

Problems in the history of intelligence

Summary

The paper addresses the strengthening of the history of intelligence and surveillance as a respectable scholarly branch of historical studies during the last couple of decades. The main reason for this change of position seems to be the end of the Cold War, both in intellectual and in practical terms. This alleviated the constraints of secrecy and security and opened up new space for thinking and analysis, and also gave access to some documentary materials. Most of the best books in the field are still published under some degree of control from the services involved, which runs counter to scholarly integrity, but as such commitments are usually reported to the reader, this is better than no research at all, which is usually the alternative.

Various methodological issues have to be considered. First, traditional source criticism seems to have preserved its full importance in this field. Forged archival documents are rare in the history of intelligence in Finland, but in many cases documents might be very different from what they seem to be at first sight. The foreign intelligence archives in Moscow, for example, contain a good series of reports on President Kekkonen's state of mind and personal opinions, obtained from a top-level source very close to the president. If a scholar were ever to see these, it would be good to know that they were written by Kekkonen himself, in the third person, and then delivered to the Soviet authorities through "agent" channels, to influence their policies. This leads to the second point, the importance of identifying sources of intelligence information, which is made difficult by the fact that this was the detail these services most wanted to hide. Third, the scholar should recognize the cognitive faculties of

the branch and its regular bureaucratic practices in order to be able to discern substantial novelties from run-of-the-mill procedures. And fourth, despite the fact that commitments in this field were usually for life, the historian should keep in mind the dimension of time: roles change, appearances can become realities, control on paper usually means interaction in life, and ultimate loyalties can be hard to unravel.

And even when every demand of source criticism is taken care of, the historian should remember that a description or analysis based on the documents of one side or service can change fundamentally when the case is viewed through the layer of documents from other services. This is quite natural in a branch where various double and triple arrangements were commonplace. As an example, the 1961 case of the defector Anatoli Golitsyn is described in utterly different ways in the Finnish, CIA and KGB papers.

The weak spot of this branch of historical research has usually been the answer to the question: so what? What is the significance of intelligence in political or military decision-making? Here, the usual sin has been exaggeration; according to the author's rule of thumb, individual pieces of knowledge – called snowflakes by Mao – are seldom important, but a constant current of information from a vital source might prove seminal for policy. The significance of top-level information from the Finnish Communist Party may be assessed as an example.

Last, the uses of history deserve some consideration, e.g. the issue of naming sensitive names, or the fact that preconceived opinions exist (among the public, the media, or interested parties) that are so strong that they cannot be altered by research results.

Despite these problems, the author is of the opinion that it is worth aiming at respectable scholarship even in this field.