ARGUMENT THAT SIS HAD A GOOD WAR

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Introduction

During the world conflict of 1939 to 1945, her Majesty's Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) had a good war. In fact, it was a major element in the success story of British Intelligence in wartime and we can even say, to quote Major-General Sir Kenneth Strong, that '[t]he latter years of World War II and the beginning of the post-war period were in a sense the golden age of British Intelligence'.

Signals intelligence

SIS can be credited with the crucial successes of Bletchley Park, whose codebreakers were under the authority of Stewart Menzies, chief of SIS. Menzies – then also known as 'C' – personally took 'Ultra', the product of their code-breaking, to Prime Minister Winston Churchill. This vital source of intelligence began to come on stream in May 1940, coinciding with Churchill's appointment as Prime Minister. The incoming signals from the German war machine represented more than 2,000 daily messages at the war's height and were of the highest level, even sometimes coming from Adolf Hitler himself. Such information enabled the Allies to build up an accurate picture of enemy plans and orders of battle, forming the basis of war plans both strategic and tactical. It played a major part in sweeping Hitler to his ruin.

The Allies were desperate to conceal from the Axis command that they had broken Enigma. This was to the extent that although they had intercepted and knew of the whereabouts of U-boats lying in wait in mid-Atlantic, often convoys were allowed to sail into their midst for fear of alerting the Axis of their knowledge. Perhaps 'C''s greatest service to the British was effort was to have ensured by constant vigilance that the ULTRA secret was never given away.

But also, Menzies seized on Enigma before others realised its potentialities. It soon surpassed all other sources of military intelligence and, armoured at first by civilian ignorance of military conventions, SIS' agents marched forward into the almost unknown with a boldness hidebound Whitehall officers would not have displayed – and yet it was the War Office and Air Ministry which drew the ultimate benefit, access to unexampled riches of information.

Another important contribution of SIS in the war against Germany was its timely realisation of the potential of the Radio Security Service (RSS) and of its work on *Abwehr*'s cipher. In May 1941, RSS was detached altogether from the War Office and MI8, removed physically from the embrace of MI5, and transferred to MI6 (SIS). With better funding and better technology, SIS trough it RSS could achieve one of its greatest successes: the decryption, in December 1941, of the Enigma cipher of the *Abwehr*.

Finally, since the ostensible dissolution of the Comintern by Stalin in 1943, SIS had been intercepting and decrypting the instructions that were being sent from the Kremlin to partisan groups and resistance movements under Communist control as to the tactics to be adopted as the day of liberation drew nearer. There again, SIS acted swiftly and efficiently to provide decision-makers with relevant intelligence.

Other successes

The conspicuous success of ULTRA has given rise to the misapprehension that it represented virtually the only useful form of available intelligence. This shows failure to grasp that the most valuable intelligence is often that compounded from different sources, each of which may supplement, or modify, the others.

The Section V of SIS was responsible for counter-espionage and its key operation was undoubtedly the running of the Double-Cross System, the co-ordinated use of turned German agents to feed deception material to the enemy. The co-ordination was carried out by an inter-departmental committee known as the XX Committee. This highly successful operation was devised by MI5 but required the cooperation of SIS for its functioning.

SIS established a network of stations in Norway and in January 1942 one of these reported the location of the battleship *Tirpitz* which the Admiralty was unable to locate. The uncertainty about the capabilities, the whereabouts and the objectives of that German ship seriously damaged Britain by acting as a permanent and threatening Damocles' sword. Thanks to SIS, the *Tirpitz* could be located and then sunk by the Royal Navy.

During the war, Germany was developing new technology, unknown to the Allies, but there again the work of SIS could minimize the success of Nazi's attacks on Britain. Indeed, SIS agents in Stockholm reported the location of the factories which produced two new German aircrafts. They also identified during 1943 and 1944 the German rocket and research development establishments at Peenemünde on the Baltic, and the launching sites for V1 and V2 rockets. 'C''s evidence clinched the matter in June 1943 and counter -measures were put in hand which were of crucial importance in shortening the period of exposure of South-East England to this form of attack.

Thanks to SIS' intelligence, the British could effectively target German construction sites: the British bombings disrupted German preparations and prevented V1s and V2s to rain down on southern England well before D-Day.

Collaboration

Another good move of SIS during World War Two was to make clever use of its network of allies. Collaboration with sympathetic Frenchmen, Czech intelligence and Polish intelligence provided Britain with useful information on German intentions and capabilities. SIS contacts at the Western end of the Mediterranean had greatly benefited from preservation of pre-war friendships with French officers of the Deuxième Bureau. While nominally subordinate to Vichy, most of them were secretly collaborating with 'C', who around Christmas 1942 paid a brief visit to Algiers.

The head of Section V, Felix Cowgill, went to visit the USA and Canada in November 1941 with the positive outcome of improving contacts with both FBI and COI (Co-ordinator of Information). When Cowgill returned to London, he was asked to report to David Bruce, who had been appointed by Donovan to head the intelligence side of his London-based operation.

During the war, MI5 was responsible for security liaison with Canada and the British West Indies and such responsibility meant that BSC, the British Security Co-ordination, became one of the most successful fields of co-operation between SIS and MI5. Frictions between the

two organizations occurred from time to time but without the high level of collaboration that usually prevailed between the two organisations the conspicuous triumphs of British security during the war could not have taken place.

<u>Conclusion</u>

Many historians, authors and scholars seem to argue that SIS had a bad war. One of the mains reasons is that there has been too much emphasis on post-war failure and too little on wartime success. Maybe the history of SIS during the war is not overloaded with amazing successes and astonishing spying operations but SIS' detractors are too easily putting on the secret service the responsibility for incidents and failures. Indeed, it is important to remember that responsibility for evaluation lay not with the producer of intelligence, but with the consumers, who had clearly failed to put their own houses in order.

Also, one has to remember that for SIS, the post-war period was characterized by severe underfunding. The successful recruitment of agent networks required long-term planning and funding, but the money was not forthcoming from a government determined to make economies. SIS' network of agents across the face of Europe was destroyed in 1940 and could not be rebuilt during the years of Nazi occupation. The Service Departments and the Foreign Office were wrong in believing that secure intelligence networks could be established overnight and at once began to yield a reliable product. Therefore, it is justified to argue that given the context and the circumstances, SIS had a good war.

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[1] Formerly known as Hugh Trevor-Roper.