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Martin Thomas. *Empires of Intelligence: Security Services and Colonial Disorder after 1914.*

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008. xii + 428pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$49.95 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-520-25117-5.

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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Peter John Brobst**, Ohio University

Nearly ten years ago, Malcolm Yapp called for a new look at the “Great Game” of empire in Asia and the Middle East. The distinguished historian of the subject remarked on “how few books are written about what one may call imperial plumbing.” And yet, he noted, “there were more policemen than soldiers in British India and it was on the policemen that the Raj ultimately rested.” Scholars had “somehow neglected the key element in how empires run, namely the police.” Yapp proposed “some alternative images: not of Kim but the policeman, Strickland, who features in *Kim* and in several short stories by Kipling.” Strickland represented “the true master of what Kipling understood to be the great game,” while Ronald Merrick, the menacing policeman in Paul Scott’s *Raj Quartet*, seemed the “archetypal figure” of the British Raj.¹

Today there is wide and understandable interest in Professor Yapp’s suggested agenda. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the attendant issues of counter-insurgency and terrorism, have no doubt stimulated much of it, just as the Cold War conditioned the earlier emphasis on balancing the big battalions. Whatever the reasons, we now enjoy a sophisticated and growing body of scholarship on policing—by which is meant political policing as opposed to criminal investigation. Many studies deal with the workaday operation of intelligence and state security in the colonial world, but few of them treat this machinery of modern government as in itself a source of empire.

Martin Thomas’s informative new book demonstrates that in the Middle Eastern empires developed by Britain and France between the two world wars, the security services were

¹ Malcolm Yapp, “The Legend of the Great Game,” *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 111, 2001, pp. 197-198.

indeed foundational. *Empires of Intelligence* reflects a broad yet thorough reading in both imperial and intelligence studies. The book provides a masterful synthesis of historiography with extensive archival research. It builds conceptually on C. A. Bayly's work on empire and information in nineteenth century India, and nicely complements Priya Satia's concurrently published study of Britain's "covert empire" in the Middle East.² It is the comparative approach that Thomas brings to his subject that sets him apart. Equally sure-footed on either side, he finds British and French imperialism comparable in the outlook and dilemmas of secret service if not in the particulars of its organization.

Thomas argues that the colonial states which Britain and France imposed on the interwar Arab world were in essence "intelligence states." These structures of governance attempted to substitute covert, specialist bureaucracies for the straightforward application of military power that characterized the imperialism of the nineteenth century. The expert management and savvy manipulation of information promised to secure what once had required a comparatively large army. A scalpel for a bludgeon, the intelligence state was an apparatus peculiarly attuned to the political, financial, and moral tenor of liberal democracy in the 1920s and 30s. In these decades the language of trusteeship and mandates replaced unapologetic talk of "empire," although the effect "revalorized the transformational impulse" behind British and French imperialism (70). In short, the intelligence state represented a "compensatory strategy" (298) to maintain empire on the cheap.

As it turned out, however, the attractions of the colonial intelligence state proved more theoretical than practical. Thomas devotes much if not most of his scrutiny to the limitations of the British and French security services as empire-builders. The most basic shortcoming lay in the existential biases of Anglo-French officials and agents, particularly their constant insistence that organized nationalism had to spring from external versus regional sources. It nearly goes without saying that such bias reflected the cultural prejudice and predilections, the racism and romanticism, of the era. Thomas acknowledges the relevance of post-colonial criticism to his subject, and offers a cogent commentary on the stultifying effect that the "Orientalist gaze" had on the intelligence state. But he also emphasizes the influence of institutional memory, of lessons learned from professional practice before and during World War I, and of indications from the sources and methods, however imperfect, that were actually available to British and French authorities.

The colonial intelligence state was captive not only to the biases of its personnel but to technology and geography as well. In fact, much of the trouble encountered by the British and French security services in the interwar Middle East stemmed from what in

² C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

today's defense parlance might be described as an asymmetrical battlefield. Technical collection, particularly signals interception, dominated the intelligence contest among the great powers. But while signals could turn up evidence of, say, Kemalist or Soviet intrigue, and thus focus the attention of policymakers on external dangers, they yielded little insight into the politics and social dynamics of the mosque, the souk, or the so-called Arab street. If open sources of intelligence, such as newspapers and pamphlets, offered some compensation in the cities, the security services found no mitigation of the problem in the remote deserts and mountains—from Waziristan to the Rif—that their political masters sought to control too.

As a result of the asymmetrical environment in the Middle East, human intelligence held primacy in the regional “information order” of the British and French empires. Each depended on networks of informants developed, managed, and interpreted by specialist officers with basic mastery of Arabic and other regional languages but a widely variable command of the vernacular. Even Britain's newfangled Royal Air Force, which promised to deliver unprecedented efficiency in colonial policing through surveillance and enforcement from the sky, relied on ground-based Special Service Officers (SSOs) for warning and targeting. The HUMINT effort was extensive and impressive, but it offered no panacea for the Anglo-French intelligence states in the Middle East. The volume of information proved much less a problem than the sifting of the good from the bad. Thomas's findings will surprise no one familiar with the recent “Curveball” scandal over intelligence in the Iraq War. The recruitment of informants often proved arbitrary, idiosyncratic, and unreliable—an SSO's manservant here, a gossipy secretariat clerk there, and so on. In the final analysis the colonial intelligence state involved a system of collaboration and clientage in which who was gaming whom was not always so clear. In this respect, this new model imperialism was perhaps not so different from that of the nineteenth century. At least it was not as powerful as its advocates and critics alike imagined.

In fact, Thomas opens with the point that intelligence, in John Ferris's phrase, “is not a form of power but a means to guide its use” (p. 2), and reiterates it throughout the book. To be sure, the British and French security services cultivated and leveraged expertise to gain advantage and privilege their own agenda in a classic model of intra-governmental politics. But the tables could be turned and intelligence readily politicized, particularly when civil administrators or regular soldiers felt confident in their own knowledge and experience. Thomas's account of the manipulation of intelligence on the Kurds by colonial officials in Iraq provides a case in point. At its best intelligence is a “multiplier,” a lens to clarify options and focus action. In the Kurdish instance, as unfortunately in so many others, it became a stalking horse. As Thomas's study underscores, the collection and analysis of intelligence is concomitant with, but not identical to, the formulation of policy.

Given his meticulous dissection and nuanced anatomy of the colonial intelligence state in the Middle East, it is disappointing that Thomas makes little mention of the oil industry's role in its development and operation. Oil was not a primary interest in French North

Africa during the interwar years, but it was certainly a driving force behind French policy in the Fertile Crescent. In Britain, the Oil Board of the Cabinet's Committee of Imperial Defense was a clearinghouse for the assessment of Middle Eastern intelligence. Whitehall collected and evaluated much of the topographical and environmental intelligence that figures prominently in Thomas's book on the basis of oil interests—whether strategic or commercial. And then there is the question of the revolving door between government and business. For instance, Stephen Longrigg, who makes a brief appearance in *Empires of Intelligence* as a junior political officer in Iraq after World War I, went on to become a senior director of Britain's Iraq Petroleum Company in the 1930s. He subsequently returned to military duty during World War II, and served as the distinctly intelligence-minded governor in Eritrea after Britain captured that country from Italy.

This criticism is really meant only to suggest avenues for future research into the colonial intelligence state that Thomas has so effectively delineated. The same can be said of the fact that the book's title does not make explicit the Middle Eastern focus of the study. To what extent did this model of governance apply in other areas of the British and French empires, and for that matter in other empires of the twentieth century? All in all, Thomas has produced an acute and much needed work of historical analysis that should interest intelligence practitioners as well as academics. *Empires of Intelligence* may not easily suit undergraduates or the casual reader, but it is invaluable reading for any specialist in imperial, intelligence, or contemporary international history.

Peter John Brobst is Associate Professor of History at Ohio University, where he teaches imperial and international history. He is the author of *The Future of the Great Game: Sir Olaf Caroe, India's Independence, and the Defense of Asia* (University of Akron Press, 2005), and is currently writing a book about strategy and globalism in the Indian Ocean between 1962 and 1977.

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