# The Limitations of History to the Field of Intelligence

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**Diamond in the Rough: The Limitations of History to the Field of Intelligence**

*'The true use of history is not to make men clever for the next time; it is to make them wise for ever'.*

-Jacob Burckhardt[1]

History as a discipline is not only useful in the academic arena but also to the field of intelligence. The study of history helps one discern what the story is, instead of what the problem is; it helps to determine the who, what, when, where, how and the why of a narrative.[2] By studying history, intelligence agencies can learn from past mistakes and aim to improve their performance. But at the same time, these lessons gathered from intelligence successes or failures do have restrictions. This paper argues on three epistemological limitations to the use of history as a learning tool. First, history can be interpreted in different ways; second, history can be misunderstood, and third, history will always have gaps. It is an incomplete story. Despite these limitations, however, the study of history is a useful tool for intelligence historians. History can clarify events, and offer guidance and guidelines for decisions to intelligence practitioners; it serves as a way to uncover past intelligence practices and expands intelligence history as an academic discipline.

History is of limited use due the variability of perceptions and the bias of the interpreter. Personal interpretations of history can be taken out of context. On the one hand, the study of history can be used as a way to measure an organization's strengths and weaknesses in a way that makes room for future progress. On the other hand, interpreters explain a small fragment of a given story; in other words, as Gaddis says: 'he or she never perceives more than a tiny patch of the vast tapestry of events.'[3] Because history can be viewed as a construction of events, such a construction depends heavily on the person who is telling the story. History is composed of facts, but facts do not speak for themselves; the interpreter speaks for the facts.[4] It is the reader (and interpreter) of history who ascribes the meaning in order to adapt these facts to the story he or she wants to tell.[5] From this perspective, history is inevitably biased.

Historians can only do so much in interpreting events, as the past is something that historians can only represent.[6] The only way in which history could be employed reliably is if they could travel back in time and objectively witness the events. However, while users and interpreters of history cannot rerun history as a chemist can rerun an experiment, they can do so with their minds working as their laboratories.[7]

That being said, the degree to which history can be implemented as an intelligence tool actually depends on how it is interpreted and whose history is chosen for analysis.[8] For example, under the umbrella of intelligence studies, there are many histories regarding MI5; however, if one was to use these histories as learning tools for subsequent organizational improvements then one would be more willing to rely on Christopher Andrew's 'In Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5,' an authoritative work based on MI5's archives. During the elaboration of this work Christopher Andrews had full unrestricted access to MI5's twentieth-century files as well as to the more restricted twenty-first century records.[9] Such opportunities provide the historian to interpret new information about an organization. In the intelligence literature, official histories are significant because they uncover many pieces of the puzzles that are missing from the other histories due to high document classification. However, one has to bear

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in mind that even this prospect may be flawed due to the bias carried out by the historian interpreting the documents. In other words, the historian might interpret history the way the organization being examined wants to be perceived. Thus, the limitation is imposed through the actions of historians themselves, since histories are never handed down to us directly and objectively.[10]  As E. H. Carr notes: "It is the historian who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context."[11] One can say that to certain degree the use of history is restricted by the historian who interprets it.  History, therefore, is a handmade tool that takes its shape according to the historian's perception.

Additionally, the improper use of analogies limits the application of history to current events and leads to misinterpretations. Analogies are often good tools that help us understand the logic of a certain topic; however, when applied to the field of decision-making and intelligence, there is a risk of confusion if the interpreter only uses analogies to fit his or her argumentative purposes.[12] One such example is that of the Korean invasion in 1950.  In his memoirs, President Truman wrote: "…Communism was acting in Korea just as Hitler, Mussolini and the Japanese had acted ten, fifteen, and twenty years earlier … If this was allowed to go unchallenged, it would mean a third world war, just as similar incidents had brought on the second world war.'[13] President Truman's decision led to a war that killed 33,651 American soldiers.[14]  There is no way to know if President Truman's thought of a possible spread of communism would have become true if the United States did not act; however, Neustadt and May argue that if the Blair House sessions had seen more explicit analysis of the history in use, the intent of President Truman's decision might have been better defined, and subsequent events might have been different, with less American casualties.[15] A similar example occurred in the 1950s when British Prime Minister Anthony Eden compared Egyptian President, Gamal Abdel Nasser, to Hitler and conducted the Suez campaign on that basis.[16]  Similarly, President George W. Bush compared Iraq to Nazi Germany.  In 2002 President George W. Bush gave a speech to students in Prague as part of a NATO summit.  During his speech, President Bush compared the challenge of Saddam Hussein to the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1938 by saying: 'Ignoring dangers or excusing aggression may temporarily avert conflict, but they do not bring true peace.'[17]  The comparison does not necessarily match except for the fact that Hussein and the Nazis both represented a threat.  Moreover, similarities in subject do not necessarily mean similarities in methods.[18] The common denominator here is that history, as a set of truths, provides a store of possible analogies.

Decision-makers and even intelligence practitioners move up and down the aisles of a market full of historical analogies, and they search until they find one that reinforces their preexisting policy inclinations.[19]  Trying to hunt for the present in the past can lead towards misapprehension.[20]  According to Neustadt and May, if one is to employ history efficiently through the use of analogies, then one must separate the known from the unknown (and both from what is presumed) in order to deconstruct erroneous analogies.[21] On the one hand, Nasser wanted to end British occupation in Egypt which posed a problem to Great Britain, as Egypt (the Suez) had become an important route to reach oil sources in the Persian Gulf.[22] The Suez Crisis was also a struggle to revitalize Great Britain as a World Power. On the other hand, the belief that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction might have been common at the time, but that did not necessarily mean that he was going to act aggressively (like Nazi Germany)—especially after the United Nations resolutions of the early 1990s and the ongoing United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM later UNMOVIC) inspections in the late 1990s.  Nevertheless, as a "mission" to expand American values and democracy the United States decided to invade Iraq.  Overall, the similarity between the two incidents is that both leaders condemned appeasement and used the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia as an analogy to fit their purpose.

History is an incomplete puzzle, which limits its use.  This is perhaps the most important limitation; much ingenuity and effort is spent on making secret information difficult to acquire and hard to analyze.[23]  How can one learn if there are gaps in the stories?  History is an attempt to describe and interpret the past.[24] This incompleteness exists because there is oftentimes little evidence on which to base assumptions.[25] The liberal use of history by decision-makers is problematic if the decision-makers are not trained (as historians might be) to recognize the incompleteness of history. The absence of comprehensive history thwarts the efforts of ever fully understanding the real context of historical events or past intelligence practices.  For example, for a long time the role of SIGINT was neglected.  However, the ULTRA secret showed historians that German intercepts had been decoded, and therefore this clarified the understanding of the Cold War in significant ways.[26] If ULTRA had not been released, then intelligence historians would still deny the efficiency of SIGINT during the Second World War.  How can the study of history be

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applied to intelligence practices and expand its literature if historians only work with imperfect or fragmentary evidence?[27] As E. H. Carr put it: 'History can be compared to an enormous jig-saw with a lot of missing parts.'[28] The jig-saw, nevertheless, can take shape through acquisition of more history, but this dictates more than just interpreting past events; it calls for the declassification of more documents. The absence of a complete history coincides with the incomplete understanding of many intelligence organizations and their origins. Of course, intelligence practices by nature are submerged in obscurity and mystery; however, how can intelligence agencies reach full working potential if they are denied their past?

Archive-based research is the bread and butter of intelligence studies;[29] there is a need for more historians, such as Christopher Andrew, with archival access. However, in addition to accessibility of archives, another factor to take into consideration is that historians also need language skills. Historians with appropriate language skills are few, and this creates an obstacle for the further understanding of ancient documents such as Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and others which have not yet surfaced. Works like the Arthashastra are very important since Intelligence bodies of the Indian subcontinent appear to have returned to the Sanskrit patterns of espionage.[30] It is important to pay attention to ancient works since now India is a rising power, and it is a major player in the international arena.[31] Incomplete history in contemporary times, with regards to intelligence, is a serious limitation because governments have not declassified documents that would help historians fill in the gaps.

But what counts as historical fact? While studying Ancient Greece, E. H. Carr accumulated around fifteen volumes on the Persian Wars alone.[32] He thought that he had all the existing facts relating to his subject; nevertheless, he later asked himself about that minute when facts were selected and became the facts of history.[33] This is especially pertinent to ancient history, particularly ancient intelligence history. There is knowledge that the collection of intelligence in ancient Greece was essential to diplomacy and that the primary role of the presbeutes was that of information gathering.[34] For instance, embassies were used when the Syracussans, upon receiving from various sources news of an imminent Athenian invasion, sent out envoys to the cities of the Sicels as part of their preparations.[35] There is useful information on the Greek practices of espionage, but, still, there is not much archival intelligence material to work on. Herodotus recorded that catalogues were taken by Xerxes in 480 BCE, but they have not come to light yet.[36] This example sheds light on an important issue for intelligence studies: they are limited by the lack of available historical information about intelligence in general.

Despite the three limitations mentioned, historical study can be very useful to the field of intelligence in at least four ways: the study of history clarifies events; it offers critical background information (scenarios) for better decisions; it improves practices by understanding failures; and it is progressively establishing intelligence as a discipline with a historical origin. History can serve as a way to demystify events, because only through the use of history one can discover the nature of intelligence organizations; for example, the organizational structures of the KGB and Stasi challenge the established assumptions about the past. It is useful to observe the role of foreign intelligence, which has received less attention than it deserves.[37] Most of the sources available about the KGB came from defectors such as Oleg Gordievsky and Vasili Mitrokhin, among others, who have added valuable information regarding the practices of the KGB.[38] For example, during the Cuban Missile Crisis (CMC), the United States lacked intelligence about the presence of Soviet nuclear warheads in Cuba; there was no knowledge about the number of these warheads until Soviet officials provided it in 1989 and subsequent declassified documents asserted that there were some sixty thermonuclear warheads in Cuba.[39] The acquired information served as a mean to clarify the facts on which President John F. Kennedy made his decisions during the CMC.

Second, history can be used in the intelligence field as a guide for future planning based on past operations; this can lead to a more educated course of action. However, it should be clear that history should act as a guide only in order to extract the concepts and values applied in the past; history must not work as a deductive tool for reasoning an opponent's reaction. For example, the analysis of history through the declassified files on covert operations can help refresh the memory of incumbent analysts on positive ways to carry out successful missions, as the CIA did through covert action in 1954 in Guatemala. Under the Eisenhower administration the CIA carried out Operation PBSUCCESS which combined psychological, economical and paramilitary sanctions against the leftist Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz.[40] On September 11, 1953, The United States decided to cut off all military aid to Guatemala in order to isolate and send a message to Arbenz that tolerance for leftist politicians in a country where

the United States had invested heavily would not be permitted.[41]

In addition to military sanctions, the CIA incorporated black propaganda. The headquarters for this part of the operation was situated in Opa Locka, in the outskirts of Miami, which broadcasted, the voice of liberation, a clandestine radio show directed to the Guatemalan people.[42] This clandestine radio show was aimed at influencing important sectors of Guatemalan society to stand against communism.[43] Overall, the CIA paved way to a successful change of regime which included psychological warfare in conjunction with a proxy army led by Carlos Castillo Armas, ex-Lieutenant Colonel and future president, and Ydigoras Fuentes, an ex-presidential candidate.[44] In Guatemala, the CIA drafted and executed a formidable operation which showed its capability to influence a population through the use of black propaganda. The CIA also showed its ability to recruit sources from the political arena in order to apply them according to the goal desired: in this case, regime change. If intelligence practitioners study cases like the 1954 Guatemalan coup d'état, then future operation planning could gather the positive concepts and values applied.

Third, the study of history can function as a developmental tool for the intelligence field. History understands the past; intelligence is aimed toward the present and future.[45] In order for analysts to assess a situation in the best possible way they need an understanding of the present,[46] and this can only be done through the examination of the past. Through the analysis of historical events, both successes and failures, one can determine which practices are to be condoned and which errors are to be avoided. For example, historically, the CIA did not conduct rigorous and continuous background checks on its employees until the Aldrich Ames case came to light and revealed serious problems.[47] The CIA would have benefited by learning from the British and the damage incurred through the Cambridge spy ring's infiltration by Harold Adrian Philby. If the CIA had taken examples from 'recent' history, then it would have been better prepared for moles like Ames. Overall, the examination of good and bad performance can lead to further improvement of intelligence practices, but this can be done if intelligence analysts make more frequent use of history, although this is not their standard of practice.[48] Many intelligence analysts are trained as historians, but they do not work as such, and sometimes they are anxious of speaking as historians to policy-makers for the fear of boring them with information they might regard as inessential.[49] Notwithstanding, it is through the explanation of history that the intelligence field can progress its performance.

Finally, and most importantly, history helps to establish intelligence as a discipline with a past. Questions such as: who are they, who do they work for, what have they done, and what can they do, can only be answered if there is knowledge about the past. There is knowledge of intelligence practices in biblical times, as well as knowledge of intelligence practices in the classical world and the Elizabethan period. Therefore, history can fill in the gaps in terms of where this profession originated. Moreover, not only can history solve the matter of intelligence's identity in the sense of origin, but it can also resolve the matter of intelligence as an academic discipline. However, according to Len Scott and Peter Jackson, intelligence is still denied its place in studies of the Cold War and in international relations in general.[50] Christopher Andrew's notion of intelligence as the missing dimension, and Len Scott and Peter Jackson's statement that intelligence is the most under-theorized area of international relations,[51] both ideas offer a glimpse of the underestimation of intelligence as a discipline. Nevertheless, through historic records, it is evident that intelligence has been important to human history, especially through documents declassified in the past decades and available through projects such as George Washington University's National Security Archives and initiatives like the Freedom of Information Act.

To conclude, history has three major epistemological limitations. These limitations cannot be completely avoided as they are inherent to the study of history itself. First, history is interpretive: two people can interpret history differently just as they can interpret art differently. Second, history provides academics and professionals with analogies. These analogies are sometimes misused due to flawed methods in analysis or because they serve to justify the interpreter's ideological needs. Third, history is incomplete. There are many truths lost in time because they were not written down, or lost to the changing nature of oral traditions, or lost to the selective process of interpretation by historians. History and intelligence have two things in common: they both have to be based on reliable sources, and they both seldom access the full story.[52] Furthermore, the history of intelligence works with official documents produced by the government. These documents are not always available; thus, history is sometimes limited in the field of intelligence. The nature of the intelligence archive will always make it impossible for anyone but official

historians to have full access to sources and methods.[53]  Until more intelligence files are declassified, history will be of limited use to the field of intelligence.

Finally, with regards to the field of intelligence, the study of history can be useful in four ways.  Firstly, the study of history can clarify past assumptions, and give more insight on the organization of intelligence agencies, old and new. Secondly, through the study of history, intelligence practices can be improved; this needs to be done in light of successful operations and the thorough examination of flawed practices in failed cases. Thirdly, the study of history can serve as a developmental tool for good practices in areas such as counterintelligence.  Fourthly, the study of history serves as a way to uncover intelligence's past and to strengthen its presence as a discipline.  The use of history can be improved by ongoing declassification projects and the study of said documents by internal history staff within the agencies as well as by academics. Despite the epistemological limitations of history, its study provides the field of intelligence with useful ways to expand its knowledge and debunk myths, discern that knowledge, and improve best practices in the hopes that the next time a momentous event occurs, these agencies will be able to apply effectively the lessons they have learned.

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