

THE INTELLIGENCE COSTS OF UNDERESTIMATING RUSSIA: A WARNING FROM HISTORY

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COMMENTARY

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Questions over the extent and nature of the relationship between President Donald Trump's administration and Vladimir Putin's Russia continue to dominate the headlines. In explosive testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee yesterday, [Thomas Rid](#) and [Clint Watts](#) provided detailed information revealing the extent to which Russian intelligence services deliberately targeted the Hillary Clinton campaign, the Democratic National Committee, and the American political system writ large.

Committees in the House of Representatives and the Senate as well as the FBI are conducting investigations into alleged ties between Moscow and Team Trump. These allegations have claimed the career of one national security advisor and forced [Attorney General Jeff Sessions to recuse himself](#) from the investigation. A dark cloud hangs over erstwhile campaign chairman [Paul Manafort](#), Carter Page, Roger Stone, and others involved with the campaign. The saga continues to twist and turn, gathering momentum with each new revelation about pre-inauguration contact between senior campaign advisors and Russian officials or proxies.

What does all this mean for how the United States will approach Russia? The picture is mixed.

[Trump personally appears to be open to a cooperative relationship with Putin](#), especially in the fight against terrorism. However, many observers have suggested that the president himself is compromised, either because of his [Russian business dealings](#) or [incriminating but thus far unsubstantiated material](#). Many have noted that Trump suffers from a [degree of naiveté](#) about Russian intelligence methods and interests, such as those that were intended to assist his candidacy.

Yet [well-respected Putin critic Fiona Hill](#) has joined the National Security Council staff as a senior director for Europe and Russia. The newly-installed director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Mike Pompeo, has a reputation as a serious, hard-nosed player in national security affairs, as does Secretary of Defense James Mattis. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Joseph Dunford suggested in

Congressional testimony that Russia posed the most serious “existential threat” to the United States. All are likely to treat another Russian “reset” with skepticism.

Given that the Trump administration seems divided on how to view Russia – as threat or potential partner – and the role of the U.S. intelligence community in collecting and analyzing intelligence to inform that decision, it is worth looking back to history to consider the British intelligence experience – and its cost – when faced with a not dissimilar circumstance.

Steeled Against the Soviets

Several years before the end of World War II, the British intelligence community began to look towards the future, attempting to gauge how to structure the intelligence apparatus of the United Kingdom so as to be ready to meet any potential threat. As discussed in a book by one of us, this crystal gazing was critical, for it quickly became clear to both British policymakers and military commanders that the pre-war deficiencies in intelligence collection and analysis had been detrimental to the war effort. These leaders now understood that a sound intelligence structure was crucial to know where Britain should focus energy, resources, and attention in the future. But there lay a problem in the form of an internecine battle between the diplomats of the Foreign Office, the military leaders, and the British intelligence community. The effects would take a decade to remedy, and the opportunity squandered would haunt the Anglo-American intelligence alliance well into the Cold War.

The background lay in World War II and the nature of the Allies. It has become something of a historical convention that the members of the wartime alliance – the United Kingdom, United States, and Soviet Union – were united only in hatred of, and desire to defeat, Nazism. It was a “marriage of convenience” in which the philosophical incompatibilities of the regimes were overlooked in the crucible of the moment and the British and Soviet struggles for national survival. In the weeks and months after Hitler’s fateful decision to commence Operation

Barbarossa, an ill-advised and unnecessary attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941, the British offered assistance, including military technology, discussion of combined operational planning and, to a lesser extent, the exchange of intelligence. Despite such collaboration and turning the tide of battle at Stalingrad, the wartime alliance did little to dispel Anglo-American fear and distrust of communist Russia. Thus, from 1943 as post-war planning and discussion got underway in London, the future of Britain's relations with the Soviet Union became an increasing concern.

Almost from the outset, it was clear that Soviet and Western visions of the post-war world were mutually exclusive. For the British Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) and Whitehall mandarins, it was clear that the three great elements of statecraft – diplomacy, military and intelligence – would need to work in tandem to produce coherent plans for the future, but they could not reach an agreement with respect to a coherent approach toward the Soviet Union. The official position of the British government at this time was that the United Kingdom should “remain on terms of close friendship with the USSR.” This stance, and the fact that the Soviet Union was a wartime ally, meant that the diplomats in the Foreign Office did not want to plan on the basis of a hostile Moscow. It was not pro-Soviet as such and many diplomats were indeed suspicious of the Russians. Rather, they advocated that it would be politically risky to start to target the Soviet Union actively as an intelligence priority because, if this became known, then Anglo-Soviet relations would break down in a self-fulfilling prophecy. The military, on the other hand, favored a range of contingency plans, but was adamant that the wartime alliance was a temporary respite from the normal, antagonistic Anglo-Russian relations, which would resume once the war was over.

The British intelligence agencies and bodies, which lacked good sources on Russian intentions, prevaricated. Foreign Office diplomats in Moscow argued that the Soviet Union's major post-war task was going to be reconstruction and, underlying its foreign policy, a “search for security.” On the assumption that the United States and United Kingdom would pose no threat to the Soviet Union, they

misread the tea leaves, assuming that “Russia will welcome a prolonged period of peaceful relations.” For the British Foreign Office, the implication of this flawed planning assumption was that over the next five years, the Soviet Union would “constitute no menace to British strategic interests.” The British Secret Intelligence Service (also known as MI6) questioned the overly sanguine view of the diplomats, arguing that the Russians would be far more expansionist and subversive in their aims. The view of the Joint Intelligence Committee, Britain’s most senior assessment body, lay somewhere in between. It concluded that the Soviet Union might not take as long to recover economically as the Foreign Office had predicted, and that to “overestimate the need for rehabilitation may lead to an underestimate of the Soviet Union’s defensive potential.”

Undermining the position of everyone in the British government was the paucity of reliable intelligence on Russia. The JIC conceded towards the end of the war that:

[A]ny study of Russia’s strategic interests must be speculative as we have little evidence to show what view Russia herself takes of her strategic interests or what policy she intends to pursue. Moreover, Russian policy at present depends very largely on the decisions of Marshal Stalin.

Indeed, Stalin’s iron grip on Soviet policymaking suggested that economic, structural, and cultural forces at play would be subordinated to his will. Nonetheless, the Soviet Union’s primary concern, it was assessed, was to achieve “absolute security,” and would do this by “build[ing] up a system of security outside her frontiers.” Stalin’s post-war goals at bringing the Soviet “near abroad” states more closely into its orbit was therefore understood, but only to a degree.

The lack of consensus on the future threat posed by Russia had practical consequences as well. By the last few months of war, a dichotomy was emerging. On one hand, the JIC identified the Soviet Union as the primary concern for British intelligence as a whole. Accordingly, in its report on intelligence collection

requirements for MI6, the JIC noted that “the USSR is likely to be the greatest potential danger to the strategic interests of the British Empire during the immediate post-war years, and should be a first charge on our intelligence resources.” Yet on the other hand, there were strict Foreign Office regulations on how MI6 should tackle its priorities, including an edict that it should not collect intelligence inside Russia itself. The chief of MI6 complained bitterly about this, but to little avail:

[T]o be told that intelligence in regard to what is happening inside Russia is of supreme importance and to be denied leave to act inside the Russian frontier is to invalidate the directive from the outset.

This frustrating predicament was not a resource issue, but rather a mismatch between collection authorities and intelligence requirements, the efflux of a muddled halfway house approach toward the Soviet Union. This was exacerbated by the British system of intelligence organization by which the chief of MI6 was answerable to the Foreign Secretary and, when combined with political ambivalence in identifying the Soviet Union as a hostile power, the admixture was a recipe for intelligence failure.

Furthermore, the Foreign Office strictures on internal collection meant that intelligence would likely be of questionable reliability. Recruited sources who themselves were outside of the Soviet Union would only be capable of providing second hand information, which was probably dated by the time it reached London. Intelligence provided by walk-ins (volunteers) who, by virtue of their defection had lost access to secret information, was also dated and, in any case, MI6 was unable to task them for further requirements. Thus, their value as sources of significant intelligence would be dubious at best. The paucity of active agents inside the Soviet Union meant that Stalin’s plans and intentions would be further outside the British grasp, and that information that did arrive would be harder to verify, validate, and cross-check against other sources.

The lack of quality intelligence flowing into Whitehall was immediate. The chairman of the JIC complained to the military chiefs of staff committee that, given the dearth of reliable intelligence, “it was not proposed to issue detailed reports at regular intervals, but rather to base the reports on such information as came to light from time to time, so as to indicate major changes as they occurred.” MI6 material, it was concluded, was “often unreliable and lacking in factual information,” and signals intelligence coverage was hardly any better.

The longer-term consequences of the rosy views of Stalin’s post-war intentions combined with impractical restrictions placed upon intelligence collection began to emerge as the Soviet Union hardened its stance towards the West. The Berlin blockade in the summer of 1948 was not predicted, nor was the outbreak of the Korean War two years later. By November 1950, the effects were still being felt: The JIC complained, “we are seriously concerned about the inadequacy of intelligence.” The nascent American Central Intelligence Agency, a reliable partner in intelligence exchange, only fared marginally better against the Soviet target during the remainder of the Truman administration. It was not able to increase its coverage until well into the Eisenhower administration with the recruitment of Soviet Military Intelligence (GRU) officer Pyotr Popov in 1953.

Ultimately it would be the actions of the Soviet Union itself that would resolve the tension in London. By 1952, a series of downbeat assessments of Britain’s intelligence coverage of the Soviet threat, not to mention the detonation of the Soviet atomic bomb in 1949, finally brought an unsettled strategic approach back to reality. Unable to support the earlier positive assessments, the British government was convinced that a drastic change was required. By this stage the Cold War battle lines had become firmly entrenched and all instruments of state were convinced of the dire need to know what those in the Kremlin were thinking and planning. The result was the allocation of more resources, personnel, and authorities to the British intelligence community, which had already been surpassed in all three categories by the burgeoning American intelligence community. Within a short space of time the more realistic political consensus

was rewarded with a modest increase in the intelligence coverage of the Soviet Union.

Steeling America Against Russia

While historical events don't exactly replicate, the Trump administration can learn from some historical parallels in the equivocal British approach toward Stalin. A cloudy strategic framework resulting in an ambivalent approach to a demonstrated and determined foe led to strategic surprise, putting Whitehall in the unenviable position of reacting as Stalin acted. Substitute the Soviet Union with a modern Russia, again pressing at its borders, and replace the Kremlin strongman of Stalin with that of Vladimir Putin, whose victory over any meaningful political opposition appears complete, and the similarities are stark. The Soviet leadership of the late 1940s was hard to decipher and even harder to predict. Arguably defensive moves were often conflated with aggressive expansionism: Did the Soviet absorption of satellite states of the 1940s and the Russian invasions of the recent years reflect a desire to expand an Empire, or perhaps to create a larger buffer between Moscow and the West? The best answers to these questions must be rooted not just in interpretations and analysis of geopolitical and military action, but also based on sober intelligence gathered via clandestine methods inside their borders.

The lack of a governmental consensus on the post-war Soviet threat was a substantial policy problem in Whitehall. For intelligence collection to stand any chance against what was, and remains, a supremely difficult intelligence target, there had to be two factors present: political unanimity undergirded by political will to resource operations appropriately paired with a willingness to grant authorities and underwrite failure in intelligence operations. Hard target intelligence coverage cannot be turned on overnight; it takes months and years to spot, access, develop and recruit sources for human intelligence and equally as long to develop and emplace the complicated machinery of signals and imagery intelligence programs. During the early years of the Cold War the British lost

valuable time and opportunities collecting intelligence against the Soviet Union due to a combination of misunderstanding the threat combined with tepid support for aggressive clandestine intelligence operations. American political leaders would do well to recall the unfortunate British experience of the late 1940s and the years of intelligence production lost in the time that it took to properly recognize the Soviet threat.

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