

BOOK REVIEW

Wark, Wesley K. *The Ultimate Enemy: British Intelligence and Nazi Germany, 1933-1939*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985.

The Ultimate Enemy is a book about the perceptions of British intelligence of the growth of the Nazi war machine between 1933 and 1939. It is a scholarly, well-organized study of a complex period of history, though it must be emphasized that this is a specialist's book. It requires some perserverence in reading, possibly because the material for a thesis is difficult to convert into a book.

For the intelligence specialist or teacher, *The Ultimate Enemy* is an important attempt to relate what happened at the hazardous conjunction of a world-class threat, the usual confusion of interservice rivalries and the persistent pursuit by government of a 'wrong-headed' foreign policy. British intelligence estimates in the 1930s do not seem to have developed the slightest inkling as to the true nature of the Nazi menace. If they had done so, the intelligence community would have unified in its opposition to Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's appeasement policy. The study of British intelligence on the path to the Second World War has not been adequate and in this book the author, Wesley Wark, has set out to supply the missing dimension in the diplomatic history of the period.

The book's title actually derives from a sharply-worded paper by Sir Warren Fisher of the British Defence Requirements Committee in January 1934 to the effect that Germany would be the "ultimate potential enemy against whom our 'long view' defence policy would have to be directed." In Wark's study air defence intelligence, army intelligence, naval intelligence and Desmond Hunt's Industrial Intelligence Centre are all evaluated for their forecasting of German rearmament before 1936 and between 1936 and 1939. It was not surprising perhaps that "the degree of bitterness and mistrust that divided the Air Ministry from the Foreign Office in the first half of the decade," was a typical obstacle to a clear assessment of the Nazi rearmament program. The overall picture which emerges is that of a fragmented intelligence community at odds with itself because of traditional inter-service rivalries. That community also had greater faith in the significance of quantity rather than quality in the build-up of German power. Its alternating cycles of optimism and pessimism in its estimates seemed more connected to government preconceptions and policies than to a long, hard assessment of the real forces at work in Hitler's Germany.

New ground has been broken in Wark's description of the work of the Industrial Intelligence Centre which was set up to conduct a detailed study of the German economic system. From the beginning, its analysis of the German war economy gave a clear and ominous warning of the threat to come. Yet the effect on the British government was to create first fear, then paralysis and finally to strengthen appeasement. As Wark

points out, through four strategic appreciations in October 1935, October 1936, July 1938 and February 1939, the Chiefs of Staff and the Joint Intelligence Committee still did not sort out the true nature of the Nazi threat. Even after the Nazi occupation of Prague on March 15, 1939, the British government was ineffectively trying to create an eastern front. Where was the intelligence community during all these crises and rumors that finally led to war? The answer, according to the author, is that the Joint Intelligence Community, like "the Chiefs of Staff were, inter alia, the voice of realpolitik (sic), strong supporters of appeasement and deep-dyed pessimists up to 1939."

In a final chapter, Wark brings together the four phases of intelligence which mark the metamorphosis of the British image of Nazi Germany between 1933 and 1939. The first period, 1933-1935, had been characterized by secrecy, which hindered intelligence collection. The second, 1935-36, was the honeymoon period, followed by a change in the overall assessment but leading to pessimism. The third period, autumn 1936 to autumn 1938, was a time of blindness in which total war loomed, yet the pessimism of the intelligence community strengthened the government's appeasement policy. In the final phase, 1938-39, a period of war scares leading to war itself, there emerged a belated and misplaced sense of military confidence.

In the words of the author, and at the very heart of this study, is the fact that "There can be no doubt that the British suffered through a classic intelligence failure stemming, not from an inability to identify one's enemy, but from an inability to understand the real nature of the threat that enemy posed."

Wark teaches history at the University of Toronto and is on the executive of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies, but it seems clear his academic roots and research interests revolve around Britain and the study of British intelligence. He has contributed to Dilks and Andrews *The Missing Dimension*, an important work on intelligence, and his work has influenced that of celebrated scholar Donald C. Watt.

The depth and quality of Wark's research is evident in the 46 pages of citations and bibliography from a wide variety of primary and secondary sources. He did gain access to British government records, though not to those of the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), the Joint Intelligence Committee or Naval Intelligence Division. Nevertheless, the end product compares favorably with Sir F.H. Hinsley's treatment of pre-war British intelligence which had the benefit of the sources closed to Wark.

The Ultimate Enemy was co-winner of the 1986 National Intelligence Centre Award in Washington for best book published in 1985 by a foreign author. Perhaps such an analysis applied to American foreign policy might avoid future disasters similar to those of Vietnam, Iran and Lebanon.

Wark has contributed positively to the complex and delicate task of balancing intelligence material with government predisposition when the international political signals are either ambiguous or impossible to read. That is when good intelligence agencies must warn and advise in pursuit of their national duty just as did Churchill's private intelligence sources, leaving him in no doubt whatsoever as to the true nature of the Nazi beast as early as 1938. Such information might have better prepared Britain for the task that lay ahead.

Peter St. John
St. John's College
University of Manitoba