



*Changing Character of War Centre
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A World Shaped by Spying – Literature review

Christopher Andrew, *The Secret World*, Allen Lane (London), June 2018,
pp.960, ISBN-13: 978-0713993660

And

Mark Urban, *The Skripal Files: The Life and Near Death of a Russian Spy*, MacMillan (London), October 2018, pp310, ISBN-13: 978-1-5290-0688-9

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The clichés around intelligence being a much-misunderstood activity, of it being the ‘hidden wiring’ are clichés precisely because they contain a large kernel of truth. Both the books under review here aim to illuminate this activity, and to perform a kind of public service. For Christopher Andrew, his canvas is wide and ambitious – he is aiming to explain and understand the role that intelligence has played throughout our development as an organised species, whilst making some narrower points about how policy makers and politicians continually under-perform because they are incapable of learning lessons from intelligence history. Mark Urban’s canvas is more limited, in the sense that he focuses in on an individual caught up in sweeping moments of contemporary history, and then someone who becomes the focus of what might become a pivot in international affairs. But they are both interested in the same core questions, that of the role and use of intelligence, the impact that intelligence operations can have on individuals and on politics. We can extract broad lessons from both books, and curiously the length of *The Secret World* does not help it yield more advanced or more numerous lessons – as one might have expected. I will take each book in turn, because that offers some clarity and simplicity, but also because the two books – whilst offering similar qualities – are very different, as will become clear.

Christopher Andrew’s *The Secret World* is a work of considerable achievement. Andrew, Emeritus Professor of Modern and Contemporary History at the University of Cambridge, and a prominent authority on intelligence studies who has overseen many important texts including *The Mitrokhin Archive*, and two books with Oleg Gordievsky, has set out to chart the development of intelligence, across a global canvas, for all recorded time. Had any other academic or author proposed this as a book project, I am sure that the publisher would have laughed them out of the office: this is a project only for someone of Andrew’s stature, and indeed probably only suitable for an academic in emeritus status. As a service to the profession and more junior colleagues, it would have been interesting to know more about the research and writing process that underpinned the book.

But the success of this book is that it blends an enormous base of research with a readability that will stretch across academic and lay-readership. And readability has two components in this volume. First,

the prose has been very well put together, and very well edited. The reader can trot along at a busy pace, because the narrative flows far more easily than is often the case in this genre. Second, the book has an almost 'red top' sensibility for the eye-catching historical fact, of details that will form the basis of 'did you know' questions in common rooms and living rooms, and probably 'quite interesting' television programmes too. For all readers, however, the real challenge here is managing the sheer wealth of information that leaps off the page, and also the length of the book which commands a decent amount of the reader's time. I noted that the unabridged audiobook version of it comes in at roughly 31 hours of listening time, and I would put my own reading time at only a few hours quicker than that.

The central theses of the book are very simple and are ones with which I strongly agree. The simplicity of these arguments sit in contrast to the sophistication of the task of martialling the material and the telling of accessible history. The first argument is that intelligence organisations and activity have a great influence over the direction of history, and the ways our governments and society have developed. The second key argument is that intelligence officers, senior policy makers, politicians and rulers, and academics alike have a poor grasp of intelligence history, and a particularly poor grasp of the impact of intelligence history, and therefore all of those people and agencies who are able to repeat historical intelligence mistakes have been doomed to do so. I have a particular reason to loudly agree and cheer for the second of these points, as I co-ran for 8 years – until very recently – an AHRC funded project called 'Lessons Learned' with Michael Goodman of King's College London, which precisely sought to overcome the problem of 'historical amnesia' within government analytical circles. Our premise was and is that intelligence remains particularly blind to learning the lessons from activities that went well, whilst being overly focused on those activities that conspicuously failed or required some form of inquiry.

From that very particular perspective, therefore, I strongly agree with the second thesis of *The Secret World*, but I was also left wanting more. Indeed, on this and learning more about the historical method used here, even on the essential approach to knowledge, I was left to draw my own conclusions – which is not often a reliable guide in academic craft – rather to learn directly what the author's views were. It is easy to make the case that intelligence officers do not learn from history – even a cursory glance at the workloads of the various agencies will tell you that there is insufficient time for most to have serious periods of reflection. But it is decidedly trickier, and consequently more valuable, to try to provide ways round this knowledge gap. It might be that Andrew thinks the broad sweep of global history he presents here is enough. It might also be that this more targeted work has to come through other forums, such as 'continuing professional development' courses, advisory activity or less well-read peer review journals.

The framework of *The Secret World* is essentially a reading of the major developments of global history, but with intelligence as the object of focus or as a framing device. One original contribution that *The Secret World* might claim to make is that it places the origins of organized intelligence far earlier than most mainstream historical account. The received wisdom is that the Tudor Court of Elizabeth I and the activities of Sir Francis Walsingham who, we are told, was the recipient of objects thrown by the Queen, as well as having practiced the darkest of arts to see off Elizabeth's rival, Mary, was the forefather of organised intelligence. If Peter Gill and Mark Phythian describe intelligence in the classic trope of the 'second oldest profession', and evoke Hannibal and so on, *The Secret World* is a more sustained treatment of this theme, albeit one that mostly excludes the role of intelligence in the private sector or in the role and development of industrial concerns over time. So, as readers, we move from biblical times, through ancient Greece, alight upon the Roman Empire, the Renaissance, Tudor England and the contest across Europe, the French and American revolutions, Napoleonic Europe, radical Europe, large power contests of the 19th century, and then a good spread of 20th century history featuring many of the usual-suspect episodes. Of the 21st century, the book touches relatively lightly upon Snowden, and indeed the inquiries into foreign policy misadventure: it may be that the author felt these had already been done to death academically, or all good sense strangled out of them by the crowing 'commentariat' that blights our popular and academic discourse.

I have deliberately excluded from my structural account above the moments where Andrew has stepped outside of the comfortable confines of European centric history. There are chapters on ancient Islamic intelligence (including the origins of cryptography), and Chinese and Indian history, which Andrew uses to argue that modern day India and China are directly drawing from these historical lessons (and despite the relative paucity of evidence, he is very keen on the Chinese as effective intelligence practitioners), and the 19th century 'Great Game', albeit told from a Eurocentric perspective. So, there is an alternative core argument this book could have advanced, which is that intelligence studies and intelligence history has yet to have its 'post-colonial turn', as much of the alternative studies and approaches of international relations have undergone in the last twenty years. If we evoke Sun Tzu, and even Clausewitz, to accept intellectually that it is preferable to understand our adversaries and empathise with them, then there is surely a case for understanding the intelligence of the other in far greater depth, and from authentic *other* perspectives. That is unlikely to be as strong a commercial proposition, but it would be the natural intellectual successor to *The Secret World*.

The Secret World has recurring themes – useful in a classroom setting – such as cognitive dissonance (obsessions and illusions about the enemy) in which the inquisition, British intelligence up to WW1, the Cold War dynamic and our current counterterrorism efforts might all be evoked. Speaking truth to power is another such theme, and Walsingham wearing Elizabeth's slipper – as noted above – might be another example of that, as might Napoleon and Stalin's continued resistance to intelligence analysis. Latterly, the theme of intelligence failure predominates. These might be failures of collection, failures created by confirmation bias (e.g. Pearl Harbour, the failure to prepare for Barbarossa, the assumption of the social contract prior to the July 2005 bombings in London and so on and so forth), failures created by incompetence, and failures created by the politicisation of intelligence agencies and officers. All of these lessons come through each and every chapter in different intensities and whilst I think it makes for an exceptional classroom tool, I do also wonder how many undergraduates will have the patience to make their way through 760 pages of narrative, or the two hundred additional pages of references and bibliography?

The various chapters of this book are an uneven length, reflecting – I think – the different bodies of evidence that sit behind them. As soon as we move into periods where official information was physically written and archived the chapters lengthen out, and the presentation of historical information deepens, quite naturally and expectedly. The author correctly points out that some of the key challenges to scholars of intelligence is access to information. And this is unsurprising, given the sensitivities, but unfortunate given the importance of intelligence work to, for example, the outcome of the Second World War, to moments in the Cold War, like the Caribbean Crisis: moments we could reasonably describe as pivotal historical moments.

Richard Aldrich's fantastic contribution to our knowledge of GCHQ, and Christopher Andrew's own book concerning MI5, were pieced together from archival material drawn from all manner of official archives, not just those one would assume was directly relevant (e.g. those of the Home Office, Foreign Office or Ministry of Defence). Even this realisation provides some evidence for the whole-of-government impact that intelligence has, and which Andrew's book is a good contribution towards. Whilst Aldrich did not have official authority for his book, against Andrew's role as MI5's official historian for his previous book, both are testament to the level of investigative zeal that is required for this sort of endeavour.

Our more recent history, and governments' growing obsession with both keeping secrets and being unable to shape 'facts' against the multitude of alternative explanations is part of the mis- and disinformation that dominates the current era, and might make such a future project more difficult to accomplish. This also provides a nice way into the issues raised by Mark Urban in his book: how are we to know what *really* happened to Skripal, when the claims and counterclaims are so loudly, vigorously and repeatedly made? What methods might be required to discern truth from lies? These

future endeavours will be more difficult than even the historical work into the Soviet Union and Third Reich were, because at least there was a difficult to reach plain official archive in those cases, of the wiring of the state, of it trying to operate as normal, rather than those archives being deliberately skewed from the outset to advance a particular world view, of deeply engrained and systematic attempts to obfuscate and mislead. Future historians will also need to develop techniques to overcome – or perhaps, preferably, to ignore – the weight of generated data via social media and so on, that I increasingly think obscures rather than informs the analysis of politics: again, something that Mark Urban's book highlights somewhat more directly than *The Secret World*.

The Secret World is, I think, a rather clever book. It will find a mass-market, particularly as we approach Christmas, and families with an amateur historian in them (all families have at least one), will find themselves grateful recipients of something that will occupy their Boxing Day and beyond. It will also be an essential university library purchase, and might even make it onto reading lists, as it will mine. But I view it as a galloping tale, with serious academic rigour, rather than a book of considerable scientific merit. I wanted to know more about the historical method, of the foundations of knowledge – of how we should discriminate between sources, particularly when we know that intelligence is a tricky subject to research, and governments have gone to lengths to make it a difficult subject to cover. I wanted to know more of those authentic, non-European voices and experiences, though this might be a touch unfair as it might amount to a different project. Some linguistic turns in the book made me wince – one homosexual character is described as 'flamboyant', which made me hope that this character really was genuinely flamboyant, as opposed to a hackneyed, ready-made trope pulled down off the linguistic shelf. But many other of Andrews' turns of phrase delighted. Overall, I enjoyed *The Secret World*, valued it and would recommend it as a sweeping work of intelligence history that does provide a unique contribution to the field. If I find myself with a spare twenty-five or so hours to spare in the future, I may even read it again.

Mark Urban is the diplomatic editor of the BBC's Newsnight programme and the author of ten other books. His book *The Skripal Files* does not make the same demands on one's time as Andrew's. Indeed, my first thoughts were about the speed at which Mark Urban had managed to write it and similarly that MacMillan had to edit and physically publish it. This is a wildly different proposition to the immense amount of time and patience that must have been exerted over *The Secret World*. Given that the Skripal poisonings only occurred in March this year, I had visions of Urban burning the candle at both ends, not to say applying a flamethrower down the entire length of the candle to achieve an instant reaction book of some considerable merits. And whilst the speed is impressive, I was relieved (presumably from a position of not being able to write as quickly as Urban) when it emerged early in the text that his original project had been a book concerning post-Cold War intelligence, and which had included Sergei Skripal as a prominent Russian defector, prior to the poisoning. This context made far more sense to me, and this book is a sensible, appropriate and interesting response to the Salisbury poisoning and the material Mark Urban had or could quickly generate. The book itself is divided into three sections: Skripal as an intelligent agent, prisoner and subsequently target. This structure is sound and delivers the information at a brisk pace.

The Skripal Files is the first monograph-length response to the poisonings of Skripal and his daughter in March 2018 and has beaten both other journalists and academics – who might be focusing on peer review journals – into press. It has substance, too. Indeed, the key added value of the book is ten hours of interview evidence that Urban conducted with Skripal in the summer of 2017: this is an entirely novel contribution to our understanding of this man, of the motivations for defection laid bare, and indeed – inadvertently – to our understanding of why the GRU may have taken such strong action against a man who had been convicted and then swapped (which conventionally would mean absolved from any further punishment). One of the starkest things about these interviews is that they were sanctioned by SIS, and that they seem to have been so uncensored, so incautious. Skripal seems – on the face of it – to have 'sung like a canary' to Mark Urban, and it did give me pause to consider whether if the GRU learned of these interviews, learned of or suspected that they were full of detail,

that this might give rise to another motivation for assassination: perhaps the unwritten rule was that he could be swapped but he must now be anonymous.

Perhaps the thought of another Oleg Gordievsky, someone who has had a career after a career of broadcasting knowledge and latterly views about Russian affairs, was simply too much to bear. Allowing another vocal Gordievsky-esque character might also be seen as tacitly encouraging defection, something that would sit uneasily with the pre-existing reluctance to have swapped Skripal in the first place. Mark Urban hints at another possible reason for the Skripal poisoning, which is that Skripal had meetings with *Sluzhba Bezpeky Ukrayiny* (SBU) officials, the successor to the KGB in Ukraine and the organization charged with counterintelligence in Ukraine. This would be particularly inflammatory to Russian sensibilities, given the ongoing struggle between Russia and Ukraine, as surely the only utility that Skripal would have to the SBU would have been to advise on Russian techniques and tactics. Continued betrayal may have also been a trigger to direct action, and if one stepped into the shoes of a party to a spy swap, the notion that the swapped officer would continue working would almost certainly breach the normative understanding of the terms of the swap.

Where the book is interesting and strong is in the use of those interviews, an analysis of how foreign agents are recruited, of Russian and British intelligence organisations and culture during the 1990s, and of tradecraft during this period, including semi-cinematic tropes like the use of invisible ink, which is all rather jolly but might be read as pitch for a *Night Manager* style televisual dramatisation, with cinematic production values. Unlike Gordievsky, Skripal shows no sign of anti-communism nor any particularly enmity against Russia, although we might reasonably assume he has gained some scepticism since March. Indeed, Urban notes that Skripal was initially unwilling to believe that the Russian authorities had poisoned him. This places Skripal in the odd position of having some identifiably Russian nationalist traits, but simultaneously being an enemy of the people: a niche position to find oneself in.

In Urban's interviews, Skripal states his enthusiasm for the former USSR, having served in the military and then intelligence with genuine distinction, and does not sympathise for the plight of Ukraine despite having met the SBU, as noted above. His treachery could be interpreted as being part and parcel of the collapse of the USSR as his central frame of reference. It could also be seen as part and parcel of the perceived chaos and corruption in Russia during the 1990s, which would lend itself to viewing personal enrichment on or over the margins of legality as something that was commonplace and an appropriate level of risk in the circumstances: some people were making serious fortunes in this way, and there may have seemed to be few guarantees in the new Russian order. But key here is that Urban's telling of this story means that we should see Skripal's treachery as not being ideologically loaded.

The logical follow-on from that should lead us to wonder if the Russian authorities missed an opportunity to run Skripal as a double agent, which might have offered some advantages to them, and may have limited his life expectancy in entirely different ways. Instead, they have compounded this potential missed opportunity by staging an audacious assassination attempt (that breaches countless international laws and norms), using a hitherto little-known chemical, which forms part of the novichok family of agents, developed under the Soviet era. And I want to commend Urban for being one of the very few journalists actually to delve into the story behind the term novichok and to make it clear that it is not one chemical, but a suite of chemicals. Urban's nuanced account of this is worth reading in parallel to the technically detailed output of former CBRN officials like Dan Kaszeta, who have done much to promote the accurate public understanding of these agents, and the approach to treatment that would have been taken.

It is the assassination attempt in Salisbury that provides the dramatic backdrop to Urban's switch of focus from a study into Cold War treachery into the study of the attempted murder of a pardoned traitor, but it is this switch of focus that potentially undermines the long-term impact of this book. By the time of publication the Skripal story had already dramatically moved on with the online

investigative team *Bellingcat* – who are a crowdsourced analytical team, citizen journalism movement, and transparent exponents of open source intelligence – revealing the identity of the alleged suspects in the case, and the subsequent denials and television interviews from Russian government figures and the suspects themselves.

We might reasonably assume that there are further developments to come in this story as the investigations continue and conclusions are drawn, and so whilst the desire to be an early entrant in the market is understandable and amply achieved here, this is unlikely to be the definitive word on the Skripal case. This is a book that demands a second and possibly a third edition (depending upon the publication timeframes) to keep pace with developments in the case. Whilst someone like me will buy an updated edition, would it find a lay audience, particularly when those who are interested will have bought the first edition? Or will Mark Urban be content to see the inevitable competitor books, and to know he got there first?

Nevertheless, *The Skripal Files* is a compelling early response to the Salisbury poisonings and has an enduring quality in what it tells us about the state of Anglo-Russian intelligence during the 1990s, and particularly the difficulty British intelligence had in penetrating the GRU at that time. It is a book to be thoroughly commended for the insights it provides us, and for the questions that it intentionally and unintentionally leaves open. One of the most prominent of those questions is the nature of research work on intelligence itself. The online group *Bellingcat* have arguably done more to advance the public understanding of Salisbury than anyone other than Mark Urban, and they have laid out the tools they used online for anyone to download, interrogate and use. It is easy to see golden bullets and sunlit uplands in online tools, techniques and sources, but *Bellingcat* has achieved and opened up a greater level of understanding than the legacy media had done to that point. They did not have Mark Urban's ten hours of interviews with Skripal, and they did not have the closer relationship, perhaps partly conditioned by the D-Notice Committee, of the legacy media and the government.

But whilst Christopher Andrew's book shows what can be achieved through a well-judged deep-dive into the traditional archives, and Mark Urban's book shows what can be achieved through 'good old fashioned journalism', I was left wondering whether the disruptions caused by Wikileaks over the past ten years, of whistleblown disclosures since 2013, and now of this crowdsourced open intelligence will transform the nature and business of writing about intelligence in the future. Will there be a bifurcated community of intelligence watchers divided between those with 'official' positions, cleared access and cleared publications and those who utilise the best of (and I struggle with the correct word here) 'invasive' (?) open source intelligence to create alternative readings and takes, all of whose work will be contested, tainted and challenged by the ceaseless eye of an online setting that has become an alternative fora for state power, as it has to amplify the ignorance of the wider public and to legitimise and democratise these views.

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