Intelligence and National Security

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To cite this article: Michael Herman (2011) Intelligence as Threats and Reassurance, Intelligence and National Security, 26:6, 791-817, DOI: 10.1080/02684527.2011.619798

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2011.619798

Published online: 20 Dec 2011.

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Intelligence as Threats and Reassurance

MICHAEL HERMAN*

ABSTRACT Intelligence’s activities provoked feelings of threat in the adversary, and its capabilities provided reassurance for its own side. Fear of espionage (and associated covert action) was common to both sides. Intrusive technical collection had a similar effect, principally through the scale of Western operations around Soviet territory, and in overflights up to May 1960. On the other hand intelligence’s capabilities provided reassurance for both sides in the mutually legitimized verification of the US-Soviet strategic arms control agreements. As the Cold War progressed they also increased Western governments’ confidence that they would not be caught by a Soviet surprise attack, or by an overturning of the military balance of power. Yet for both sides the threat of the opponent’s intelligence activities – the enemy within – remained the more important part of Cold War psychology.

Intelligence mattered in the Cold War mainly through governments’ use of the knowledge it produced. But it was at the same time an activity, principally in its covert means of information collection, and also a capability: a power that governments felt able to count on in planning for the present and future. Both these had effects on the psychology of the two sides. The collection activities (or some of them) were seen as intrusive threats by the opponent against whom they were targeted. By contrast the intelligence capabilities that depended on this collection gave their own governments in the West – perhaps also in the East - some assurance in facing the Cold War’s future. They were some restraint on the fears and distortions of uncertainty.

The two effects interacted in ways that posed an intelligence version of the ‘security dilemma’ of military power, in which seeking more security nationally through developing more forces increases perceptions of insecurity internationally and leads to a ratcheting of military procurement.1 This did not apply to intelligence’s verification of the US-Soviet strategic arms agreements in which, remarkably and exceptionally, the intelligence coverage of the two sides was legitimized so that it provided mutual reassurance without additional threats. But everywhere else intelligence increased the confidence of its own side by drawing on the product of the

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1For a fuller discussion of this dilemma over intelligence effects see Michael Herman, Intelligence Power in Peace and War (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996) pp.368–75.
collection activities that alarmed the other. This paper discusses this combination of its threats and reassurance and the place of the two in Cold War psychology, though it is written mainly from an Anglo-American perspective and adds only limited aspects of the Soviet Union’s.

Threats

**Human and Technical Collection**

Most intelligence activity was in collection and the first-stage exploitation that went with it. The image of this collection everywhere was of espionage, the covert use of human agents, and this can be discussed first. The agents were of all kinds: those seeking to talent-spot, recruit and run them and the recruited agents in place, but also the defectors who changed sides with information to offer, the émigrés, travellers and other occasional sources of all kinds, the whole gamut of human contacts with the other side. The image of ‘spying’ was popularly extended to all other intelligence collection, even merging into legitimate information-seeking. Both sides also used diplomatic cover for their intelligence officers overseas, and they sometimes extended intelligence functions as a result to providing covert government contacts and unattributable diplomacy. Covert technical collection was also mounted from diplomatic premises, as well as being a means of host countries’ and others’ external attacks on them. Embassies were both intelligence bases and intelligence targets.

Espionage was of course nothing new. On the Soviet side the large-scale effort of the Cold War had been foreshadowed in the pre-revolutionary Tsarist Okhrana, the inter-war pursuit of émigré and other perceived threats abroad, and the effort against both enemy and allies in the Second War; but the worldwide scale and professionalism the system developed after 1945 were unprecedented in peacetime. This was even more the case with its much smaller British and American counterparts. Covert US collection in peacetime was starting virtually from scratch, and the small pre-war British effort against Soviet targets had been discontinued after 1941.

Counterespionage developed in parallel, and the spy cases and spy trials it produced became regular reminders of espionage’s Cold War significance to governments and publics on both sides. In the West the defection of the code clerk Igor Gouzenko from the Soviet embassy in Ottawa in 1945 led to public revelations of the scale of wartime Soviet espionage on its allies, and the effects were reinforced by the trials of the Soviet ‘atomic spies’ in the United Kingdom and United States in the following years. Other spy cases followed regularly on both sides, and the diplomatic cover these involved led to the recurrent tit-for-tat expulsions of diplomats and pseudo-diplomats. Both sides chose to publicize these trials and expulsions, along with some (not all) of the valuable human defections from the other side, and these glimpses of the secret war came to be regularly quoted in the East–West war of words. The intelligence war was held to be deeply secret, but some aspects of it were surprisingly public.
This was the public face of espionage, but it was closely linked on both sides with the less publicized activity of covert action, in its wide range from unattributable information services and confidential contacts at one extreme to support for paramilitary operations at the other. In the Soviet view these ‘active measures’ were complementary to espionage and doctrinally inseparable from it in the communist struggle. The West distinguished more sharply between the two, and unlike the Soviet Union tended to see covert action as the subsidiary and more controversial of the two activities. Yet over the Cold War as a whole it was a significant American activity, although the effort in it waxed and waned; and though Britain was more cautious it made its contributions. Covert action on both sides – and reactions to it – may indeed have been a major strand in Cold War history, particularly of the East–West conflict in the Third World. It may indeed have been an important element in the loss of both Western and Soviet empires. But we lack a synoptic view of it, and one is not attempted here. The paper limits itself to the psychological effects of these human activities – both espionage and covert action – and does not distinguish between the two.

Despite the importance of this human component, most intelligence activity was in fact technical and not human in character. This was overwhelmingly the case in the West, and was probably also true of the Soviet Bloc where the technical effort is now known to have been larger than once thought. Part of technical collection on both sides was photoreconnaissance, initially by aircraft and later with the addition of the extensive programmes of imagery satellites. But most of it was signals intelligence (Sigint), overwhelmingly so in the West, and probably also so in the East. Despite the development of space satellites, most of Sigint’s interception effort was at sizeable, fixed, terrestrial sites. These were not publicly declared, but could not be completely concealed. Each side was aware of the other’s efforts, though sketchy on the details. Each side also gave them the popular but misleading label of ‘spying’, which has stuck. For

2The KGB’s official definition of intelligence-gathering was as a ‘specific form of political struggle used by the intelligence agencies of a state to help it to fulfill its internal and external functions’, not far different from the role of active measures in ‘exerting useful influence’ on the target country and misleading and disrupting its activities generally (Vasiliy Mitrokhin, KGB Lexicon: The Soviet Intelligence Officer’s Handbook (London: Cass 2002) pp.13, 200).

3Well-known examples of American covert action are the funding of the Italian anti-communist parties after 1945, the backing for the Mujahidin in Afghanistan, and the provision of printing presses and other covert support for Solidarity in Poland.

4One description is in Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, KGB: The Inside Story of its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev (London: Hodder and Stoughton 1990) pp.510–2. Andrew has also quoted the combined strength of KGB and GRU Sigint as 350,000 people (‘The Nature of Military Intelligence’ in Keith Neilson and B.C.J. McKercher (eds.) Go Spy the Land: Military Intelligence in History (Westport, CT: Praeger 1992) p.5). This seems a high figure, but probably included military tactical Sigint and electronic warfare. For the particularly important East German effort see Ben Fisher, “‘One of the Biggest Ears in the World’: East German Sigint’, International Journal of Intelligence and Counter-intelligence 11/2 (1998) pp.142–53.
the British media, for example, the national Sigint headquarters has for many years been, erroneously but irretrievably, the ‘Cheltenham Spy Centre’.

The location of the interception stations was determined on both sides by the physics of radio propagation. The principal classes of Soviet military transmissions could be intercepted reasonably well by the West at ranges of hundreds of miles, but not when these got far into thousands. They could not be adequately heard from the American homeland. Hence the United States needed Sigint bases nearer the Soviet Bloc, or arrangements with friendly services in suitable places, or both. Most of America’s NATO allies, including the United Kingdom, could meet this geographic requirement: even from North America Canada was able to provide coverage of the Barents Sea and the Soviet Far North from its Arctic sites. The same considerations dictated the location of sites outside NATO around the southern Soviet periphery and Soviet Far East. Geography was also a factor in other kinds of technical collection, as in the use of British and Norwegian locations to provide some of the shore ends for the American acoustic devices that detected submerged Soviet submarines en route between northern waters and the Atlantic. But Sigint was the main technical activity dictating the search for sites.

As the Cold War developed, this geographical dimension was sharpened by the growing volume of Soviet transmissions and radar-like emissions that operated in higher frequency bands that necessitated interception at much closer ranges, comparable with those of the domestic FM radio receivers we all use today: rather further than line-of-sight distances across the earth’s curvature, but not by much. Those Western states with Soviet forces across their borders or just over their horizons therefore offered particularly valuable locations, and the ring of longer-range Western sites was complemented by an inner ring of close-access ones in locations that included northern Norway, Baltic islands, the Federal Republic of Germany’s East–West border, northern Turkey, Iran and northern Japan. For the same reason West Berlin was a prime location behind enemy lines.

This collection was all from fixed sites, but the need to get close to the targets also led the West to mount mobile collection from ships and aircraft where land-based collection was impossible or incomplete. For the same reason there was even a brief attempt to operate from an Arctic ice-floe. Aircraft flying high had a special ability to provide a specially deep Sigint ‘look’ into Soviet Bloc territory, as well as oblique photography. Thus there were constant aircraft flights along Warsaw Pact borders, over international waters off the Soviet coastline, and in the sea areas used by the Soviet fleets. Naval surface vessels and submarines collected intelligence in the course of suitable deployments, and there was some Western use of specialized intelligence vessels that could spend lengthy periods on station. A result on the Western side was an intensive, multinational Great Game with the opponent, played not only along the German border but also over and in the Baltic, the Barents Sea, the North Pacific and elsewhere. Aircraft of almost all Western countries packed with technical equipment flew every day, and
tough men rolled for weeks in small ships. Though the United States led, most of its allies took some part.

The Soviet Union had the same collection needs but the combination of geography and radio propagation worked against meeting them. It had large-scale efforts within the Soviet Bloc’s borders, but lacked any sites close enough to the American enemy’s home base, except for its station in Cuba which remained an irritant to the United States long after the USSR had ceased to exist. It mounted extensive flights along the East–West German border and over the Baltic and the Norwegian Sea, but it was difficult for its aircraft to fly close to Britain or the United States for any length of time. There was covert interception from Soviet diplomatic premises, and there were persistent reports of other clandestine operations, for example in civilian lorries transiting through divided Germany. The main Soviet investment in mobile operations was however in shipborne interception, in which there was a much greater effort than in the West, with regular patrols by the specialized collection vessels, the so-called ‘intelligence trawlers’. Even here geography meant that these were widely dispersed by comparison with the West’s concentrated efforts around the Soviet periphery.

The operations of both sides were undeclared, but many of them were virtually overt, and some produced contacts between attackers and defenders. There was no deep mystery about the regular aircraft flights of both sides, or the East’s intelligence trawlers. Each side tracked the surface warships of the other and assumed them to be collecting whatever intelligence they could. Submarine operations were more covert, but the Russians had no illusions about the operation of Western boats in their fleet areas, and the same applied to the comparable Soviet operations around Western deployments and exercises. There were deeply secret American submarine missions in the 1970s and 1980s to tap cables off Soviet coasts, and also to retrieve fragments of Soviet missiles from the seabed, but they were eventually detected.5 Close contact of a quite different, non-technical kind between the opponents was also provided by the ‘licensed espionage’ – actually observation and photography – by both sides’ military missions in East and West Germany, and by the activities of their military attachés everywhere.

Technical Collection and Incidents

Most of these technical operations were conducted by both sides without intentionally infringing international law, and some became Cold War routines, but they were fragile ones, liable to produce East–West incidents, particularly through the airborne Sigint operations and the urge for them to get close to their targets. There were accidental Western incursions into Soviet airspace through navigational limitations and human errors, particularly in the Cold War’s early years. Soviet Bloc fighters would

normally be sent to intercept any flights not recognized as scheduled civil ones, and there were shoot-downs of Western aircraft when positional errors of one side or the other produced unwonted Soviet reactions, especially in times of political tension. The Western flights’ objectives also regularly included provoking and testing the Soviet defences to study their responses. An aircraft would approach low under Soviet radar cover and suddenly go high to test the speed and accuracy of the defender’s tracking and reporting system; or as in one American account, ‘[S]ometimes we would fly missions over the Black Sea . . . To tickle the Soviets a little and create more activity we would do a straight approach towards Sevastopol, turn and run out. Then we would listen to the racket [on the air defence radio communications].’

In these circumstances it is not surprising that as many as 13 intelligence-gathering American aircraft were shot down around and over the Soviet periphery between 1947 and 1960. In 1952 a Swedish intelligence aircraft was also a victim over the Baltic, and the same happened to a flying boat sent to rescue the crew. No British intelligence aircraft was ever shot down. There were no further shoot-downs of these kinds after the summer of 1960, perhaps through more sophisticated navigation systems or more caution on both sides. Minor incursions still continued (by both sides) around the East-West border in Germany, and in and around the Western air corridors to Berlin, but none of them led to significant incidents. But accidental overflights of Soviet territory by others could still take place, and Soviet fears of intelligence incursions could give them tragic consequences. In April 1978 a South Korean airliner was shot down over the north-west USSR, though without heavy casualties, and on 1 September 1983 there was a more publicized repetition in the Far East, when an aircraft of the same airline was shot down after accidentally overflying Kamchatka and Sakhalin, with the loss of all 269 people aboard.

Even more significant than this activity around the Soviet periphery in forming Soviet attitudes was the succession of deliberate Western penetrations of Soviet airspace in the years through the 1950s. These were to various depths, and for the varying purposes of photography, radar mapping, technical interception, testing defence reactions and (some writers have

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7I am indebted to Chris Pocock for this figure in March 2010. Lashmar’s Spy Flights of the Cold War Appendix 2 gives a total of 20 Western aircraft shot down in this period, including some he lists as on transport and training flights.

8Lashmar, Spy Flights of the Cold War, p.169.

9Flying from Paris to Alaska to refuel and fly on to Seoul on 20 April 1978, it managed with astonishing navigational ineptitude to change course by almost 180 degrees and overfly the Murmansk area. After being fired on by a Soviet fighter it landed on a frozen lake. Two passengers were killed (Wikipedia, accessed 23 January 2010).

10For a full account see Wikipedia.
argued) demonstrating American military *machismo*. Many were detected though none was lost. They began in 1950, and for the first half of the decade including 1956 were by US Air Force (USAF) (mainly Strategic Air Command (SAC)) and US Navy aircraft in separate operations that in total ran well into the teens, some by multiple aircraft in different areas.\(^{11}\) The penetrations were mainly of the USSR’s remote Far East and Far North, but some were of Eastern Europe into Byelorussia, the Ukraine and Metropolitan Russia. Two (multiple) operations, in 1952 and 1954, were by Royal Air Force crew in American military aircraft painted with British insignia.\(^{12}\) There were also concentrated operations in spring 1956 that according to unofficial American accounts consisted of 156 flights in seven weeks into Soviet airspace, ending with a squadron flying in formation in daylight several hundred miles over (remote) Soviet territory.\(^{13}\) There were also programmes of unmanned American balloons from Western sites to drift across the USSR to record imagery and radar emissions. Nearly 500 were released in the mid-1950s, and another smaller balloon project was mounted two years later.\(^{14}\)

The overflights by military aircraft were all superseded after the end of 1956 by the CIA-led programme of operations by the specially constructed, high altitude U-2 aircraft, principally for photo-reconnaissance though they also had a subsidiary Sigint capability. There were 24 U-2 overflights of varying depths, including two by Royal Air Force pilots in 1959–60 (not to be confused with the earlier British-manned operations just mentioned). The overflights ended with the well-known shoot-down of one of these aircraft on 1 May 1960 deep in Soviet territory, near Sverdlovsk, and the subsequent trial of the pilot.\(^{15}\) No more U-2 operations took place over the Soviet Union, though there may have been incursions by military aircraft in the Far East much later, in the early 1980s, as part of the Reagan administration’s demonstrations of power.\(^{16}\)

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\(^{12}\)There have also been claims that an RAF flight in a British aircraft was mounted in this period. For a discussion of the evidence and doubts about the conclusion see Chris Pocock, ‘Operation “Robin” and the British overflight of Kapustin Yar’, *Intelligence and National Security* 17/4 (2002) pp.185–93.

\(^{13}\)Gordon S. Barrass, *The Great Cold War: A Journey through the Hall of Mirrors* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2009) p.90. A rather more restrained account is given by Hall pp.182–5. The flights were indeed concentrated, though the incursions were all over the Soviet Far North.


\(^{15}\)Pocock, *The U-2 Spyplane* pp.158, 161–2. I am indebted to him for confirmation of this total of 24 U-2 overflights (correspondence March 2010).

Other kinds of close-range collection also produced their own incidents. At sea the underwater trailing of opposing submarines produced East–West collisions, though none became public knowledge. An unofficial account shows 13 involving American boats and two the British. An officer of the American military mission in East Germany was shot and killed in 1985, after a member of the French mission had been road-rammed and killed the previous year.

Apart from the maritime collisions, the incidents were all Soviet reactions to Western collection of an intrusive or potentially intrusive kind. There were no comparable examples of intrusive Soviet operations and violent Western reaction. Soviet aircraft flying off the US homeland seem to have stayed outside a 50-mile limit. Intelligence trawlers were stationed off Western naval bases but their presence became accepted as a routine. The only authenticated case of a substantial Soviet maritime incursion was of the Whisky-class submarine that ran aground off the Swedish coast in October 1981, much publicized by the Western press as the ‘Whisky on the Rocks’. Compared with its adversary the West suffered fewer close approaches, and was much more restrained in its responses.

These, then, were the sensitive activities – human and technical – in which each side was engaged and the incidents that followed, but what effects did they have on the Cold War? Did they make it hotter, or did leaders accept them as no more than part of the background noise?

**Effects on Allies**

The effects were mainly on opponents; but there were some between allies and not enemies. The United States was sometimes an intelligence paymaster, and would provide the smaller countries with equipment or funding in return for operating in their territories or receiving their intelligence product; but despite this material *quid pro quo* the allied agencies would also insist on some Sigint assistance and collaboration. Their attitude was rarely that of mercenaries, or real estate agents only concerned with maximizing rent for their sites. The need for suitable intelligence sites reinforced not only America’s need for a large overseas presence but also the cooperative character of the relationships it developed.

Proximity to the USSR was also a factor in the tenor of these individual relationships. The UK–US Sigint partnership was *sui generis* within the transatlantic alliance, but one element in it – though by no means the most important – was the UK mainland’s position as an unsinkable aircraft carrier within intelligence range of the adversary. The same applied even more to the UK’s ‘useful geography’ elsewhere, as in its presence in Cyprus and its retention after Cypriot independence as a striking case of an influence of

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17 Figures compiled from Sontag and Drew, *Blind Man’s Bluff*, appendix A.
20 Details can be found in *Wikipedia* (accessed 23 January 2010).
intelligence requirements on the retention of sovereignty. Countries such as Norway and Turkey offered unique access to important areas and received particularly generous American treatment. With the presence of UK and US forces on its territory, West Germany could not provide special access of its own, but its combination of sizeable Sigint resources and well-placed locations was nevertheless felt to make it particularly useful in ‘taking the strain’ (the idiom of the time) in helping the UK–US effort on the European mainland. By contrast, France’s lack of well-placed sites held it back as an influence in the Western intelligence club, and perhaps contributed a little to its semi-disengaged political stance.

Such geographical effects also applied outside the NATO area. The value of its site in Iran for monitoring Soviet missile tests was a considerable factor in the US’s uncritical support for the Shah before his fall. Japan’s value for coverage of the Soviet Far East figured similarly as a factor in its American relationship. Australia’s geographical suitability for a ground control site for American intelligence satellites became a factor in its emergence as a US ally in its own right, no longer so tied to the British connection. Similar factors applied to the alliance’s relations with friendly neutrals: a history of Swedish Cold War policy would be incomplete without considering the value to the West of its window on to Soviet forces and activities in the Baltic area. Geographic access was even the basis of the secret Sino-American agreement for Sigint operations in China targeted against Soviet missile tests.21

We know less about any comparable effects within the very different Soviet Bloc. The East European countries offered little access not open to the USSR, but Moscow nevertheless depended heavily upon East German intelligence for its high-quality coverage of the many Western targets in West Germany: we do not know if this gave East German leaders any leverage with Moscow. We do not know if Polish intelligence influenced its governments in pro-Soviet or nationalist directions. An account of Romanian intelligence’s place in the extraordinary history of Soviet–Romanian relations is now available,22 but otherwise the English literature on Warsaw Pact intelligence arrangements is limited.

What is clearer, however, is that this Soviet-controlled effort as a whole had its political effects at one remove on the politics of the Western alliance. The politics of NATO was influenced throughout by the accurate UK–US assessment about the Soviet penetration of the alliance’s continental members: the assumption was that anything passed to them would reach Moscow. This was a factor in the emergence of the half-acknowledged English-speaking, ‘CANUKUS Eyes Only’ community within NATO, and the ramifications this had in the strain between the alliance’s continental and transatlantic strands.

22Larry L. Watts, With Friends Like These: The Soviet Bloc’s Clandestine War Against Romania (Bucharest: Military Publishing House 2010).
Covert Agents: Enemies Within

The main interest here is however in activities’ effects on adversaries. Of these some individual episodes are established parts of Cold War history. The scale of Soviet espionage against its wartime allies had its part in fixing the Western view of post-war Soviet intentions in 1945–46, and was confirmed by the spy cases that followed later. Those of Hiss and Fuchs may have contributed a little by their timing in early 1950 to the hard line of the American National Security Council’s policy report NSC-68 issued that summer. The shooting down of the American U-2 on 1 May 1960 led to Nikita Khrushchev’s break-up of the East–West Paris Conference that began shortly afterwards. The same fate of a U-2 over Cuba during the 1962 crisis increased the tense situation. The expulsion in 1971 of 105 Soviet intelligence officers from their diplomatic cover in London, and the Soviet response, froze UK–Soviet relations for some time, and set a pattern for the next 20 years of substantial expulsions by Western governments and counter-expulsions from Moscow, though none was on the London scale. The fate of the South Korean airliner in September 1983 exacerbated a situation of already high US–Soviet tension.

But these were major episodes, and the question remains whether the many unpublicized activities of these kinds had a comparable psychological influence through the nature of the activities and the scale of their repetition. Part of the answer is in Raymond Garthoff’s comment on the shoot-down of the South Korean airliner in 1983, that

Each side thus converted its ready suspicions and worst assumptions about the other into accusations that could not be proved or disproved, but that tended to be believed by its own side and bitterly resented by the other. The upshot was to set American–Soviet and Soviet–American relations considerably further back and undercut tentative steps towards an improvement in relations.23

What was known about the other side’s secret activities was no doubt magnified by what was suspected about them, and became the unseen parts of the adversary’s intelligence iceberg. But it must be asked whether experienced leaders and officials regarded this iceberg in reality as a nuisance rather than a threat, and something best insulated from Cold War policies as far as possible. How seriously was it really taken as evidence of a threat?

It may be sensible here to separate reactions to human and technical ‘spying’. On the first the expert view in the West seems to be that Western espionage and covert action were genuinely seen by the Soviet regime as evidence of a serious Western intent to overthrow the system. The demonology of the West’s ‘special services’ in Soviet thinking went back to the West’s intervention in the regime’s early days, and the solid evidence of the Western spy cases and support for anti-Soviet partisan movements

23 Garthoff, Detente and Confrontation, p.1016.
after 1945 bore out its Cold War relevance. Inside government’s top echelons the KGB’s exaggerated accounts of Western machinations in Eastern Europe were accepted before the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the other actions considered to preserve the Bloc’s integrity. The West’s covert activities were routinely blamed for most of the regime’s domestic and international failures: the shakier its empire became, the more was attributed to CIA’s subversion. Julie Fedor’s paper in this collection describes the grand scale of the KGB’s myths about West’s intent and action that were developed in the Cold War and are devoutly put around now. We have no reason to disagree with Vojtech Mastny’s conclusion that in the Soviet Union the ‘reports showing vast penetration by Western spies were not merely invented for public consumption to justify the repression of imaginary enemies, but were taken seriously by the security services as working assumptions.’ The preservation of secrecy had acquired an absolute value in the Soviet system, almost beyond analysis.

Western reactions to these human activities by the Soviet side were more diverse. Hawkish opinion-formers made the same exaggerations in the West as their Soviet opposite numbers, but the succession of spy cases and the large scale of covert Soviet operations also nourished rather wider, visceral, less ideological Western fears of treachery, the betrayal of the open society’s trust, the enemy within. Typical was the long-running speculation in the British media about the penetration of the Establishment by the KGB’s ‘Cambridge Five’ agents. Fears of Soviet subversion and support for communist parties in Western Europe loomed large in the Cold War’s early years and were never completely stilled. They reappeared at a top official level in the British Joint Intelligence Committee’s 1972 assessment of ‘The Soviet Threat’ which gave prominence to the presence in Continental Europe of ‘more than 800 identified or suspected Soviet intelligence officers with official cover’. It forecast that ‘the Soviet Union will increase the number of agents of influence and sympathisers . . . in order to influence Western policies and undermine Western resistance to Soviet aims.’ This was a bleaker assessment of Soviet motives than that committee usually produced. Nevertheless the writer recalls genuine official concern in subsequent years that Spain and Portugal might ‘go communist’ when the two dictators Francisco Franco and Antonio Salazar died.

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24 For brief references to the scale of Western support for these movements after 1945 see Raymond L. Garthoff, Assessing the Adversary: Estimates by the Eisenhower Administration of Soviet Intentions and Capabilities (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution 1991) pp.16–19.


On the other hand some more relaxed attitudes could be found among Western politicians and officials. The published volume of internal Foreign and Commonwealth Office documents leading up to the British expulsions of the Soviet intelligence officers from London conveys an impression of measured professionalism: documents with that provenance would be unlikely to convey anything else. They suggest that the decisive factor was the foreign secretary’s robust anger at the scale and shamelessness of this Soviet effort. It was no way for a state to behave that aspired to be treated as a respectable great power, and an impediment to developing any normal relationship, but not necessarily a threat to national security.  

Yet even under this professional carapace the diplomats’ experiences within the Soviet Bloc may still have had their effects. An American diplomat has written with honesty about life under constant hostile intelligence targeting in the Moscow Embassy, and concluded that ‘it was hard not to let that situation impact on your own view of [what is now] the former USSR’.  

(Possibly the same applied in reverse: the autobiography of Oleg Gordievsky records the claustrophobic precautions taken in the heavily curtained Soviet Embassy in London to counter the UK’s technical eavesdropping against it.  

) Even if diplomats managed to remain impassive in their attitudes, it is difficult to believe that governments as a whole did not share the public view of the opponent’s espionage and subversion as threats to national ways of life, the more corrosive for being for the most part invisible.

Effects of ‘Technical Spying’

Here the bulk of intrusion was by the West. There were indeed numerous Soviet Bloc operations, and Western publics were regularly reminded of the threats posed by the Soviet long-distance flights over the Atlantic, the patrols by the intelligence trawlers, and the suspicions of covert activity by Soviet merchant ships and other Soviet ‘technical spying’. There was enough evidence to provide ammunition for the hawkish Western commentators whose influence on Western policies is a fact of Cold War history. Nevertheless the proportion of activity that could reasonably be deemed threatening was small, and it is difficult to believe that Western opinion was ever as influenced by the USSR’s technical operations as by the scale of its agent-running.

The threat of the opponent’s technical operations must have seemed much more substantial to the Soviet side. The worldwide location of the West’s Sigint facilities around the Soviet periphery was part of the Cold War’s political geography: the West looking in and the USSR looking out. The sites were much less conspicuous than the main military deployments, but their

27Official papers published at note 26 above.
link with ‘spying’ probably gave them some place in the world-view of Soviet strategists, though by no means a dominating one. There must have been more definite effects from the scale and intrusiveness of the West’s mobile collection operations, particularly the airborne ones. After the American creation of SAC in 1946 an airborne nuclear attack on the Soviet Union was part of Western military planning, and was quickly reflected in the Soviet creation of the air defence force in 1948 as a separate service to counter it. Evaluating this air defence and ways of defeating it was always the principal target of the Western intelligence flights, though not the only one. Treating the flights as potential threats must have seemed especially important on the Soviet side in the periods when SAC had its 24-hour nuclear-armed patrols airborne.

With this sensitivity it is not surprising that the Russians presented their shoot-downs of American aircraft as national defence, and reported in the official primer on Soviet armed forces’ organization issued in Moscow in 1978, that ‘[A]t the beginning of the ‘fifties, when violations of USSR air borders became more frequent, the National Air Defence Forces successfully intercepted all attempts to penetrate Soviet airspace.’\(^\text{30}\) The high-level command’s involvement in the Soviet shooting down of the South Korean civilian aircraft in September 1983 illustrated the importance that the defence of the airspace was still given.\(^\text{31}\) For the Americans these incidents were all evidence of Soviet ruthlessness and warlike attitude. In all they lost some 170 USAF and Navy aircrew around the total Soviet Bloc periphery between 1946 and 1991, most though not all on intelligence missions.\(^\text{32}\)

There were also regular Soviet protests over the deliberate overflights of the 1950s. When these began there were American hopes that they would not be detected and tracked, but the Soviet radar coverage improved throughout the 1950s, though the defending fighters were still unable to reach the intruders. There were also American press leaks about them. At one point the Russians displayed one of the American intelligence-gathering balloons in Moscow. So for Khrushchev the flight and shoot-down of the U-2 deep over Soviet territory on May Day 1961 may have been a last straw, and his wrecking of the subsequent Paris conference was not the only result. High feelings were raised again on both sides when a SAC reconnaissance aircraft was shot down in international airspace off the Kola Peninsula shortly afterwards, on 1 July,\(^\text{33}\) and it seems that Khrushchev decided at that stage to abandon further cooperation with the Eisenhower lame-duck administration and wait until the following year for his successor.\(^\text{34}\)


\(^\text{31}\)See \textit{Wikipedia} account at note 10.

\(^\text{32}\)Hall, ‘The Truth about Overflights’, p.188. Barrass suggests after correspondence with Hall that this figure includes losses around Eastern Europe, China and North Korea (Barrass, \textit{The Great Cold War}, p.90). Some others were also lost on non-intelligence flights.

\(^\text{33}\)Pocock, \textit{The U-2 Spyplane}, p.234.

Yet it is still not clear that the Soviet reactions to these overflights and other Western close-range technical collection were quite as visceral as to the covert activities attributed to the Western ‘special services’. The protests over overflights before the U-2 shoot-down were relatively muted, though there may have been practical explanations: the radar contacts may have been uncertain, and in any case the regime may not have wanted to draw its citizens’ attentions to the limitations of its air defences. Khrushchev did not raise the subject of overflights with Dwight Eisenhower in his visit to the United States in September 1959.35 It also seems that after the U-2 shoot-down Khrushchev was initially prepared to accept the expected American excuses and apologies, and it was only Eisenhower’s soldier-like acceptance of responsibility and refusal to apologize that moved him to take a much harder line in Paris than he had intended.36 Khrushchev may indeed have seen the U-2 operations as an insult to Soviet pride rather than more evidence of a basically aggressive American intent.

We also do not know what the Soviet leadership really thought of all the Western peripheral flights that passed without incident, and indeed of the maritime deployments in Soviet sea areas. Some of the naval operations were intended as assertions of American power and no doubt the political message was taken, but their intelligence collection was subsidiary.37 Close encounters between the two sides’ surface warships were frequent, but the American writers on the covert submarine operations concluded that ‘even the most violent submarine encounters never sparked real crisis.’38 Limitations were agreed in the signature of the US–Soviet Incidents at Sea agreement in 1972 to avoid accidents, and for the navies of both sides much of the regular intelligence-gathering probably became accepted as part of the Cold War choreography of demonstrating power, ‘tailing’ the other side, and observing. The Soviet authorities became aware of the West’s much more intrusive submarine operations, but there is no indication of any top-level reaction to them. A Soviet general dealing with the British Military Mission in East Germany drew a distinction between acceptable ‘reconnaissance’ and unacceptable ‘espionage’,39 and comparable tacit understandings about what was acceptable may have developed among the air and maritime authorities most often involved. Despite the intrusions and shoot-downs, the West’s airborne and maritime technical operations probably did not arouse quite the same feelings in Moscow as the image of the West’s covert agents and ‘special services’ and their undermining of communism from within. Yet

37Those close to the Soviet Far East in 1983 were a particularly large demonstration of power (MccGwire, Perestroika and Soviet National Security, p.389). American and British surface deployments in the Barents Sea also had political objectives mixed with collection.
38Sontag and Drew, Blind Man’s Bluff, p.301.
39I am grateful to Col. Roy Giles for this observation.
at the very least the scale of the West’s technical operations and their intru-
sion or near-intrusion must have been a constant reminder, to attackers and
defenders alike, of the Cold War’s nature as a very unusual period of peace.

Playing Hardball with the Adversary
The big question for each side was to assess the balance of offence and
defence in the other’s world-views, and their scope for change. To apply to
the Cold War a term coined earlier to discuss the post-1918 peace, was the
other side a ‘satisfied’ power, or an ‘unsatisfied’ one, seeking to change the
situation in its favour? Each side took the other’s activities as evidence of
hostility, but there is no evidence that either side went further and
scrutinized them for clues whether the other’s politico-strategic aims were
offensive or defensive.

Neither did either consider the effects of its own side’s total covert
activity – human as well as technical, those of its allies or subordinates as
well as its own – on the opponent’s assumptions on what the Cold War was
about. To think of such terms was hardly Moscow’s style: even Mikhail
Gorbachev, who sought to improve the KGB’s objectivity, did not as far is
known curtail its collection. In the West those drafting the assessments on
the USSR were never aware of the full scope of Western activities against it
and the effects they might have. Even if they had tried they had no means of
getting complete information.

On the other hand the West was not completely insensitive about
intelligence’s effects. There was an official study for President Eisenhower of
the limits to be set on American intelligence activities, and there is published
information on some presidential and prime ministerial decisions on
particular operations in the Eisenhower period. They provide little
indication of any guiding view about intelligence’s effects on the adversary,
but they merit examination.

The report was by a commission under General Doolittle convened by
President Eisenhower in 1954 to consider policy on covert activities,
including intelligence-gathering. The conclusions were hard-line:

We are facing an implacable enemy whose avowed objective is world
domination by whatever means and at whatever cost. There are no
rules in such a game … We must develop effective espionage and
counterespionage services and must learn to subvert, sabotage and
destroy our enemies.\textsuperscript{40}

Eisenhower wrote in reply that ‘I have come to the conclusion that some of
our traditional ideas of international sportsmanship are scarcely applicable
in the morass in which the world now flounders.’\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{40}Quoted by Harold M. Greenberg, ‘The Doolittle Commission of 1954’, \textit{Intelligence and

\textsuperscript{41}Quoted by Gaddis, \textit{The Cold War}, p.165.
Yet the actual decisions over the airborne operations of that period were more nuanced. The American flights around the Soviet periphery had initially been given stand-off distances of 40 miles from Soviet borders, but after the outbreak of the Korean War this was usually reduced to 12 miles, though the United States still claimed a (contested) right to approach to a three-mile limit. The military overflights of Soviet territory in the first half of the 1950s had approvals from Presidents Harry Truman and Eisenhower. By the mid-1950s Eisenhower was making his remarkable proposal to the Soviet side for an Open Skies’ inspection agreement and had become more hesitant about the overflights. He was assured at one stage that the specially designed U-2s would be undetectable, and authorized some flights by them. The assurance was found to be optimistic and he became more parsimonious with his authorizations. By the end of the decade he was insisting that the U-2 missions should all take off from Pakistan to exploit the remaining gaps in the Soviet radar coverage. After further detections he was even more torn between the risks and the pressing need for intelligence on the size of the Soviet missile threat. Even had it succeeded, the overflight of 1 May 1960 which he authorized may well have been the last, as usable satellite photography was about to become regularly available.

The British decisions over participation in these series were also taken at top-level. The two RAF operations in the first half of the 1950s had Churchill’s approval as prime minister. In 1956, after the much-publicized failure of a quite different British covert operation, his successor Anthony Eden withdrew the British cooperation with the U-2 programme. After Eden’s resignation in early 1957 Harold Macmillan renewed the British stake in it including the two RAF-piloted U-2 overflights already mentioned.

This is no more than a snapshot of Western decisions over these overflights, but it is clear that they all had proper political authority, even though the military commanders may have exceeded the discretion they were initially given. (Though few details are available, there also seems to have been presidential awareness of the intrusive American submarine

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43Ibid., p.166. Also Pocock, The U-2 Spyplane, p.142.
46Pocock, The U-2 Spyplane, chapters 7–9.
47An MI6 operation using an ex-naval diver to investigate underwater features of the Soviet cruiser, which had brought the Soviet leadership to Portsmouth in April 1956 in a visit to the UK. The diver, Commander Crabb, was drowned and the operation became known to the press. A permanent result was a tightening of the British procedures for the authorization of intrusive operations, and this remained a feature of the British system for the rest of the Cold War.
48Lashmar, Spy Flights of the Cold War, chapters 5–7, 14; Pocock The U-2 Spyplane, pp.157–61.
operations then and later.\textsuperscript{49} The need for intelligence was undeniable: it was intolerable and dangerous that the American intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) programmes were being driven by guesswork about the Soviet competition. The underlying American mood was as set out by Doolittle, of playing hardball and signalling toughness, but there seems in practice to have been ample presidential weighing of pros and cons of the operations.

Eisenhower’s judgments seem to have been careful, but there is little indication of his rationales. It must be remembered that at the time of the early overflights American aircraft (and British) had just been engaged in the undeclared air battles with the Soviet air force in the Korean War. The survival of the U-2 pilot to be put on trial in Moscow had also been judged to be an unlikely outcome. Nevertheless with hindsight, given the place of nuclear air attack in American strategy and Soviet fears of it, the succession of overflights in the 1950s now seems among the most provocative of the West’s intelligence-related activities, next only to the support of the armed resistance movements in the Soviet Bloc in the early years. Neither side’s intelligence was good at seeing things accurately through the opponent’s eyes, least of all in assessing the conclusions he would draw from one’s own intrusive collection against him. Eisenhower in his decisions on the U-2 operations was caught here between intelligence’s two psychological effects, of promoting reassurance in its own side and perceptions of threat in the other, before the development of American intelligence satellites removed the need for any further aircraft overflights.

These were the threat perceptions. The international and national dimensions of reassurance can now be examined.

Reassurance

Arms Control\textsuperscript{50}

Intelligence’s capabilities – what it could be relied on to provide – served national ends. Yet they also played an important part in the American government’s initiative in launching East–West strategic arms control in the late 1960s, and in reaching the agreements with the Soviet Union in the 1970s and later. Negotiations would never have got underway without the factual baseline about the Soviet strategic forces that American intelligence was by then able to provide; ‘it was in large but unrecognised measure US confidence in the quality of the intelligence on Soviet forces during the late 1960s and early 1970s that allowed strategic arms limitation negotiations to begin at all.’\textsuperscript{51} It continued to be available throughout the negotiations.

\textsuperscript{49}For indications of presidential (and congressional) briefings see Sontag and Drew, \textit{Blind Man’s Bluff}, pp.179–80, 227–31, 242–4. See, however, p.222 for the fudging of reports to disguise the risks submarine captains had taken.

\textsuperscript{50}These paragraphs are adapted from Herman, \textit{Intelligence Power in Peace and War}, pp.158–63.

But counting on this intelligence for the future was even more important. The concept of arms control turned on the ability to verify, and on-site inspection for this purpose was at that stage unacceptable to the Soviet side. Confidence about long-distance verification by intelligence was therefore a foundation of the American proposals and the eventual agreements. Domestically it was essential for the American Congressional approvals on which so much depended. More than that, intelligence determined not only the mechanism for verification but the subjects of the agreements. The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks Agreement (SALT I) was cast in terms of launchers (at missile sites and as missile tubes in submarines), not missile production, because launchers were what imagery satellites could see. The limitations on throw-weights and multiple independently targetable warheads in SALT II were possible because US interception and analysis of radio-telemetry from Soviet missiles could yield the necessary data on them.

All this received treaty recognition. The USSR had accepted the existence of intelligence satellites from 1963 onwards, but only tacitly; and there were American fears that they might be disarmed in some way, as through the operational deployment of anti-satellite programmes for knocking them out in space, or by extensive camouflage to conceal launchers from satellite imagery. The result was the provision incorporated as Article XII of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and Article V of the SALT I Agreement, repeated as Article XV of SALT II, that:

1. For the purpose of providing assurance of compliance with the provisos of this Interim Agreement [Treaty], each Party shall use national technical means of verification at its disposal in a manner consistent with generally recognised principles of international law.
2. Each Party undertakes not to interfere with the national technical means of verification of the other Party operating in accordance with paragraph one of this article.
3. Each Party undertakes not to use deliberate concealment measures which impede verification by national technical means of compliance with the provisions of this Interim Agreement [Treaty]. This obligation shall not require changes in current construction, assembly, conversion, or overhaul practices.

The US–Soviet Standing Consultative Committee was created as a mechanism for handling complaints about treaty breaches, with the ‘national technical means’ (NTMs) accepted as legitimate inputs. In commentaries these NTMs have often been identified exclusively with satellite collection, but the wording did not limit them in this way. Soviet missile telemetry was collected by US aircraft and by ground-based sites in Iran as well as by satellites; and Soviet intelligence vessels in the Atlantic probably did the same against the American test firings from Florida. Nevertheless it was the development of satellite collection by both sides that made this intelligence verification possible.

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52An official American description of NTMs was as ‘assets which are under national control for monitoring compliance with the provisions of an agreement. NTMs include photographic
This special importance of NTMs declined when on-site inspection became acceptable to the USSR and assumed the major verification role in the arms control measures of the 1980s. Nevertheless inspection still benefited from synergy with NTMs, as for example in the signatories’ ability to trigger the limited numbers of on-site ‘challenge inspections’ permitted by treaty. The NTM provisions were repeated in the later Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), along with mutual agreements for some specific displays of equipment to imagery satellites.

For intelligence this was all breaking new ground. The agreement not to camouflage missile silos from satellites was new enough, but more surprising still was the explicit agreement in conjunction with SALT II that the NTM provisions covered not only the interception and analysis of radio-telemetry but also a limitation in the encipherment of its channels. Both parties’ imagery satellites were by then an open secret, and in any case the practical scope for hiding ICBM silo construction from them was limited. By contrast telemetry interception and analysis had previously been part of the closely guarded intelligence world. After SALT I the SALT II negotiations in the 1970s turned increasingly on parameters verifiable from this material, and there were US fears that its access to them would be cut off by increases in the Soviet encipherment of it that had begun some years earlier. From 1977 onwards the United States demanded assurances that further telemetry encipherment was covered by the ban on ‘concealment measures which impede verification by national technical means’, and after two years the Soviet Union accepted as part of the SALT II settlement that neither party would engage in the deliberate denial of telemetric information, such as reconnaissance satellites, aircraft-based systems (such as radar and optical systems), as well as sea- and ground-based systems (such as radar and antennas for collecting telemetry).”


Thus article XII of the INF Treaty provided for each side to be able to request six open displays per year of road-mobile ground-launched missiles at operating bases; not later than six hours after receiving a request, roofs of all launcher structures were to be slid open, and missiles and launchers moved into the open for a period of 12 hours. (J.K. Leggett and P.M. Lewis, ‘Verifying a START Agreement: Impact of INF Precedents’, Survival 30/5 (1988) p.413) The START I agreement included similar provisions for monitoring mobile ICBMs; see A.S. Krass, ‘Update: Verification and START: A Progress Report’ in J.B. Poole and R. Guthrie (eds.) Verification Report 1992 (London: VERTIC 1992) p.57.

Though it was thought necessary to agree as a ‘Third Common Understanding’ attached to Article XV of the SALT II Treaty that ‘no shelters which impede verification by national technical means . . . shall be used over ICBM silo launchers.’

through the use of telemetry encryption, whenever such denial impedes verification of compliance with the provisions of the Treaty. The spread of encipherment was halted, and the later START I agreement of 1991 banned it completely and took other measures to ensure that recorded telemetry data was available to the other party.

This recognition of intelligence collection, and the agreement not to interfere with it, became what John Gaddis has described as the ‘reconnaissance satellite regime’ between the superpowers. It was still quite a strange one. It had no definition of NTMs, or of the ‘recognized principles of international law’ to be applied in using them. Their legitimization applied only to verifying the arms control treaties, and not to technical collection for any other purposes. It is also not at all clear whether it was even-handed between the two sides. The United States may well have been the main gainer, perhaps the only one, since the evidence about American programmes from published and leaked information available – to say nothing of the product of Soviet espionage – may have meant that its NTMs could not add a great deal to what Moscow knew already. Checking Soviet encipherment was a major US interest, but we do not know whether the equivalent American telemetry transmissions were encrypted at all, and whether the Soviet side exploited them. But the Soviet fear of American deception was so deep that the regime may well have felt it needed all it could get from the NTMs. In any case no agreement would have been acceptable to Moscow without the appearance of complete reciprocity.

Whatever the oddities, the agreements were of lasting significance. The enemies were prepared to discuss what hitherto had been their secret means of collection and the fruits from them. The American side’s revelation of its exploitation of the intercepted telemetry, and the store it set by preventing its encryption, was an unprecedented revelation of intelligence’s capabilities; and there were also no precedents for the undertakings to send radio

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58 The treaty required the broadcasting of all telemetric information and banned any practice – including encryption, encapsulation and jamming – that denied access to it by NTMs. It also required the provision of full telemetry tapes and certain information that helped in their interpretation. This was ‘a new and highly significant commitment to transparency in military affairs’ (details and quotation from A.S. Krass, ‘Update: Verification and START: A Progress Report’ in Poole and Guthrie, Verification Report 1992, p.59).


60 Though there is an echo of them in a UN resolution on the principles of arms control verification that ‘any verification system should correspond to the generally recognized principles and norms of the UN Charter and other fundamental sources of international law’ (Final Document UN 1st Special Session 1978 on Disarmament (UN Document A/S - 10/2), quoted by B.R. Tuzmukhamedov, ‘Verification of Disarmament’ in A. Carty and G. Danilenko, Perestroika and International Law (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1990) p.49).
transmissions *en clair*. Agreements with the other side on what had previously been among the most sensitive parts of the intelligence war were possible in a good cause. Intelligence in the form of USAF’s late 1950s estimates of the ‘missile gap’ had had some responsibility for the Cold War’s inflated strategic nuclear arms race that followed. In its contribution to arms control intelligence subsequently did something to check this arms race and bring it under control. The significance for Cold War history is not for discussion here, but there is probably not much modern dissent from the conclusion of Michael (later Sir Michael) Howard at the time that ‘[F]ew would deny that the development of reconnaissance satellites has been highly stabilising.’

Reducing National Uncertainty: Taking the Opponent’s Pulse

This creation of mutual East–West reassurance was exceptional, and intelligence’s other reassurance to its leaders was national. In trying to assess what this contributed to Cold War psychology it is not easy to reconstruct the changing and sometimes fickle moods of the period. Nevertheless it can be recalled that as the Cold War continued the British national mood moved from the widespread fear of nuclear war in the years after the Cuban crisis to a degree of confidence that the Cold War could be managed. In the United States the interest in civil defence and fallout shelters was at its height in the early 1960s and then declined. One can guess that in both countries intelligence’s improving performance was a factor in a greater government confidence which rubbed off on popular opinion.

The paper ‘What Difference Did it Make?’ in this collection outlines Western intelligence’s improvement. It was never able to provide compelling insights into long-term Soviet intentions, and we still do not know if the views which it endorsed struck the right balances between expansion and defence in Soviet motives, and allowed enough for changes over time. But its main contributions were on Soviet military power. On this its record in the early part of the Cold War was a mixture of realistic judgments, exaggerations and uncertainties, but from the 1960s onwards the American imagery collection by satellite helped to improve it greatly. ‘Worst case’ exaggerations were reduced, though by no means eliminated. The intelligence estimates became more precise, less fuzzy, and governments had less scope for choosing what suited their political stances. There was less fear of destabilizing surprises. An improved warning role was joined with a better understanding of Soviet military capabilities, and the two rubbed off on each other. The imponderable of reassurance was one result.

The fear of Soviet surprise attack was bound to be part of the Western stance: Pearl Harbor had seared itself into the American consciousness.

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Britain had not had quite the same experience of surprise, but the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) had developed from the experience of the German attacks in spring 1940 and the threat of German invasion that followed, and the influence of Churchill’s instruction for it to produce urgent appreciations as needed ‘at any hour of the day or night’.63 Warning arrangements got some limited attention in Washington after 1945, but were given their impetus by the surprises of the invasion of South Korea and the subsequent Chinese intervention, and warning machinery was set up.64 Britain responded to an invitation to join, and it became a tripartite system with Canadian participation.

The assumption behind the warning system was that there would never be direct evidence of a Soviet intent to attack, or a decision to do so. These would have to be inferred from departures from normality over wide ranges of government activity, mainly by Soviet and satellite armed forces, and the ‘warning indicators’ that these would present. This warning role was implicit in the coverage of these forces for other purposes, including the analysis of Soviet Bloc capabilities and order-of-battle needed for many other reasons. But the speed and comprehensiveness of surveillance for effective warning greatly influenced the effort towards the development of information technology (IT) and the speed and comprehensiveness it could provide. IT devices and early computers had been developed in the Second World War for cipher-breaking, but from the early 1950s onwards there was a parallel development of them, along with communications, for large-scale data-handling and exploitation. It became a prime characteristic of the US effort and of the British and other allies who cooperated with it.

What was presented as a result was never complete. It was in a sense a two-dimensional picture of military activities, without explicit insights into purposes and intentions, and needed interpretation. But when it was set against the static and initially delayed pictures available from satellite imagery, it provided the West with a dynamic and timely picture of changes, movements and preparations. In the jargon of the day it indicated the Soviet ‘military posture’. It was likened at the time to ‘taking the pulse’ of the target. Perhaps the modern medical analogy would be with using MRI scans of human brain activity to give clues of the subject’s preoccupations and intentions. Scanning activity in this way for ‘warning indicators’ became a specialist activity by military intelligence staffs. If the exciting part of the West’s Great Game was close-range collection around the Soviet periphery, its substantive complement was the 24-hour operation of the warning and reporting offices that sought to monitor what the other side was doing.

This effort was never solely for strategic warning. The West’s own naval and air operations around the Soviet periphery needed the supporting

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surveillance that could alert them to reactions that might threaten their safety. The development of this kind of mission warning may indeed have been a reason for the absence of Soviet shoot-downs of American aircraft after 1960. It was inconceivable in any case that Western authorities should not have some current awareness of what Soviet forces were doing. But timely reporting and evaluation became a top priority, and the provision for surveillance at a near-waritime tempo became one of Western intelligence’s distinctive features. Of all the megatons of paper that Cold War intelligence consumed, a considerable proportion must have been for the ephemeral product of this system, of little practical use except as a precaution. Never before had intelligence sought to provide warning of attack on such a scale in peacetime, and for so long.

No one will ever know how effective the system would have been against a real Soviet attack. It had to be geared to the imaginable scenarios that were unlikely to happen, and not the unpredictable circumstances of war by accident, error or leaders’ impetuosity. Its record on Soviet moves against targets outside the Western alliance was actually unimpressive. It failed to provide clear warnings of the moves to crush Hungarian and Czechoslovakian independence in 1956 and 1968. It provided indications of Moscow’s preparation to take action against Romania in 1968 and China in 1969, but its warning of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was muted. On the other hand it did better in following the aborted Warsaw Pact preparations for military moves into Poland in 1980 and 1981, and the American use of intelligence to drive the diplomatic signalling of the time may have helped to deter Moscow from the military solution it was contemplating. Yet the Soviet alert of some kind in November 1983 (discussed in Professor Scott’s paper here) was not discerned until some time after the event.

But these events were all different from a prepared Soviet attack on the West, and the record on them is hardly relevant. There were endless NATO debates about the warning times that could be expected in varied scenarios, but the bottom line was that warning was central to the West’s formal stance. Nuclear deterrence needed some warning of a Soviet bolt-from-the-blue, and NATO’s plans for conventional resistance depended on warning time for its large-scale mobilization and redeployment. The West needed warning and had no alternative. The real value was that it reduced the risk of war by misperception, or by accidents in the automated detection of missile launches on radar screens. Confidence in the system may have encouraged the Americans not to invest for longer in SAC’s continuous airborne deterrent, and not develop other hair-trigger arrangements for a strike. As the sophistication of the warning system developed, statesmen felt more protected against surprise and the fog of crises. Even at the worst times of East–West tension, American presidents never believed that they were about to be attacked. For the top political level this was the real, peacetime pay-back for the large-scale coverage and analysis of Soviet Bloc forces – the often-despised ‘bean-counting’ – that was criticized by the civilians in
Whitehall as serving no purpose except meeting military needs for the war that would never happen.

**Understanding Soviet Power**

This confidence over Soviet attack was part of a wider intelligence effort. The warning system depended not only on harnessing IT and communications for the speed and scope they could provide, but also on the understanding of the Soviet military machine that improved as the Cold War continued. For those running the Western effort there were difficult decisions on the balance of effort between ‘current intelligence’ and ‘research’: producing a better and quicker picture of today’s activities and the indications they provided of tomorrow’s, or promoting more understanding in depth? Yet the two were at opposite ends of a common intelligence spectrum: each infused and strengthened the other.

The same applied to the effect of reassurance. As the Cold War went on Western confidence grew not only in the ability to detect a Soviet attack but also to understand the extent of the military threat. Even in the early years this had never been a complete mystery; and at no time afterwards was this understanding complete. Nevertheless, as intelligence improved, the military balance of men, materiel and deployments between the two sides could be used as policy rationales by Western governments with more confidence than before. Fears of new Soviet wonder-weapons and widespread Soviet deception still had their effects in the 1970s and 1980s, but were kept in check better than the earlier ‘missile gap’ had been. There was no policy panic in the later period on the scale of the reaction to the Soviet Sputnik in 1957. No American government could have embarked on arms control without confidence in its intelligence on Soviet missile deployments and characteristics. Mrs Thatcher was probably strengthened in her belief that she could do business with Mr Gorbachev by the confidence that the JIC was capable of checking on his veracity, and in the event was only too anxious to find evidence of deception.

Hence intelligence helped all those, hawks and doves alike, who saw the West’s objective as ‘managing’ the Cold War. The confidence it provided in the military balance did not necessarily encourage any particular style of Cold War politics. It may indeed have supported the confident and aggressive style of the first Reagan administration just as much as the milder approach of President Jimmy Carter’s before it. But it may nevertheless have encouraged considered approaches, and reduced the risks of panics and hasty decisions by leaders. In the reflection of a thoughtful British diplomat much involved in dealing with the Soviet Union, ‘those responsible for day-to-day affairs proceeded on the assumption that there would be no doomsday.’65 The fact that Soviet power was no longer quite as secret as it had seemed immediately after 1945 may have been a factor in

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what the same diplomat described as ‘a consensus on both sides – conscious in some cases, unconscious in many – to allow the confrontation to play itself out rather than to bring it to a head.’ Western intelligence’s improved quality as the Cold War progressed had been a factor in this confidence, and it was fortunate that the improvement had come about in large measure through the American intelligence satellites that operated at safe distances in the sky, and had not needed the continued violations of Soviet sovereignty of the overflights up to May 1960.

Soviet Reassurance?
We know little about the Soviet regime’s view of intelligence as an insurance against surprise. It adopted its new national warning system (RYAN) in the early 1980s when fears of Western attack increased, and this was raised to alert status in late 1983, and then retained for some time though with declining priority. There is earlier evidence of special daily reporting during the Berlin crisis of the late 1950s and early 1960s, but not of any other comprehensive warning arrangements before RYAN. Perhaps the need for warning in the 1980s was felt to justify copying the West’s system, which the USSR must have known about by then.

On the wider issue of managing the East–West conflict, we do not know whether Soviet leaders drew confidence from the information they had on the Western diplomatic hand, or always feared Western surprises and deception. Perhaps there was a mixture of both. Intelligence’s role in the verification of the strategic arms control agreements certainly seems to have been taken seriously. Presumably the Soviet satellite imagery programmes used for this verification gave its operators some new dimensions of Western visibility, though we have no idea how effectively the satellite source (run by military intelligence) was integrated into other top-level reporting in Moscow. The Soviet fears of a Western strike in the first half of the 1980s, and the related crisis alert in November 1983, demonstrated the Soviet leaders’ continued capacity for misinterpreting American intentions, but presumably by then Soviet intelligence as a whole (including the absence of alert messages from the warning system) had some balancing effect.

A Balance-Sheet
Intelligence’s main importance in both East and West was in its reports and assessments and governments’ use of them; but its activities and its capabilities also had these other effects on the psychology on both sides.

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66Ibid.
The West always felt threatened by the large scale of Soviet espionage and the subversion associated with it. The corresponding activities by the West were less extensive, but the Soviet regime felt even more deeply menaced by them. Next only to the threat of war, the Cold War was felt everywhere to be about these covert, internal attacks on the two regimes and societies. The publicity given to spy-cases and tit-for-tat diplomatic expulsions kept the threats in the minds of governments and publics.

Both sides’ collection by technical means had comparable effects, but they were less visceral and also less symmetrical, with the Soviet side more obviously threatened than the West. Geography and the requirements of radio interception produced concentrated Western efforts around the Soviet Bloc’s periphery. American aircraft involved in them were shot down through the 1950s up to the summer of 1960, and the same period saw the deliberate American and British overflights of Soviet territory. Up to the end of the Cold War the West’s close-range airborne collection must have had particular links in Soviet eyes with the threat of US–UK nuclear attack.

On the other side of the coin, the two sides’ technical collectors were mutual confidence-builders in their legitimized verification of the US–Soviet strategic arms control agreements. On other things the West’s improving intelligence on Soviet military targets increased its governments’ confidence that it would get warning of an impending Soviet attack, and similarly would not be surprised by the appearance of new Soviet weaponry that would overturn the military balance. It increased leaders’ confidence that the Cold War could be managed. In the early part of the Cold War this service of intelligence had needed the intrusive collection operations that frightened Moscow, but from the 1960s onwards its improvement came substantially from the American satellites, and the overflights of the USSR ceased: better intelligence had ceased to require more intrusion. The dilemma that Western reassurance came through activities that nourished Soviet fears did not disappear but became rather less acute.

Soviet intelligence may have provided some similar reassurance. Its intelligence satellites may also have provided valuable coverage of a non-threatening kind, though we are guessing about its contribution. The total effect on the Soviet side may have added a little (though not much) there to Western intelligence’s contribution to all those running the Cold War who, in the words of the diplomat quoted earlier, ‘had a vested interest in keeping the show on the road’ so that in the end ‘Armageddon came to be side-stepped, at least this time round.’

Despite this, threats were intelligence’s bigger psychological contribution. I argue in the paper ‘What Difference Did It Make?’ in this collection that, at the level of formal inputs to policy, intelligence’s knowledge was important to both sides on matters of military power, but much less so on the adversary’s long-term intentions. These judgments by each side about the other – as put by the British JIC in 1948, ‘What is Russia trying to do?’ –

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68 Alexander, Managing the Cold War, p.2.

69 Russian Interests, Intentions and Capabilities, JIC(48)9(O)Final, 23 July 1948 (London:...
were based more on what each saw of the other’s behaviour than on intelligence assessments. Yet for each side the intrusive intelligence activities of the other were an important and continuing element of this behaviour. The knowledge they produced may eventually have given Western governments – and possibly the Soviet regime – the confidence that the Cold War could be managed without disaster, yet for both sides the adversary’s intrusive collection demonstrated the hostility that made the conflict continue. All in all, this psychological effect probably did more to keep the Cold War going than intelligence’s reassurance could do to wind it down.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Chris Pocock for information on airborne operations, and to John Steele and Julie Fedor for helpful comments.