Secrecy, State-Private Networks and Operational Effectiveness in Cold War Europe

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Kaeten Mistry, *The United States, Italy and the Origins of the Cold War: Waging Political Warfare, 1945–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 308 pp., £65 (hb), ISBN 9781107035089.

Christopher Moran, *Classified: Secrecy and the State in Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 449 pp., £26.99 (hb), ISBN 9781107000995.

Alfred A. Reisch, *Hot Books in the Cold War: The CIA-Funded Secret Western Book Distribution Program behind the Iron Curtain* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2013), 570 pp., $70.00/€55.00/£45.00 (hb), ISBN 9786155225239.

Linda Risso, *Propaganda and Intelligence in the Cold War: The NATO Information Service* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 320 pp., $145/£90 (hb), ISBN 9780415570329.

Giles Scott-Smith, *Western Anti-Communism and the Interdoc Network: Cold War Internationale* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 376 pp., $105/£65 (hb), ISBN 9780230221260.

Secrecy has unintended consequences. The release on 9 December 2014 of the US Senate Intelligence Committee's report on the torture of terrorism detainees focused public attention on the secret activities of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Regrettably, lost amidst debate over justifying or condemning state-sponsored torture is a more basic concern, the issue of state secrecy, which underlies the discussion of how governments promote national ends. Only two days after the issuance of the Senate Intelligence Committee's report, the US House of Representatives adjourned without taking action on the Freedom of Information Act reform bill – despite receiving *unanimous* approval in both houses. This bill would not have required complete openness, but it would have eliminated many of the arbitrary

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Contemporary European History, **25**, 3 (2016), pp. 551–560. © Cambridge University Press 2016
doi:10.1017/S0960777316000291

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777316000291 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mechanisms that enable the CIA and other governmental agencies to suppress requests for information. Although the House Republican leadership failed to put the act on the legislative calendar, the Obama administration's Department of Justice also deserves opprobrium for surreptitiously opposing the act behind the scenes. The US government's disregard for establishing reasonable rules of transparency virtually guarantees that the CIA will continue to suppress its records, and thus public scrutiny of its unchecked activities, for a very long time to come.[1]

Of course, secrecy and over-classification are not the sole preserve of the US intelligence organisation. Arbitrary declassification continues to impede historians whether they are working in the archives of the CIA or the intelligence agencies of Europe. This review article explores three themes found in the recent work of five scholars, who have tried to piece together the history of secrecy and intelligence services in Western Europe and the United States. A recurring theme seen throughout the works under review is that of inadequate source material. Despite labouring at significant disadvantage, these historians nevertheless manage to craft admirable narratives. In a second, but closely related theme, the connection between state intelligence services and 'public' organisations (i.e., state-private networks) have inspired several of these historians to ask challenging questions about institutions designed to disguise or confuse. The last theme, namely determining the effectiveness of intelligence operations, forms a key aspect of intelligence gathering agencies' mania with secrecy.

Throughout the works under review, one reads variations of Linda Risso's remark in *Propaganda and Intelligence in the Cold War* that, 'unfortunately, further research on this point is impossible due to the lack of declassified documents' (Risso, 73). Consider also the late Alfred A. Reisch (1931–2013), who, in *Hot Books in the Cold War*, laments, 'for reasons beyond my control, I was able to locate and access only the first 17 years of the complete archival documents covering the project. . . . [Indeed, the] complete files have yet to be released by the CIA' (Reisch, 3). Risso resourcefully sidesteps the roadblock of classified sources in her institutional history of the NATO Intelligence Service (NATIS) by using multi-archival research from a variety of Western European, and especially NATO, materials. Reisch compensates for the lack of CIA material by making use of a remarkable range of letters, interviews and archival research conducted in Poland, Hungary and the United States. Also facing the issue of excessive classification, Kaeten Mistry's *The United States, Italy and the Origins of the Cold War* addresses the additional problem of exiguous and deliberately misleading documents by attempting to uncover the extent of US covert contributions to local Italian groups. Mistry discovered that 'the precise details concerning private contributions remain difficult to quantify due to the fragmentary

[1] Nate Jones, 'What We Can Learn from the Death of a Unanimously-Supported FOIA Bill, and Janus-Faced Support for Open Government', available at http://nsarchive.wordpress.com/2014/12/18/what-we-can-learn-from-the-death-of-a-unanimously-supported-foia-bill-and-janus-faced-support-for-open-government/ (last visited 14 Jan. 2015).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777316000291 Published online by Cambridge University Press

record for operations whose *raison d'être* was to leave no paper trail' (Mistry, 135). Risso, Reisch and Mistry each recognise that excessive classification has rendered many of their conclusions provisional, but they commendably demonstrate the value of conducting transnational and multi-archival research as a means of expanding the types of questions that can be put to documents.

Giles Scott-Smith's *Western Anti-Communism and the Interdoc Network*, similarly labouring under the burden of classified sources, validates transnational and multi-archival research. However, his work goes beyond the work of the other historians in that it draws counterintuitive conclusions about the paradoxical nature of secrecy. In writing his history of the International Documentation and Information Centre (Interdoc), which was a quasi-private, multinational intelligence service housed in The Hague, Scott-Smith engages several different types of documentary material to challenge a belief or 'suspicion' that Interdoc operated as 'little more than another CIA ploy to control West European activities' (Scott-Smith, 248). Ironically, this belief developed precisely as a result of Western governments' obsession with secrecy. His skilful examination of interviews, personal papers and corporate documents (e.g., Royal Dutch Shell and Philips International) indicate that 'Interdoc represented an alternative path' taken by Europeans away from American leadership in the struggle with Soviet communism. Despite this, Interdoc's preoccupation with secrecy appears to have fostered erroneous and conspiracist views among many Europeans that Interdoc operated as a CIA auxiliary. Although holding no brief for either Interdoc or the CIA, Scott-Smith shows that secrecy has unfairly and ironically enhanced the reputation of the CIA.

Compared to the other books under review, Christopher Moran's *Classified* appears as an outlier. Moran focuses upon the British state's obsession with secrecy and how various British governments have attempted to manage leaks and espionage, rather than upon the operation of intelligence agencies and state-private networks. Nevertheless, Moran's work relates to the other reviewed historians in that it explains how various governments' arbitrary classification structures affect historical research and how systems of secrecy are likely to complicate efforts to understand intelligence services. As will be discussed below, Moran considers the consequences of secrecy and suggests that conducting research on intelligence services will become increasingly problematic.

Cold War historians already face difficulties reconstructing much of what they know about how state intelligence agencies have conducted operations in cooperation with private organisations. Through the persistent questioning of a wide variety of historical sources, historians have gathered meaningful clues with which to piece together details about the collaboration between intelligence agencies and 'private' organisations. Consequently, scholars have begun constructing models of how state-private networks promote political agendas related to promoting culture, disseminating propaganda and gathering intelligence. This has proved a difficult task, because, whether the state secretly created these 'private' organisations or they originated 'organically', the very purpose of state-private networks has been to obscure the source of government activity.

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Mistry offers a critical view of state-private networks, even though he covers only a very narrow topic, namely US interference in the Italian election of 1948. While state-private networks masked US intervention in the 1948 Italian elections, Mistry argues that the CIA's 'enthusiasm' for covert operations ignored the 'critical role of Italian political and social actors' and of the 'host of transnational religious, labour, civic, and business protagonists' (Mistry, 3). The CIA believed that the electoral defeat of the Communist Party of Italy (*Partito Comunista d'Italia*, PCI) both vindicated US covert activities and justified heavy US investments in similar operations around the world. However, working with local groups was not as productive as the CIA believed, because 'beyond the shared objective of defeating the left, the motives underpinning such alliances were less straightforward than American officials assumed' (Mistry, 97).

American policy makers incongruously disregarded 'the contribution of the local partners and non-state actors with whom the Truman administration cooperated' and deluded themselves into thinking that covert collaborations formed an indispensable weapon in winning the Cold War (Mistry, 128). The United States misunderstood how 'the competing agendas of state-private collaborators undermined covert political warfare' (Mistry, 197). Thus, ascribing more clarity to its efforts than reality justified, the CIA exaggerated its importance in determining events in Italy. Although persuasive so far as he goes, Mistry overstates the significance of the Italian example. Despite correctly observing that covert operations in Italy contributed to the creation of the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC), which became 'the first permanent covert operations agency in American history' (Mistry, 178), Mistry would have been more convincing had he gone beyond the Italian election of 1948 to examine more broadly how US officials used the CIA's efforts in Italy as a template for global operations.

Risso takes both a longer and broader perspective on the operation of state-private networks. She contends that, while NATO was obviously a military alliance, 'NATO was – and still is – primarily a political organisation' (Risso, 5). As such, NATIS collaborated with private organisations, such as the Bilderberg Group, the Atlantic Institute, Atlantic Treaty Association and the North Atlantic Assembly, to manage the diverse political interests of the several member states. Work with state-private networks, especially in terms of cultural affairs and propaganda, helped coordinate responses to the political challenges facing the Atlantic alliance. By noting that the CIA 'excelled in the use of state-private networks to achieve the "mobilization of culture"' (Risso, 3) as it did by sponsoring the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), Risso appears to agree with Frances Stonor Saunders's conspiracist assessments of the CIA and CCF.[2] However, she discerns that NATIS's state-private networks faced tremendous operational challenges. Rather than supporting Saunders, Risso actually demonstrates that, 'the different levels of funding and discrepancy in the expertise of their members . . . jeopardised the associations' ability to put forward a coherent action, with the obvious result that a lot of energy and resources went

[2] Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta Books, 1999).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777316000291 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to waste' (Risso, 220). Even if NATIS had been able to manipulate state-private networks, 'the competing demands and initiatives of national governments created a degree of overlap and conflicting priorities that constantly undermined their efforts to promote NATO, and the result was often a hotchpotch of initiatives leading in different directions' (Risso, 249).

Similarly long and broad in view, Scott-Smith argues that Interdoc 'occupied a "grey area" as a state-private network somewhere between the public and private worlds' (Scott-Smith, 11), in essence acting as a 'network of networks' (Scott-Smith, 248). Describing Interdoc as neither a state nor private organisation, he defines it instead as a coordinating body for 'Western intelligence officers, political philosophers, and businessmen, who were determined to deal with communism as an intellectual adversary, not as a paranoid existential threat' (Scott-Smith, 2). He contrasts Interdoc's work to that of the CCF, which, he argues with less subtlety here than elsewhere,[3] served as an extension of the CIA. Whereas the CIA directly funded the CCF, 'Interdoc was being run [in the 1960s] on a combination of funding from the BND [West Germany's intelligence service] and business corporations, and in the 1970s the commercial approach was emphasized even more' (Scott-Smith, 245). Although certainly operating at the behest of Western intelligence services, Interdoc functioned as part of a multinational effort but was no adjunct of the Americans' state-private network. Interdoc participants promoted a vision of 'positive anti-communism' that tried to strike a balance between uncompromising Cold War and excessive tolerance of the Soviet system (Scott-Smith, 244) and hoped the organisation would cooperate with, but remain independent of, the CIA. The Americans even 'encouraged the Europeans to organize themselves in order to increase the effectiveness of [Interdoc's] activities' (Scott-Smith, 248).

In *Hot Books in the Cold War*, Reisch argues that the CIA's secret book distribution network represented one of the Cold War's great success stories. Although avoiding the term, 'state-private network', Reisch offers a sanguine opinion about the programme's operation in Eastern Europe through 'private' organisations. The book programme 'had a significant impact and influence on intellectuals, professional people, and thousands of students and youths in Eastern Europe during some four decades of Soviet communist domination' (Reisch, 523). The CIA (and occasionally the United States Information Agency) carried out much of this highly successful covert operation through an astounding number of state-private organisations (in some cases, front groups), including Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, the Free Europe Committee, the International Advisory Committee and many others (he does not discuss the CCF). According to Reisch, the programme operated as an important weapon in the Cold War's 'war of ideas through the political use of culture, and . . . part of an overall ideological competition between the East and the West' (523). Quoting historian Scott W. Lucas, Reisch notes that the book programme could not have functioned without the CIA's covert funding to private

[3] Giles Scott-Smith, *The Politics of Apolitical Culture: The Congress for Cultural Freedom, the CIA and Post-War American Hegemony* (London: Routledge, 2002), 3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777316000291 Published online by Cambridge University Press

organisations (Reisch, 524). Nonetheless, his celebratory view of the CIA-sponsored book programme likely puts him at odds with Lucas, who contends that the CIA's covert activities contributed to the 'drive for ideological consensus'.[4] Reisch agrees with the 'people in the intelligence community who knew about the book program [and] described it as a huge success and one of the best things the CIA ever did' (Reisch, 524).

Evaluating the effectiveness of what intelligence services actually 'did' marks the great benefit of several of these books. Historians of propaganda and information activities have found it exceedingly difficult to assess the degree to which such operations have been successful. A major challenge facing such scholars is the limited access to the data used by information agencies about the effectiveness of propaganda campaigns or covert operations. However, even when they do have access to relevant source material, historians often shy away from making conclusions about whether or not operations 'worked'. The historians under review attempt to address head on the issue of effectiveness, but they wisely avoid trying to make quantitative measurements of the effect of information activities on audiences. Recognising that such an approach might be simplistic and reductive, they choose instead to consider broad reactions, rather than specific responses to operations. Although the authors draw very different conclusions about the effectiveness of the various operations, the authors' conclusions are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

In considering the effectiveness of US propaganda and covert actions in Italy, Mistry holds a critical view, not because he regards such operations as 'unilateral and oppressive' (although he certainly does regard such operations as 'unilateral and oppressive'), but rather because he views the agency's efforts as 'largely haphazard and tardy' (Mistry, 142). For instance, the CIA's attempts to control covert operations in the Italian labour movement by threatening to cut off covert funds backfired. Resentful Italian labour leaders simply exposed the pattern of covert funding to the international press, thus embarrassing the US State Department (Mistry, 163). Despite recognising that 'covert activities entailed the perennial danger of exposure', the CIA persisted in trying to exert control over local actors. (Mistry, 165). The CIA encountered surprising difficulty coordinating activities with perhaps Italy's staunchest anti-communists, the Vatican, which often resisted the capitalist-Protestant vision of modernity and consumerism inherent in CIA propaganda. US officials also seemed baffled by the Christian Democrat Party's refusal to demonise the PCI. 'Beyond the shared objective of defeating the left', Mistry argues, 'the motives underpinning such alliances were less straightforward than American officials assumed' (Mistry, 97). Mistry ignores the morality of CIA covert funding and propaganda, persuasively arguing that 'the competing agendas of state-private collaborators undermined covert political warfare' and thus rendered CIA operations in Italy ineffective (Mistry, 197).

[4] Scott W. Lucas, *Freedom's Crusade: The American Crusade against the Soviet Union* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 282.

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At first glance, Risso appears to present NATIS as flexible and responsive. Risso concludes, however, that NATIS was not a particularly effective organisation. Her examination of 'propaganda outputs' from the beginning of the alliance to the fall of the Soviet Union 'demonstrates a shift away from straightforward anti-Soviet and military-based concepts towards a more articulated series of programmes that promoted the alliance as a political organization that fostered cooperation among its members and helped them prepare for a wide range of threats, including pollution, nuclear waste disposal and new technologies' (Risso, 6). Initially projecting information activities that emphasised the threat of communism, NATIS quickly adapted to the Soviet 'peace offensive' by abandoning 'strictly military-based themes' and moving to 'economic and social integration' (Risso, 76). In the 1960s NATIS propaganda reacted to social and political upheavals by putting 'a sharper focus on the younger generation and on the peaceful goals' of the alliance (Risso, 115). Moreover, NATIS's propaganda strategies tacked with events even after the end of the Cold War.

Despite setting its own information priorities, periodically revising outputs and flexibly responding to varying socio-political challenges, NATIS suffered from institutional disorganisation and lacked the ability to determine the effectiveness of its propaganda operations. Most member states perceived NATIS as an inadequate compromise: the Americans thought the body disorganised and insufficiently anti-communist, the British feared NATIS competition with their existing information operations and the Europeans on the continent regarded NATIS as insensitive to smaller states' concerns (Risso, 41). Moreover, 'cumbersome institutional procedures, the limited budget and the low priority accorded to information work within the alliance and by the national governments worked against an effective information programme' (Risso, 250). Above all, Risso observes that 'NATIS personnel had no means of assessing how much of the message was actually passed on to the secondary audiences' (Risso, 214).

Similarly, Scott-Smith asks whether 'Interdoc achieve[d] its hoped-for role as the central point for Western anti-communism – a privatized alternative to psychological warfare being run out of NATO' (Scott-Smith, 247). He concludes that the organisation was a failure. Interdoc neither operated as hoped nor escaped its public reputation as an affiliate of the CIA. However, Interdoc's significance lies not in its success or failure, but, rather, in its mere existence. Although obscure to many historians, Interdoc's ineffectiveness, Scott-Smith intriguingly argues, 'exposed . . . the severe obstacles that lay in the way of European integration in the security field, a legacy that is still being acted out today' (Scott-Smith, 248). More importantly, Scott-Smith's shifting of focus from state actors to state-private networks demonstrates a way for historians to broaden examination of the Cold War as an ideological struggle. Despite failing to realise its vision, Interdoc serves as an example for considering not only the 'intelligence and security liaison', but also 'the links between ideas and power' (Scott-Smith, 249).

Reisch confidently concludes that the book distribution programme 'played a decisive role' in contributing to 'the West's ideological victory' (Reisch,

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525). However, Reisch's introductory and concluding sections offer little help for understanding the method he used to make such a bold claim. Lean on argument, his work is dominated by the operational details of the book distribution programme. Nonetheless, historian Mark Kramer writes an excellent introduction to Reisch's book, which provides several criteria for gauging the project's effectiveness and testing Reisch's claims (Reisch, xviii–xxv). Indeed, Kramer's introduction clarifies and amplifies Reisch's important contributions, particularly in terms of understanding how to measure the effectiveness of information activities.

Looking at just one criterion, if one measures the book distribution programme by the negative reaction it provoked, then the project should be regarded as a success. Reisch's exceptional research indicates that Soviet and East European authorities regarded the steady flow of American and Western European materials reaching Eastern Europe as a threat. Throughout Eastern Europe, regimes engaged in criticisms, warnings and attacks on Western books. Concerned that these 'ideologically unwanted and unsuitable books and periodicals' challenged their 'monolithic political control', communist regimes 'mostly resorted to censorship to intercept any book or magazine they considered "subversive"' (Reisch, 207). In Czechoslovakia, communists reacted by using the state press to condemn challenges to socialist consciousness and the Prague Spring inspired 'Soviet propagandists to launch a broad campaign against Western media and institutions' (Reisch, 225). In the Baltic States, Hungary and Poland, officials confiscated books and placed them in the 'restricted sections' out of public reach (Reisch, 206). In Bulgaria, authorities worried that 'intellectuals were corrupted by Western books and publications, by visits to the West, and contacts with Westerners' (Reisch, 222). Historians concerned with understanding the effects of information activities would do well to follow Reisch's example of investigating target countries' reactions to propaganda activities.

In considering the book programme's overall effectiveness, Reisch certainly overstates its 'decisive role' in ending the Cold War. Such a view simply burdens the book programme with too much significance. Kramer, whose introduction offers a more measured assessment of the programme's significance, argues that 'few if any scholars are likely to argue either that the book distribution programs were absolutely decisive in ending the Cold War or that they were completely irrelevant' (Reisch, xxiv). Exaggerated claims notwithstanding, Kramer notes that Reisch's work opens 'fruitful opportunities for further research' and guarantees 'that scholars henceforth will keep in mind the impact of this crucial U.S. political warfare activity' (Reisch, xxviii). Indeed, Reisch employes meaningful methods of evaluating the qualitative effectiveness of propaganda and information activities.

As mentioned above, Moran's book seems disconnected from the others under review. It neither explores the operations of intelligence organisations, nor discusses state-private networks in detail. Nevertheless, the book focuses upon how effectively states keep secrets. Moran's book ties the others together, because his conclusions about secret-keeping indicate that historians will face increasing difficulties as they work to understand intelligence networks and operations. He observes that

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maintaining strict secrecy is a near hopeless task but does not conclude that historians will soon be given access to troves of intelligence documents. Unfortunately, if Moran's interpretation of the past is any indication, then historians should discard any optimism they have about future access to documents.

According to Moran, the British government's desire to keep secrets has proved 'not only impossible but also counterproductive' (Moran, 5). After the First World War, Winston Churchill and David Lloyd George arrogantly initiated a haemorrhage of government secrets by exposing classified documents to the public when writing their lucrative and self-vindicating personal memoirs. Churchill and Lloyd George retained official papers and gained 'access at any time to Cabinet documents generated during the period in which they had been in office' (Moran, 56). Behaving even more outrageously when writing his memoir, *The Second World War*, Churchill carried off 'giant horse boxes' of documents and enabled Hugh Dalton, Leo Amery and Anthony Eden to raid 'countless filing cabinets, all in anticipation of producing memoirs' (Moran, 91). Never mind spies, journalists or historians – government officials have made upholding standards of secrecy untenable.

The deterioration of the D-Notice system further eroded secrecy standards. Moran's detailed treatment in *Classified* establishes that the upshot of the complicated 1967 D-Notice Affair was that 'confidence in its utility as a protector of genuine national security concerns was severely dented' (Moran, 137). In the telling, Moran unfortunately exaggerates the importance of journalist Chapman Pincher and overstates the Affair as 'Britain's Watergate'. Still, there is an important lesson to be learned here. Cynical governments, reasoning that 'journalists would be less inclined to push the envelope of disclosure if the government of the day showed greater willingness to take them into its confidence', have concluded they must 'manage' the press (Moran, 174). Thus, argues Moran, while the British government has appeared to 'retreat from secrecy' (Moran, 329), 'the relaxation of attitudes towards secrecy over the past twenty years should be seen as an expansion of the offensive strategy of information control that was born in the 1960s and 1970s' (Moran, 333). In the 1980s the Thatcher government's attempt to suppress Peter Wright's 'tell all' book, *Spycatcher*, inadvertently exposed intelligence secrets to public scrutiny. Describing the attempt to maintain 'absolute secrecy under Thatcher' as 'irrational' (Moran, 334), Moran observes that the more secrets the British state tries to keep, the less control it seems to have over those secrets.

Although the British example provides an object lesson in governments' inability to maintain secrecy, Moran suggests that historians should not expect much of government openness. On the contrary, research might become ever more challenging. New technologies have both threatened governments' abilities to keep secrets and forced governments to develop innovative ways of keeping information from the public. Indeed, 'fear of being WikiLeaked' will likely motivate government officials, especially those in the intelligence establishment, to prefer 'informal chats' to 'briefing papers and minutes' (Moran, 348–9). Such behaviour, Moran concludes, will 'have a chilling effect not only for historians, who down the line will find archives strangely empty, but [also] for the efficient running of government' (Moran, 349).

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Moran's forecast is that more government 'openness' might result paradoxically in less knowledge about the workings of government. When combined with the US government's failure to act on the Freedom of Information Act reform bill, the British government's attempts to 'manage' the press portend that future work in intelligence history will need to be more creative than even that described in the excellent books under review.

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