

INTELLIGENCE IN WAR: KNOWLEDGE OF THE ENEMY FROM NAPOLEON TO AL-QAEDA

by John Keegan

Toronto: Key Porter Books. 443 pages, \$49.95.

Reviewed by Commander M.J. Barber

This is a deeply disappointing book. John Keegan has, over the years, amassed a deservedly high reputation as a writer of popular and perceptive military history. Books such as *The Face of Battle*, *The Mask of Command*, and *The Price of Admiralty* provided insightful and very readable analyses of recurring themes in military history dating from Classical times to the present. Keegan's ability to describe land and sea battles in a gripping and knowledgeable manner made for books that could be guaranteed to be good reading for the layman and expert alike. As a professional Intelligence Officer, I had long awaited Keegan turning his pen to providing a good history of the development and use of military intelligence throughout history. Unfortunately, this is not such a book.

From the very beginning, Keegan admits that he has little knowledge of, or interest in, military intelligence. His thesis for this book is that intelligence, however good, does not in itself lead to battlefield victory. No intelligence professional would disagree with this thesis as stated. However, anyone knowledgeable of military affairs would hasten to add that this is an incomplete thesis since there is, in truth, no *single* factor of any kind that will ensure victory in battle. War is so complex that many elements operating in combination are necessary for success. Intelligence is one such element, but so are, among others, supply, transportation, training, equipment, skill at arms, command and control, and often a little luck.

A reader searching for an understanding of military intelligence in warfare should expect that the author provide, at the least, an explanation of the purpose of military intelligence, how it can be used, and how it is organized to fulfil its function. Intelligence attempts to answer the commander's need to know where the enemy is located, in what strength and with what capabilities, and, most importantly, with what intentions. Nowhere does Keegan explain these fundamentals, and nowhere does he show more than the most cursory understanding of the intelligence process. Although Keegan never properly explains this, intelligence is used by a commander to make decisions about the future. It is the commander's ability to use intelligence – to ask the right questions and to make decisions and

judgments based on the answers received, however uncertain these answers may be – that is as important as the quality of the intelligence.

In exploring something of which he has little understanding, Keegan was not aided by his research. His sources are mostly secondary and tertiary descriptions of battles that only peripherally touch upon intelligence as a function. For a book purporting to be a serious work of history, the standard of research would embarrass a senior undergraduate. The sources consulted mostly describe the British experience, with a limited examination of US experience, in the Second World War. Nowhere is there any reference to the German and Russian/Soviet uses of intelligence. In dealing with the Cold War period in which intelligence grew tremendously in importance, Keegan relies solely on his own opinions – without reference to any of the vast body of literature available. Furthermore, his opinions are often particularly ill-informed when dealing with intelligence. This results in such basic errors as a reference to the British Defence Intelligence Agency, when no such organization exists by that name, and to the repeated misspelling of the key intelligence term, SIGINT.

In keeping with many of his previous books, Keegan uses the case study approach to illustrate his theme. Eight naval and land battles were selected to highlight certain aspects of the use of intelligence in battle. The case studies range from Nelson's 1798 pursuit of the French fleet in the Mediterranean that culminated in the Battle of the Nile at Aboukir Bay, to a brief and (unsatisfactory) description of the 1982 Falklands War. Other studies include Stonewall Jackson's Shenandoah Valley campaign in 1862, the German cruiser campaign in the Pacific in 1914, Crete 1941, Midway 1942, and The Battle of the Atlantic 1939-45. Despite the book's subtitle, there is very little about the present war on terrorism. Nor is there very much on the Cold War. The case studies, with one exception, are largely descriptive narratives of the battles. The limited references to intelligence tend to come in a few concluding paragraphs to chapter-length descriptions. Keegan is happier describing battles than analyzing how intelligence contributed to them. When he does do so, it is generally to denigrate the importance of intelligence – even when it contradicts the information contained within his narratives. Most egregious, to my mind, was his dismissal of the important role played by intelligence in the eventual allied victory in the Battle of the Atlantic. Keegan makes this claim even though, at many points, he shows evidence that intelligence was indeed a key element in the true success of the battle. Most shipping crossed the Atlantic safely because most convoys were routed away from the U-boat menace because of timely intelligence. It was when intelligence

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failed, as it did from time to time during this six-year-long struggle, that convoys encountered U-boats and losses ensued.

The one chapter that I considered to be successful is Keegan's examination of the intelligence problem surrounding the German development of the V-1 and V-2 weapons. He clearly points out the dilemma involved when attempting to discover secret and revolutionary new technology: how does one look for something that may be beyond one's imagination, that may not even exist, and if it does, look nothing like what one had envisioned? Keegan does a good job of describing the debate within the British scientific and technical intelligence community concerning these very questions. He also describes the use of "all source" intelligence, ranging from aerial reconnaissance to human sources on the ground of dubious reliability in order to come up with an analysis that was in the end mostly correct. Unfortunately, the problem was so difficult that it took the British most of the war to find the answers. But they did achieve sufficient success that they were able to limit, though not entirely eliminate, the operational effectiveness of these weapons.

Keegan's concluding chapter is especially weak. Much of it consists of a repetitive synopsis of the case studies. The analytic portion of the chapter barely discusses the purpose and contribution of intelligence. Instead, he proceeds into a lengthy discourse on the Cambridge spy ring, and the wartime operations of the Special Operations Executive, even though Keegan correctly points out that espionage and Special Forces operations are only peripherally related to the military intelligence function.

This book is far from authoritative, and will cause more confusion than enlightenment. Poorly researched, it does not begin to explain what military intelligence is all about, nor how it has developed through history, nor why commanders find intelligence useful. So focused is Keegan on proving his thesis that intelligence

is of little value that he ignores military intelligence activity for much of his book. When it is described, it is usually denigrated and judged to be inconsequential. The many maps contained in the book are reasonably useful in illustrating the campaigns and battles being described, but the photographs used are hackneyed, and illustrate little about intelligence activity. I cannot recommend this book to anyone.

A reader in search of a primer on military intelligence in battle would be well advised to ignore Keegan's book and go to either John Hughes-Wilson's *Military Intelligence Blunders* (1999) or M.I. Handel's *Intelligence and Military Operations*. The Hughes-Wilson book (not even referenced in Keegan's book) is also intended for the general reader, but is written by someone well experienced in intelligence. It covers much of the same ground as Keegan, uses a similar case study approach, shows what happens when intelligence fails (or is failed to be believed by decision-makers) and is one of the best explanations of how and why military intelligence should work. The Handel book is more academic in style, and consists of a collection of papers by a variety of authors that describe the operational use of intelligence in battles ranging from the US Civil War through to the Second World War. Handel's extensive introductory chapter is a superb explanation of the processes involved in operational intelligence. He examines many of the same campaigns as Keegan, but draws much different – and more positive – conclusions about the value of intelligence. Handel demonstrates that while intelligence alone will not guarantee victory for a weaker force, it does aid a strong force to win more decisively, and gives a fighting edge to a force facing a roughly equal opponent. These are the kind of lessons one would have wished to see in Keegan's book.

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