

Urban, Mark. UK Eyes Alpha: The Inside Story of British Intelligence. London: Faber and Faber, 1996.

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Urban, Mark. *UK Eyes Alpha: The Inside Story of British Intelligence*. London: Faber and Faber, 1996.

Commencing his book with the appearance of Mikhail Gorbachev as Soviet Leader and (as a consequence) as intelligence concern, Mark Urban comments in the preface of his *UK Eyes Alpha* that "it might be argued that now is too early to look at such recent events," (p. viii) and the inevitable conclusion reading his book is that this is almost certainly true. That Urban's volume follows so closely on the heels of current events is not helped by his frustrating practice (for an academic) of citing assorted published sources, but without either detailed citations or a bibliography. Nonetheless, the volume is, within these limits, very thoroughly researched. Urban's journalistic reliance on interviews with former officials and politicians has been considerably fortified through his use of political and intelligence memoirs as well as government publications. If the book has any fundamental drawback, it is that even with a wealth of fascinating data concerning the strengths and weaknesses of the British intelligence system, Urban still resorts to speculation and insinuation in order to reintroduce the traditional left-wing concerns about accountability and the ever-contentious transAtlantic "Special Relationship." Such a strategy of last resort is unnecessary; there is enough critical and sometimes even damning information in his raw data to warrant very serious interest, but it is of a fundamentally different order from that to which the politically committed critics of intelligence are accustomed.

Urban starts out promisingly enough, asking what are essentially the classical questions of intelligence studies and American-influenced intelligence "theory":

How good is British intelligence? What kind of return do ministers and officials get for the hundreds of millions of pounds spent on espionage each year? How does this secret establishment find direction and purpose in an age when old certainties have evaporated? (p. vii)

As far as this goes, Urban is asking all the right questions, and gets some interesting and compelling answers. Just as Michael Herman has noted in his *Intelligence Power in Peace and War*, one of the potential drawbacks of a consensus-based, all-source analysis system is so-called "group think." This manifests itself in the Joint Intelligence Community (JIC) through both the emergence of certain unquestioned orthodoxies, and also a tendency for its evaluations to reflect the lowest common denominator of participants' opinions. However, where Herman provides a general warning from insider experience, Urban quotes ministerial and Whitehall consumers in support of this tendency (or at least its perceived occurrence), and also provides, and quotes former ministers (including the ill starred David Mellor) about their dissatisfaction with the blandness of JIC reports, and their dependency on a consensus on a "lowest common denominator." Moreover, Urban's portrayal of such influential figures as Margaret Thatcher and one-time JIC Chairman Sir Percy Cradock also suggests how strong and strongly committed personalities can *impose* an orthodoxy on JIC assessments through the face-to-face impact of small-group dynamics.

For the most part, Urban's survey of British intelligence operations and the assessment process during the 1980s and early '90s is informative, and in many respects presents something of a counterpoint to the image of the British agencies at the end of the Cold War by James Adams (in his *The New Spies*, London: Hutchinson, 1994). Adams develops a picture of a Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) under Sir Colin McColl vigorously embracing the new and revising its practices and organization to meet the emerging intelligence needs of the post-Cold War era. Urban's SIS on the cusp of the new world (dis)order is one almost obsessed with "screwing" (p. 224) the Soviet/Russian agencies once and for all, determined to settle such old scores as Philby and Blake decades after the fact. Urban's accounts of the Security Service and GCHQ's (Government Communications Headquarters) similarly provide a sense of the mixed bag of successes and failures experienced by those agencies, although his discussion of GCHQ is far less detailed than that on MI5.

Although Urban's account involves a limited retelling of stories, such as Oleg Gordievsky, or the defection of biological warfare scientist Vladimir Pasechnik, he adds such additional matters as the differences between British and American estimates of Soviet chemical warfare capabilities, and, in the cold light of post-Cold War hindsight, the apparent inaccuracy of both. Urban also provides a reasonably convincing picture of the kinds of *quid pro quo* that exist between the British and Americans in their so-called "Special Relationship." He recounts how British contributions to the costs of US space-based SIGINT (Signals Intelligence) and overhead reconnaissance and surveillance systems have secured the British some limited ability to "task" these assets. He also compares these resources favorably with the developing European satellite intelligence capability (SPOT and HELIOS), and with the vast, futile expenditure on Britain's stillborn, independent ZIRCON satellite program. Urban also provides an account of British intelligence strengths and weaknesses during the Gulf War, including the debatable decisions over what was and was not made available to British and allied commanders in the field.

Finally, Urban provides a survey of post-Cold War intelligence requirements, and some of the structural changes to the British system to cope with those changes. Here Urban makes some especially interesting observations, particularly about the future of SIGINT. He repeats and elaborates upon a number of the better known changes, such as MI5's new emphasis on counter-terrorism, and SIS' new geographical priorities and its Controller, Global and Functional (dealing with "motherhood" issues such as counter-proliferation and transnational crime). Perhaps one of Urban's interesting contributions here is his discussion of the contemporary information technology and its implications for both intelligence and security operations. For example, fibre-optics make line taps harder, and also make the very secure communications through so-called "quantum key" ciphers a possibility. And then there is the question of readily available, inexpensive and relatively strong encryption through the common desktop computer. *UK Eyes Alpha* raises very real questions about the degree to which commercial strong encryption will make COMINT (Communications Intelligence) that much more difficult, particularly where counter-terrorism and serious crime are concerned. In view of the recent successful attack on the export version of the RSA encryption key, it may be possible that Urban is

overestimating the problems presented by cheap and cheery strong encryption. Nonetheless, Urban is asking the kinds of questions about intelligence and information technology which need to be asked, and still remain imperfectly examined in the literature.

Despite Urban's wealth of raw material, he nonetheless seems to feel the need to resort to sloppy reasoning and speculation in order to preserve the classical political concerns about control and accountability. For example, one of the items featured in the 1989 Security Service Act absent from the earlier 1952 Maxwell-Fyffe Directive is the provision for the Security Service to act in defence of Britain's "economic well-being." Of this new clause, Urban asserts that "people within the Service did not have a precise idea of what the 'economic well-being' clause amounted to . . . one MI5 officer suggests that the clause was put in 'just in case'." Urban's conclusion is that the clause's appearance is "an example of the Service's tendency to seek maximum freedom in defining its role and preserving its establishment." (p. 53) It would, however, seem rather unlikely for the Security Service's officials to have agitated legislators for the inclusion in the 1989 Act of an item those officials did not themselves understand. Rather, the clause's appearance would seem more likely to represent a perceived potential need on the part of the Service's consumers in Downing Street and Whitehall, particularly in view of much the same clause appearing four years before in the 1985 Interception of Communications Act and five years later in the 1994 Intelligence Services Act. Much the same might be said about the numerous occasions in which, deprived of any real facts to work from, Urban resorts to speculation and insinuation. Did MI5 and the National Security Agency (NSA) bug the communications rooms of foreign embassies in Britain during the 1980s, as had the NSA and Australia's ASIO? Urban does not know, but remarks that "it would be surprising if the US eavesdropping agency did not exploit its relationship with the UK to mount such operations in London." (p. 244) The Seabed Operations Vessel *HMS Challenger* had among its tasks the protection of British undersea communication lines from Soviet taps (similar to the American IVY BELLS operation against the USSR). But did it mount such taps itself? Urban does not know, "but a question remains . . ." (p. 247) And, of course, such occasions are the sort of opportunity to adopt the pejorative language of "Britain's spies" rather than intelligence officers, services or community, or "eavesdropping" rather than SIGINT. For the most part, however, Urban's outbursts of guesswork and suggestion are more tactfully embedded in the larger narrative, but that makes them more difficult to locate and isolate from Urban's more valuable, factual information.

For the most part, then, Urban's *UK Eyes Alpha* is a valuable contribution to the field, although occasionally one has to read somewhat carefully. The book does a thorough job of examining the British intelligence system over the second half of the 1980s and the early 1990s, despite the limitations of the volume and kind of data available. The only real drawback is Urban's apparent need to gild the critical lily, entirely unnecessary given the very real range of British intelligence strengths and weaknesses that emerge from his factual narrative.

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