

Espionage and Intelligence, Early Historical Foundations

Espionage and Intelligence, Early Historical Foundations / Adrienne Wilmoth Lerner

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Espionage is one of the oldest, and most well documented, political and military arts. The rise of the great ancient civilizations, beginning 6,000 years ago in Mesopotamia, begat institutions and persons devoted to the security and preservation of their ruling regimes. Clandestine and covert operations garner the most intrigue, but the history of espionage is better described in terms of the evolution of its more mundane components of tradecraft. Throughout history, intelligence has been defined as the collection, culling, analysis, and dissemination of critical and strategic information. Its practice and implications, however, are widely diverse.

Espionage in the Ancient World

Historical and literary accounts of spies and acts of espionage appear in some of world's earliest recorded histories. Egyptian hieroglyphs reveal the presence of court spies, as do papyri describing ancient Egypt's extensive military and slave trade operations. Early Egyptian pharos employed agents of espionage to ferret-out disloyal subject and to locate tribes that could be conquered and enslaved. From 1,000 B.C. onwards, Egyptian espionage operations focused on foreign intelligence about the political and military strength of rivals Greece and Rome.

Egyptian spies made significant contributions to espionage tradecraft. As the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Greece, and Rome employed literate subjects in their civil services, many spies dealt with written communications.

The use of written messages necessitated the development of codes, disguised writing, trick inks, and hidden compartments in clothing to his communications. Egyptian spies were the first to develop the extensive use of poisons, including toxins derived from plants and snakes, to carry-out assassinations or acts of sabotage.

The rise of the Greek civilization brought forth new concepts of government and law enforcement. Between 1500 B.C. and 1200 B.C., Greece's many wars with its regional rivals led to the development of new military and intelligence strategies. The early Greeks relied on deception as a primary means of achieving surprise attacks on their enemies. So renowned were Greek employments of deceptive strategies, that Greek literature from antiquity celebrated its intelligence and espionage exploits. The

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legendary incident of the Trojan Horse, a wooden structure given to the city of Troy as gift, but which contained several hundred Greek soldiers seeking safe entrance into the heavily fortified rival city, became the symbol of Grecian intelligence prowess.

In the era of democratic Greek city-states, espionage was chiefly employed as a political tool. Agents of espionage spied on rival city-states, providing rulers with information on military strength and defenses. The most farsighted contribution of the ancient Greek intelligence community, however, was its creation of a complex and efficient means of communication between cities. Couriers delivered messages between cities, but important messages were also relayed between a series of outposts or towers using semaphore, a form of communication that utilized signals to convey messages. Greek communications were so efficient that they remained unparalleled until the modern era.

In the Middle East, and later Byzantium, the large government bureaucracy established one of the earliest civilian intelligence agencies. Civilian agents of espionage culled information about foreign militaries and economic practices from traders, merchants, sailors, and other businessmen. Outside of the Mediterranean region, other civilizations utilized and contributed to the art of espionage. Written records from the fifth century mention the use of spies in the Indus Valley 2,500 years ago. In China, Sun Tzu penned the comprehensive military treatise, *The Art of War*, which contained several chapters devoted to the use of spies both on and off the battlefield.

No civilization in the ancient world relied more heavily on intelligence information, nor furthered the development of espionage more than ancient Rome. Over a millennium, the Romans created the largest empire of the ancient world, necessitating the governance of the most expansive infrastructure, military, and bureaucracy of the period.

Rome's most famous case of espionage and intrigue culminated in the assassination of Julius Caesar on March 15, 44 B.C. The exact details of the assassination conspiracy remain a mystery to historians, but records have established that the Roman intelligence community knew of the plot and even provided information to Caesar or his assistants providing the names of several conspirators. The information from the intelligence community was ignored.

The ever-expanding Roman Empire often spied on its neighbors. Not only did intelligence forces provide comprehensive reports on the military strength and resources of those outside the empire, but the Roman military also employed intelligence forces to infiltrate tribal organizations and convince leaders to join in

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alliance with Rome. If populations were judged hostile by informants, the military was informed, and engaged the opposing forces. This type of intelligence campaign was very successful in the Italian Peninsula during the fourth century B.C., but far less effective in the later campaigns to conquer North Africa and Northern Europe.

The Roman Empire possessed a fondness for the practice of political espionage. Spies engaged in both foreign and domestic political operations, gauging the political climate of the Empire and surrounding lands by eavesdropping in the Forum or in public market spaces. Several ancient accounts, especially those of the A.D. first century, mention the presence of a secret police force, the *frumentarii*. By the third century, Roman authors noted the pervasiveness and excessive censorship of the secret police forces, likening them to an authoritative force or an occupational army. Political espionage was not limited to the more contentious parts of the Roman periphery, but was also practiced in Rome itself by rival factions of the government. Some ministries even employed saboteurs. Concern about government rivalries necessitated the creation of the *agentes in rebus*, the first exclusive counterintelligence force.

The Middle Ages

After the collapse of the Roman Empire in Europe, espionage and intelligence activities were confined to wartime or local service. Warring factions under barbarian lords may have used strategic espionage to gauge the strength of their opposition or learn about enemy defenses, but no written records of such activities survive. The only considerable political force in Europe during the Dark Ages was the Catholic Church, but operations on the European periphery were confined to monastic outposts that struggled for survival.

In the Middle Ages, the birth of large nation-states, such as France and England, in the ninth and tenth centuries facilitated the need for intelligence in a diplomatic setting. Systems of couriers, translators, and royal messengers carried diplomatic messages between monarchs or feudal lords. Literacy was a rarity, even in the early royal courts, so messages were carefully delivered verbatim by couriers, or clergy acted as scribes.

Espionage remained mostly limited to battlefield operations, but the development of the feudal system, in which lords swore fealty to monarchs, created a complicated allegiance network. The web of allegiances gave rise to laws prohibiting treason, double allegiances, and political espionage against allied lords.

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In the eleventh century, the Catholic Church rose to the fore in European politics. With a large bureaucratic network, the resources of feudal military forces, and the largest treasury in the world, the Church formed policy that governed all of Europe. Throughout the course of the Middle Ages, two events, the Crusades and the Inquisition, solidified the power of the Church and created the only long-standing, medieval intelligence community.

In 1095, Pope Urban II called for the first Crusade, a military campaign to recapture Jerusalem and the Holy Lands from Muslim and Byzantine rule. The Church massed several large armies, and employed spies to report on defenses surrounding Constantinople and Jerusalem. Special intelligence agents also infiltrated prisons to free captured crusaders, or sabotage rival palaces, mosques, and military defenses. The Crusades continued for nearly four centuries, draining the military and intelligence resources of most of the European monarchs.

The Crusades also changed the tenor of espionage and intelligence work within Europe itself. Religious fervor, and the desire for political consolidation, prompted thirteenth century church councils to establish laws regarding the prosecution of heretics and anti-clerical political leaders. The ensuing movement became known as the Inquisition. Although the Church used its political force as impetus for the Inquisition, enforcement of religious edicts and prosecution of violators fell to local clergy and secular authorities. For this reason, the Inquisition took many forms throughout Europe. The same movement that was terror-filled and brutal in Spain, had little impact in England and Scandinavia.

Espionage was an essential component of the Inquisition. The Church relied on vast networks of informants to find and denounce suspected heretics and political dissidents. By the early fourteenth century, Rome and the Spanish monarchs both employed sizable secret police forces to carry out mass trials and public executions. In southern France, heretical groups relied on intelligence gathered from their own resistance networks to gauge the surrounding political climate, and assist in hiding refugees.

In 1542, the process of Inquisition was centralized within the Church. Pope Paul III established the Congregation of the Holy Office, a permanent council, composed of cardinals and other officials, whose mission was to maintain the political integrity of Church. The council relied on censure and excommunication to coerce problematic individuals, forsaking the brutal cloak and dagger methods of early Inquisitors. The council maintained spies and informants, but shifted their focus to scrutinizing the actions of Europe's monarchs and prominent aristocrats. The advent of the

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Renaissance in Italy in the mid-fifteenth century quelled much of the fervor and political fear that drove the Inquisition, and the movement faded.

The Renaissance

The Renaissance marked the eclipse of the Church dominated world. Europe transitioned to more localized, nationalistic models of government, with each nation or citystate employing its own intelligence force. As nations and city-states became wealthier and gained more power, espionage enjoyed a resurgence. Competition for dominance over trade and exploration of the New World changed the political climate of Europe, and forced regimes to adopt increasingly deft measures of protecting political, military, and economic interests.

In response to the changing world, Niccolo Machiavelli, a Florentine political philosopher, published a series of books detailing the qualities and actions of effective rulers. In his works, *The Prince*, and *The Art of War*, Machiavelli advocated that rulers routinely employ espionage tradecraft, engaging in deception and spying to insure protection of their power and interests. His advice, much of which was culled from rediscovered works of Aristotle and Cicero, was intended for the ruling Medici princes of Florence. However, the works gained popularity several centuries after their 1520 publication.

In the late 1500s, the English royal court developed the premier Renaissance era spy network. Religious reforms and a schism with the Catholic Church under the rule of Henry VIII, prompted the creation of a large secret police force, commanded by the military, to locate and infiltrate Catholic loyalist cells that threatened the English monarchy. When his daughter, Elizabeth I, ascended to the throne, political tensions threatened her reign. Elizabeth chose to rebuild the flagging military to rebuff opposition from disloyal lords and their forces, but especially lobbied for the expansion of the Navy and intelligence services. The new navy dispatched foreign threats, defeating the Spanish Armada in 1558, while the intelligence services dispatched several conspiracy plots that threatened to topple Elizabeth I's reign.

The Elizabethan court gained a reputation for the ruthlessness of its spies, several of whom double and triple crossed those with whom they dealt. The Elizabethan espionage system was highly effective, but its novel contribution to the development of espionage lay in its employment practices. Instead of relying on haphazard, ill-trained volunteers, or military men, the Elizabethan intelligence community employed

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linguists, scholars, authors, engineers, and scientists, relying on professional experts to seek and analyze intelligence information.

Technological development in the Renaissance altered the practice of espionage. The development of small firearms, such the pistol, aided cloak and dagger operations. Chemists invented invisible inks, and the rebirth of complex mathematics revived encryption and code methods long dormant since Antiquity. Telescopes, magnifying glasses, the camera obscura, and clocks facilitated the remote surveillance and the effective use of "dead drops" to pass information between agents. Travel became easier, but that ease soon prompted territorial growth and the rebirth of vast empires.

The Birth of Modern Espionage: The Age of Empires, Industrial Revolution, and the Nineteenth Century

Espionage in the Age of Empires, a period that spanned from 1700 to almost 1900, saw its greatest development in the numerous conflicts and wars that occurred in Europe, and between rival colonial powers in Europe and abroad. Industrialization, economic and territorial expansion, the diversification of political philosophies and regimes, and immigration all transformed the world's intelligence communities.

During the French Revolution, in the 1790s, all factions relied heavily on espionage. However, the period marked by the dictatorship of Robespierre is most infamous. Informant networks denounced traitors to the new republic, and tracked down refugee aristocrats and clergy for trial and execution. The wide application of treason laws and charges marked one of the greatest abuses of intelligence powers in the modern era.

The American Revolution (1776–1783), and colonial wars for independence in South America in the 1820s and 1830s, marked the end of Europe's New World empires. European nations turned their attention to Africa and the Orient. The ensuing land grab inflamed tensions among European nations, changing the balance of European power and creating a complicated alliance system. Colonial rulers employed secret police and agents of espionage throughout their territorial holdings, hoping to quell anti-colonial rebellions and separatist movements.

Imperialism not only changed the world political balance, but transformed economics. Modern industrial espionage was born in the pan-European revolutions of 1848. The series of regional conflicts pitted workers against landed gentry, liberals against conservatives, and monarchists against republicans, communists, and other political

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groups. Many governments, especially those of England, France, and Prussia, employed spies to infiltrate political and labor organizations and report on any antigovernment activities. Labor organizations often spied on each other, reporting on working conditions, factory operations, mining productivity, and other concerns. Many radical workers' organizations carried out acts of sabotage, destroying factories, mines, and government property. After armed conflict abated, many governments continued to conduct surveillance on dissident and workers' groups, within a decade, the same principals of industrial espionage were increasingly employed against foreign economic interests.

Industrialization revolutionized tradecraft with the proliferations of gadgets for the concealment, transcription, and analysis of intelligence information. The invention of dynamite aided saboteurs. Advances in chemistry and chemical production transformed everything from dyes and inks, to poisons and acids. Chemical weapons and poison gasses were developed during this time, but were considered too inhumane for strategic use until World War I. The discipline of forensic science added scientific methodology to the investigation of crimes and the analysis of intelligence information.

The collection of intelligence information forever changed in 1837, with the invention of the daguerreotype, the first practical form of photography. Though not able to be widely incorporated into intelligence practices until the 1860s, the photograph permitted agents of espionage to portray targets, documents, and other interests as they actually were. As soon as photo development became more practical with the advent of film, in lieu of glass plates, cameras were made smaller, disguised, or placed in mundane items for use in espionage. Until the advent of electronic data storage in the twentieth century, the photograph was the best means of copying and transmitting information.

Improvements in transportation and communications also transformed espionage operations. On May 24, 1844, Samuel Morse, sent the first message via telegraph. His code (Morse code) and the telegraph were able to send messages over lines in a matter of minutes, requiring only knowledge of the operational code. As soon as governments began to use telegraphs to send vital communications, rival intelligence services learned to tap the line, gaining access to secret communications and conducting detailed surveillance from a comfortable distance. Use of the telegraph necessitated the development of complex codes, and the creation of specialized cryptology departments. By the turn of the twentieth century, most national intelligence operations in Europe and the United States involved communications surveillance and the tapping of both wired, and wireless, telegraphs.

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Just as the discovery of the New World, and the development of fast ships in the seventeenth century altered the scope of espionage, so to did the invention of the locomotive and the proliferation of railroads. Railroads also became primary targets of enemy sabotage, and one of the main protective objectives of counterintelligence personnel. Ease of travel facilitated communications and surveillance, permitting agents to travel to foreign destinations under the guise of tourists without arousing suspicion. Movement, travel, and immigration during the nineteenth century provided many nations, especially the United States, with a field of language and culture experts.

By the dawn of the twentieth century, espionage had evolved into a highly specialized, technical field. Far from the battlefield and political intrigue of the ancient world, modern espionage involves more research and analysis than field operations. Specialized military units are still used for strategic intelligence, but most nations have developed large, centralized, civilian intelligence communities that conduct operations in wartime and peacetime with increasing technological sophistication.

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