

### 3. How professional were Britain's intelligence services between 1909 and 1949?

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Between 1909 and 1949, British intelligence emerged as an effective instrument of state power. Beginning as a small and unorganised system, it evolved to having a greater decisive role in decision-making. However, within these circumstances, the level of professionalism remained inadequate. The question becomes whether British intelligence successes indicate genuine maturity or were only temporary adaptations under pressure.

Professionalism in intelligence can be understood as a development of stable organisational structures, financial security for its staff, effective recruitment of staff, and administrative continuity within the services. It is not measured solely by operational success, but instead by the extent that the service was institutionally organised and how efficiently it was managed. These factors imply a reliable source of funding, with effective budgeting and management of its staff. Crucially, it also implies an ability to improve upon previous institutional errors.

Measured against these criteria, British intelligence began as amateur and unprofessional but fluctuated in growth to a more streamlined organisation throughout the war years. Firstly, the pre-war service began due to rumours and relied on informal networks. Secondly, despite intelligence successes during the First World War, they were the product of disorganised growth. Thirdly, during the inter-war period professionalisation was uneven and marked financial cutbacks. This was coupled with staffing problems and issues of poor management. Fourthly, the Second World War forced a rapid expansion of British intelligence, with increased of analytical output. However, this professionalism was born of a necessity rather than design. Finally, wartime success hid enduring weaknesses financing, personnel and management. In the post-war period, many of these structural limitations re-emerged as funding faced another decline.

British intelligence between 1909 and 1949 did effectively professionalise, but very unevenly. The service achieved high wartime effectiveness yet remained constrained by issues of growth and management.

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The Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) suffered from significant structural weaknesses at its foundation. Its origins were marked by a lack of professionalism, evident in its reactionary creation, lack of precedent, and chronic underfunding. As a result, the service initially struggled to operate as a credible intelligence organisation.

This early lack of professionalism is evident in how the service was created. It emerged from a case of ‘Spy Fever’.<sup>1</sup> Hughes calls this a ‘moral panic’ that catalysed the beginning of the service.<sup>2</sup> Political insecurity stemmed from Imperial Germany’s rising naval strength, while Britain possessed ‘small and underfunded military and naval’ intelligence departments.<sup>3</sup> By 1907, rumours in the press about Germany prompted calls for improved intelligence gathering.<sup>4</sup> This pushed Britain to act, ‘if only to remedy its own ignorance.’<sup>5</sup> Although ‘the evidence [...] now appears flimsy’, Britain felt it had to respond to growing fears.<sup>6</sup> Andrew describes this as a ‘remarkable collective gullibility’ shown by the government.<sup>7</sup> Dismissing claims as being ‘rather absurd’.<sup>8</sup>

Despite this, a foreign intelligence organisation was created by late 1909.<sup>9</sup> Since there was no model for peacetime intelligence, it had ‘a confused start.’<sup>10</sup> The process was slow and intelligence gathering was difficult to achieve.<sup>11</sup> Vernon Kell noted in 1910 that among two hundred investigations into Germans, there was not a ‘single case of genuine espionage’.<sup>12</sup> Espionage was poorly organised, relying on outdated methods and amateur spies due to low recruitment.<sup>13</sup> The first head of the service, Mansfield Cumming, had no intelligence background but was selected for his government experience.<sup>14</sup> Roles were given to people through cronyism rather than through professional vetting.<sup>15</sup>

Before the war the service remained extremely small, employing only fifteen staff.<sup>16</sup> The Bureau of intelligence had just one translator.<sup>17</sup> While the document noting this is not intended as a

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<sup>1</sup> David French, ‘Spy Fever in Britain, 1900-1915’, *The Historical Journal*, 21.2 (1978), pp. 355-70 (p. 355) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X00000571>>

<sup>2</sup> R. Gerald Hughes, ‘The British Secret Intelligence Service, 1909-1949’, *Intelligence and National Security*, 26.5 (2011), pp. 701-729 (p. 725) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2011.620789>>

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5*, Updated [edition] (Penguin Books, 2010), pp. 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas P. Hiley, ‘The Failure of British Espionage against Germany, 1907-1914’, *The Historical Journal*, 26.4 (1983), pp. 867-889 (p. 872) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X00012735>>

<sup>5</sup> French, ‘Spy Fever in Britain’, p. 358.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm*, p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew, Christopher, ‘Governments and Secret Services: A Historical Perspective’, *International Journal*, 34.2 (1979), pp. 167-186 (p. 177) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/40201748>>

<sup>8</sup> Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm*, p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> London, The National Archives of the UK (TNA), WO 106/6292, *Conclusions of the Sub-Committee Requested to Consider How a Secret Service Bureau Could be Established in Great Britain*, 28 April 1909, Frame 4.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm*, p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> TNA, WO 106/6292, Frame 5.

<sup>12</sup> Chris Northcott, ‘MI5’s Tradecraft Before the First World War’, *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, 31.2 (2018), pp. 289-311 (p. 296) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2017.1375327>>

<sup>13</sup> Hiley, ‘The Failure of British Espionage against Germany’, p. 868, p. 880.

<sup>14</sup> Keith Jeffery, *MI6: The History of the Secret Intelligence Service, 1909-1949* (Bloomsbury, 2011), pp. 3-4.

<sup>15</sup> Jeffery, *MI6*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>16</sup> Richard J Aldrich and Rory Cormac, *The Black Door: Spies, Secret Intelligence and British Prime Ministers* (William Collins, 2016), p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> TNA, WO 106/6292, Frame 5.

critique of capability, it exposes the extent that linguistic and analytical capacity was undervalued. Similarly, MI5 began its life with only two members, Vernon Kell and William Melville.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, MI5 was faced with a 'huge task' of organising intelligence.<sup>19</sup> Understaffing meant the Admiralty and War Office often ignored or dismissed valuable intelligence.<sup>20</sup> They struggled with utilisation and organisation, because the service was not given much importance.<sup>21</sup> Funding lacked any systematic approach.<sup>22</sup> The total budget for the service was estimated at just £2,000 - revealing what departments were willing to allocate rather than what intelligence work required.<sup>23</sup> This reflects material underfunding and a broader failure to conceptualise intelligence as a permanent, professional institution. This was enough to support one permanent foreign agent and a few other staff members, not a full professionalised institution.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the SIS was founded on an unprofessional precedent, and experienced challenges of an amateur workforce with underfunded efforts. These formative deficiencies would have lasting implications, shaping the effectiveness of intelligence on the eve of the First World War.

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After the amateur beginnings of the service, the First World War saw the first proper increase in professionalism in the service. The development of Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) and cryptanalytic successes marked considerable progress. However, these developments do not show a rise in institutionalised professionalism. Issues poor record-keeping and weak structures persisted, due to an ad hoc advancement of intelligence systems.

Weaknesses in the service became evident in 1914, prompting a complete reorganisation of the services.<sup>25</sup> This supported the use of counter-espionage and interception.<sup>26</sup> Inspired by sporadic cryptanalysis in the South African War, British intelligence developed a system of SIGINT.<sup>27</sup> British

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<sup>18</sup> Northcott, 'MI5's Tradecraft Before the First World War', p. 290.

<sup>19</sup> Alistar Black and Rodney Brunt, 'MI5, 1909-1945: An Information Management Perspective', *Journal of Information Science*, 26.3 (2000), pp. 185-98 (p. 185), doi:10.1177/0165551004233186.

<sup>20</sup> Hiley, 'The Failure of British Espionage against Germany', p. 887.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew, 'Governments and Secret Services', p. 168.

<sup>22</sup> Hiley, 'The Failure of British Espionage against Germany', p. 870.

<sup>23</sup> TNA, WO 106/6292, Frame 8.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Jeffery, *MI6*, pp. 103-104.

<sup>26</sup> London, The National Archives of the UK (TNA), KV 4/183, *Some Intelligence Bull's Eyes Scored, 1914-1918*, 1919.

<sup>27</sup> James Bruce, 'A shadowy entity': M.I.1(b) and British Communications Intelligence, 1914-1922', *Intelligence and National Security*, 32.3 (2017), pp. 313-332 (p. 315)

<<https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2016.1270992>>

intelligence expanded capabilities through units like Room 40 and MI1(b).<sup>28</sup> The service learned how to decode and interpret great amounts of German material.<sup>29</sup> Allowing Lloyd George to increasingly ‘assert control over war strategy’, due to these successes.<sup>30</sup>

Britain developed ‘six efficient codebreaking bureaux’ during the First World War.<sup>31</sup> Room 40 is the most celebrated example.<sup>32</sup> According to reports from Room 40, ‘from an early date in November 1914 [they] were overhearing a host of the secret naval orders’.<sup>33</sup> Some scholars, such as Larsen, claim that there is an overstated importance.<sup>34</sup> However, according to Hines, ‘historians agree that Room 40 [...] performed superbly’.<sup>35</sup> Few other services achieved the levels of cryptanalysis.<sup>36</sup>

War Office assessments of cryptanalytic success claim that most notable success was the decryption of the Zimmerman Telegram.<sup>37</sup> The Telegram was an encrypted German message proposing alliance with Mexico.<sup>38</sup> The code was ‘almost undiscoverable’, yet Room 40 was successful in decrypting it.<sup>39</sup> The War Office claims that this contributed significantly to the United States’ entry into the war and placed Britain at the forefront of intelligence innovation.<sup>40</sup> However, produced in 1919, the analysis is shaped by the political need to justify wartime expenditure.<sup>41</sup> While the document

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<sup>28</sup> John Robert Ferris, *Behind the Enigma: The Authorised History of GCHQ, Britain’s Secret Cyber-Intelligence Agency* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), pp. 48-56.

<sup>29</sup> Alfred Ewing, ‘Some Special War Work’: A lecture to the Edinburgh Philosophical Institution - 13 December 1927’, *Proceedings of the Royal Society*, 34 (1979), pp. 68-90 (p. 85).

<sup>30</sup> Jeffery, *MI6*, p. 59.

<sup>31</sup> John Robert Ferris, ‘The British Army and Signals Intelligence in the Field During the First World War’, *Intelligence and National Security*, 3.4 (1988), pp. 23-48 (p. 23) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/02684528808431968>>

<sup>32</sup> Betsy Rohaly Smoot, ‘Impermanent Alliances: Cryptologic Cooperation Between the United States, Britain, and France on the Western Front, 1917-1918’, *Intelligence and National Security*, 32.3 (2017), pp. 365-377 (p. 366) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2016.1270996>>

<sup>33</sup> Ewing, ‘Some Special War Work’, p. 73.

<sup>34</sup> Daniel Larsen, ‘Intelligence in the First World War: The State of the Field’, *Intelligence and National Security*, 29.2 (2014), pp. 282-302 (p. 297) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2012.727070>>

<sup>35</sup> Jason Hines, ‘Sins of Omission and Commission: A Reassessment of the Role of Intelligence in the Battle of Jutland’, *The Journal of Military History*, 72.4 (2008), pp. 1117-1153 (pp. 1117-1118) <<https://go.openathens.net/redirector/leeds.ac.uk?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/sins-omission-commission-reassessment-role/docview/195635690/se-2?accountid=14664>> [Accessed 14 October 2025].

<sup>36</sup> Larsen, ‘Intelligence in the First World War’, p. 284.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Freeman, ‘The Zimmermann Telegram Revisited: A Reconciliation of the Primary Sources’, *Cryptologia*, 30.2 (2006), pp. 98-150 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01611190500428634>>

<sup>38</sup> Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, ‘The sensitivity of SIGINT: Sir Alfred Ewing’s lecture on room 40 in 1927’, *Journal of Intelligence History*, 17.1 (2018), pp. 18-29 (p. 21) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/16161262.2017.1385197>>

<sup>39</sup> London, The National Archives of the UK (TNA), WO 106/45, *History of I (b) GHQ, 1917-1918: Part I. Secret Service*, 5 May 1919, Frame 23.

<sup>40</sup> George Lasry, Ingo Niebel and Torbjörn Andersson, ‘Deciphering German diplomatic and naval attaché messages from 1900-1915’, *Cryptologia*, 45.5 (2021), pp. 383-425 (p. 391) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01611194.2020.1755914>>

<sup>41</sup> Freeman, ‘The Zimmermann Telegram Revisited’.

confirms the technical difficulty of the cipher, it downplays how the service relied on the enemy mistakes to acquire and decode it, rather than strategic decryption.<sup>42</sup> SIGINT depended on material conditions and the enemy's use of communication.<sup>43</sup> It depended on poor cipher discipline.<sup>44</sup> Even within notable successes, the Code Books were found by means of good fortune.<sup>45</sup> British intelligence relied on the accuracy and reliability of the interceptions too.<sup>46</sup> 'Flaws were possible anywhere along [the] chain'.<sup>47</sup> Intelligence may not be accurate, or accurate intelligence may not reach the commander.<sup>48</sup> Data was unreliable and analysts had to continuously argue the validity of their sources.<sup>49</sup> Especially amongst their own allies, Bolshevik sources were 'least trustworthy sources of information.'<sup>50</sup>

Decryptions were poorly managed, record-keeping was inconsistent, and much learning occurred on the job.<sup>51</sup> This admission is particularly revealing given the document's official nature; failure could not be ignored. Many of the decoded messages did not have dates, so the record-keeping was poorly managed.<sup>52</sup> MI5 had to hurriedly organise an "inversion" system for storing documents, which was an ad-hoc addition to the system.<sup>53</sup> The service relied on the efficiency and effectiveness of a small group of individuals, the likes of Cummings and Fisher are notably credited.<sup>54</sup>

The first World War marked a crucial step towards professionalisation within British intelligence, particularly through advances in SIGINT and other forms of intelligence. However, these successes were coupled with persistent organisational weaknesses, poor management and reliance on enemy errors, which limited effectiveness and would hinder the service's post-war development.

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<sup>42</sup> Lasry and others, 'Deciphering German diplomatic messages', p. 411.

<sup>43</sup> Ferris, 'The British Army and Signals Intelligence in the Field During the First World War', p. 27.

<sup>44</sup> Lasry and others, 'Deciphering German diplomatic messages', p. 386.

<sup>45</sup> Ewing, "Some Special War Work", pp. 75-76.

<sup>46</sup> London, The National Archives of the UK (TNA), CAB 24/90/99, *Conflicting Reports on Conditions in Soviet Russia*, 16 October 1919, p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> Ferris, 'The British Army and Signals Intelligence in the Field During the First World War', p. 32.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Louis Halewood, "A matter of opinion": British attempts to assess the attrition of German manpower, 1915-1917', *Intelligence and National Security*, 32.3 (2017), pp. 333-350 (pp. 336-341)

<<https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2016.1270994>>

<sup>50</sup> TNA, CAB 24/90/99, p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> TNA, WO 106/45, Frame 39.

<sup>52</sup> Lasry and others, 'Deciphering German diplomatic messages', p. 385.

<sup>53</sup> Black and Brunt, 'MI5, 1909-1945', p. 188.

<sup>54</sup> Ewing, "Some Special War Work", p. 68.

After the First World War ended, the service entered a period of institutional weakness. It faced issues of structural disunity between organisations and management within them. It encountered staffing, training and expertise problems because of the poor recruitment system. The service also dealt with financial cutbacks after the war. As a result, the service took two steps back in terms of professionalism.

During and after the war, the service faced inter-service rivalry, reinforcing fragmented intelligence practices rather than a unified professional system. There was a growing animosity between branches.<sup>55</sup> The SIS faced competition from the Directorate of Intelligence and MI6, leading to coordination issues.<sup>56</sup> The services had to be reorganised multiple times because the existing system caused “waste, delay and inefficiency”.<sup>57</sup> This is evident in how GC&CS became ‘an adopted child in the Foreign Office (FO) with no family rights.’<sup>58</sup> This is viewed as an “institutional failure” on the part of the service.<sup>59</sup> To resolve this, officials attempted to restructure by merging five agencies into one.<sup>60</sup> Cumming thought merging would be “utterly unworkable”.<sup>61</sup> In the long term, this effort was foundational in creating the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), but it came from a disordered process.<sup>62</sup>

The service faced issues of staffing, training, and expertise. In Lord Hankey’s Inquiry into the SIS, he claims that the recruitment system ‘has thus been haphazard.’<sup>63</sup> Recruitment was limited to personal recommendations of the director, which restricted scope.<sup>64</sup> While this system fared well ‘when times were peaceful and the establishment was small’, it proved inadequate as demands increased.<sup>65</sup> Ineffective recruitment directly eroded professionalism by limiting expertise and slowing operational efficiency. Andrew claims that work was thence ‘embarrassingly slow’.<sup>66</sup> Hankey describes the staff as ‘dispirited’ and ‘not “on their toes”’.<sup>67</sup> This implies a weaker leadership that compounded financial

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<sup>55</sup> TNA, WO 106/45, Frame 4.

<sup>56</sup> Black and Brunt, ‘MI5, 1909-1945’, p. 190.

<sup>57</sup> Jeffery, *MI6*, p. 256.

<sup>58</sup> London, The National Archives of the UK (TNA), HW 43/2, *Frank Birch, ‘British SIGINT, 1914-1945’, Chapter XVII*, p. 50.

<sup>59</sup> Rodney Brunt, ‘Information Management of British Military Intelligence: The Work of the Documentalists, 1909-1945’, *Library Trends*, 62.2 (2013), pp. 360-377 (P. 362), DOI:10.1353/lib.2013.0048.

<sup>60</sup> Jeffery, *MI6*, p. 158.

<sup>61</sup> Jeffery, *MI6*, p. 162.

<sup>62</sup> Victor Madeira, “No Wishful Thinking Allowed’: Secret Service Committee and Intelligence Reform in Great Britain, 1919-23’, *Intelligence and National Security*, 18.1 (2003), pp. 1-20 (p. 15)  
<<https://doi.org/10.1080/02684520308559244>>

<sup>63</sup> London, The National Archives of the UK (TNA), FO 1093/193, *Lord Hankey’s Inquiry into SIS*, 22 February 1940, p. 6.

<sup>64</sup> TNA, FO 1093/193, p. 6.

<sup>65</sup> TNA, FO 1093/193, p. 6.

<sup>66</sup> Andrew, ‘Governments and Secret Services’, p. 179.

<sup>67</sup> TNA, FO 1093/193, p. 14.

and recruitment failures, preventing clear managerial accountability. As Hankey's inquiry attempted to justify reform, his criticisms may overstate institutional failings, but they are corroborated by suitable evidence.<sup>68</sup> Historians agree with Hankey's sentiment, with Thurlow likening Soviet and British intelligence to 'Manchester United and Corinthian Casuals', an analogy emphasising the inadequacy of the British.<sup>69</sup> A consequence of ineffective recruitment was analytical weaknesses. Only 'a very small percentage' of intelligence reports were requested in complete form, indicating limited capacity.<sup>70</sup> Efficiency depended on individual expertise rather than institutional training, because any 'corporate memory [...] soon fell by the wayside.'<sup>71</sup>

The SIS faced chronic underfunding. The two dominating prime ministers of the 1920s-1930s (Baldwin and MacDonald) were disinterested in intelligence.<sup>72</sup> Consequently, the service received treasury constraints and cutbacks, an underestimation of intelligence needs in official estimates.<sup>73</sup> 'MI5's budget was cut by almost two thirds', which had immediate adverse effects.<sup>74</sup> This persistent financial neglect ensured that the SIS lacked a structural integrity required for professional intelligence work. Field Intelligence funds were reduced, making foreign intelligence less effective.<sup>75</sup> As shown by the cuts, the government made significant underestimations of the service's requirements. By 1923 the SIS shrunk to only sixteen officers at home, and seventy overseas.<sup>76</sup> In 1929 that number had gone down further to only thirteen.<sup>77</sup> The poor pay and ineffective working environment pushed people away. The budget for the service in 1922/25 was a mere £180,000 – which 'was criticised as inadequate'.<sup>78</sup> It 'increased to £200,000 after criticism' but was still inefficient.<sup>79</sup> As a consequence of these cuts, MI6's capabilities were negligible due to a lack of resources.<sup>80</sup> In one case, a message sent to Lockhart about the state of the organisation's network and the need for funds only arrived just after

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<sup>68</sup> TNA, FO 1093/193, p. 14.

<sup>69</sup> Richard Thurlow, 'Soviet Spies and British Counter-Intelligence in the 1930s: Espionage in the Woolwich Arsenal and the Foreign Office Communications Department', *Intelligence and National Security*, 19.4 (2004), pp. 610-631 (p. 611) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0268452042000327519>>

<sup>70</sup> TNA, HW 43/2, p. 56

<sup>71</sup> Black and Brunt, 'MI5, 1909-1945', p. 189.

<sup>72</sup> Aldrich, *The Black Door*, p. 44.

<sup>73</sup> London, The National Archives of the UK (TNA), KV 4/151, *Report of Sir Warren Fisher's Committee of Secret Service*, 4 April 1922.

<sup>74</sup> Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm*, p. 117.

<sup>75</sup> TNA, KV 4/151, Frame 33.

<sup>76</sup> Jeffery, *MI6*, p. 175.

<sup>77</sup> Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm*, p. 127.

<sup>78</sup> TNA, KV 4/151, Frame 33.

<sup>79</sup> TNA, KV 4/151, Frame 32.

<sup>80</sup> Calder Walton, *Spies: The Epic Intelligence War between East and West* (Simon and Schuster, 2023), p. 24.

Lockhart had been captured in Russia.<sup>81</sup> The cost of having agents was very high, yet the government did very little to provide financial support.<sup>82</sup> Hence, the cumulative effect of poor recruitment and underfunding led to operational failures. These deficiencies illustrate how the SIS remained largely unprofessional, with limited capacity for learning or reform.

Hence, in the interwar years, British intelligence achieved sufficient experience from the First World War, but lacked proper resourcing, authority and coherence for effective professionalism. The service faced structural and recruiting problems from within, as well as budgeting problems. These left the service in a state of poor management and a lack of professionalism.

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As Britain faced Nazi threat in the Second World War, institutional weaknesses came to the fore. Britain recognised deficiencies in how intelligence was used and managed. These problems led to reforms that began to transform and professionalise the service. In the later years, British intelligence at Bletchley Park (BP) marked a shift from improvisation to efficiency. However, even within these successes, Bletchley continued to expose structural weaknesses of the service.

Post-war intelligence narratives border on self-congratulation, with MI5 claiming an ‘exalted state through their wartime exertions’.<sup>83</sup> In reality, during the early stages, British intelligence was overstretched, poorly coordinated, and inadequately staffed.<sup>84</sup> Intelligence failures within the British Expeditionary Force reflected the service’s resource shortages.<sup>85</sup> So much so that its Y unit ‘could make little of the German field army’s complex signals network’.<sup>86</sup> SIGINT lagged behind in terms of quality of organisation, with poorly trained staff and having to rely on allies for resources.<sup>87</sup> ‘Polish cryptanalysts revealed to the British how they broke Enigma’.<sup>88</sup> This inertia persisted, with SIS constrained by bureaucracy and sustained underinvestment in SIGINT.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> London, The National Archives of the UK (TNA), *Hill: Report On Work Done in Russia*, 26 November 1918, Frame 52.

<sup>82</sup> TNA, *Hill Report*, Frame 65.

<sup>83</sup> Simon J Ball, *Secret History: Writing the Rise of Britain’s Intelligence Services* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2020), p. 152.

<sup>84</sup> F.H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, Abridged edition (HMSO, 1993), pp. 5-31.

<sup>85</sup> Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, p. 30.

<sup>86</sup> Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, p. 31.

<sup>87</sup> London, The National Archives of the UK (TNA), CAB 301/25, *Sir David Petrie, ‘Report on the Security Service’*, 13 February 1941, p. 7.

<sup>88</sup> Ralph Erskine, ‘The Poles Reveal their Secrets: Alastair Denniston's Account of the July 1939 Meeting at Pyry’, *Cryptologia*, 30.4 (2006), pp. 294-305 (p. 294) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01611190600920944>>

<sup>89</sup> Jeffery, *MI6*, p. 334.

The intelligence that was acquired by the service was not utilised effectively.<sup>90</sup> Processing methods were ‘far too primitive and unintelligent’.<sup>91</sup> Hinsley bluntly claims that ‘information existed [but] was not put to good use.’<sup>92</sup> British intelligence was able to monitor German mechanised forces but their lack of technical analysis risked strategic misjudgements.<sup>93</sup> A failure to acquire intelligence and a greater failure to transform intelligence into strategy exposed the unprofessional position of the service and how ineffectively it was run.

These failures revealed that size and streamlining needed to be increased. At first, there were less employees at Bletchley than the German equivalent.<sup>94</sup> Recruitment in BP was slow, with early accounts claiming very few analysts.<sup>95</sup> As the war intensified, one cryptanalyst sent a message to Churchill, requesting more resources and staff.<sup>96</sup> Churchill called for “extreme priority” of cryptanalysis.<sup>97</sup> Aldrich is particularly praising, claiming Churchill was the first prime minister to prioritise the service, but action merely reflected necessary change.<sup>98</sup> Despite his intervention, ‘recruitment problems persisted due to conscription and bureaucratic hurdles’.<sup>99</sup> Pre-war recruitment methods proved inadequate.<sup>100</sup> To combat this, recruitment began to draw from universities or any profession with German language proficiency.<sup>101</sup>

While this expanded the organisation to nine-thousand, it remained disorganised.<sup>102</sup> Many employees arrived at BP with little knowledge of cryptology or intelligence work and learned on the job.<sup>103</sup> There were poor working and living conditions, logistical strain, and bad infrastructure.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ball, *Secret History*, p. 73.

<sup>91</sup> Jeffery, *MI6*, p. 357.

<sup>92</sup> Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, p. 10.

<sup>93</sup> J.P. Harris, ‘British military intelligence and the rise of German mechanized forces, 1929-40’, *Intelligence and National Security*, 6.2 (1991), pp. 395-417 (pp. 413-415) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/02684529108432108>>

<sup>94</sup> Ball, *Secret History*, p. 79.

<sup>95</sup> Michael Smith, *The Debs of Bletchley Park and Other Stories* (Aurum, 2015), Chapter 1.

<sup>96</sup> P.S. Milner-Barry and Alan Turing ‘Action this day’: The letter from Bletchley Park Cryptanalysts to the Prime Minister, 21 October 1941’, *Intelligence and National Security*, 1.2 (1986), pp. 272-276 (p. 273), DOI: 10.1080/02684528608431853.

<sup>97</sup> Milner-Barry and Turing, ‘Action this Day’, p. 273.

<sup>98</sup> Aldrich, *The Black Door*, p. 94.

<sup>99</sup> Thomas Cheetham, ‘A sad story of delay and obstructionism!: the impact of external relationships on the resourcing and development of Bletchley Park during the Second World War’, *Intelligence and National Security*, 37.3 (2022), pp. 359-376 (pp. 367-368) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2022.2032583>>

<sup>100</sup> Cheetham, ‘A sad story of delay and obstructionism’, pp. 364-365.

<sup>101</sup> Peter Calvocoressi, *Top Secret Ultra: The Full Story of Ultra and its Impact on World War II* (Sphere Books Limited, 1981), p. 13.

<sup>102</sup> Cheetham, ‘A sad story of delay and obstructionism’, p. 360.

<sup>103</sup> Gordon Welchman, *The Hut Six Story: Breaking the Enigma Codes* (Allen Lane, 1982), p. 31.

<sup>104</sup> Smith, *The Debs of Bletchley Park and Other Stories*, Chapter 1-3.

Smith describes the staff as being “so overworked”.<sup>105</sup> Smith’s recollections provide a valuable insight into the strain and lack of institutionalisation, but due to being a retrospective testimony, it privileges personal hardship over structural analysis. This risks a generalisation from an individual experience. Despite this, this account indicates a lack of professional structure to BP.

As the war progressed, intelligence work became increasingly professionalised, reflecting recognition that traditional approaches were inadequate.<sup>106</sup> This shift was reinforced by the temporary addition of leading academics and analysts, whose collaboration formed a more effective intelligence unit.<sup>107</sup> The institution began to work more structurally, Welchman accounts for the administering of highly skilled female staff; managing logistics and liaison.<sup>108</sup> As a senior figure within Hut Six his narrative risks boasting a coherence while underplaying conflict, but his account implies a good level of quality in structure.

The service established better disciplinary standards, which helped professionalise its vetting strength. Employees signed the Official Secrets Act, if breached it led to expulsion without trial.<sup>109</sup> Calvocoressi’s recollection of his interview demonstrates the intimidating and highly selective vetting process.<sup>110</sup> As a result, there was a good ‘quality of staff’ at Bletchley.<sup>111</sup> However, Calvocoressi’s depiction of vetting and discipline reflects a retrospective framing shaped by the later success of Ultra, which may project later professionalism onto the earlier, more improvised systems. The individual primary material highlights poor organisation whereas later official accounts tend to frame the same period as one of sufficient progress.

Much of Bletchley’s immediate improvements focused on increasing their production flow.<sup>112</sup> BP professionalised through means of shift work, introducing Watches and an effective shift system.<sup>113</sup> Work was organised into ‘four Watches, each working an eight-hour shift.’<sup>114</sup> Thus, a reliable system for decoding messages was formed in BP.<sup>115</sup> Intelligence was ‘being produced on an industrial scale,

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<sup>105</sup> Smith, *The Debs of Bletchley Park and Other Stories*, Chapter 2.

<sup>106</sup> Peter Davies, *The Authorised History of British Defence Economic Intelligence: A Cold War in Whitehall, 1929-90* (Routledge, 2019), p. 69.

<sup>107</sup> E.D.R. Harrison, ‘British Radio Security and Intelligence, 1939-43’, *The English Historical Review*, 124.506 (2009), pp. 53-93 (pp. 68-76), DOI:10.1093/ehr/cen361.

<sup>108</sup> Welchman, *The Hut Six Story*, p. 123.

<sup>109</sup> Smith, *The Debs of Bletchley Park and Other Stories*, Chapter 2.

<sup>110</sup> Calvocoressi, *Top Secret Ultra*, p. 9.

<sup>111</sup> Davies, *The Authorised History of British Defence Economic Intelligence*, p. 66.

<sup>112</sup> TNA, HW 43/2, p. 664.

<sup>113</sup> Welchman, *The Hut Six Story*, p. 90.

<sup>114</sup> Calvocoressi, *Top Secret Ultra*, p. 66.

<sup>115</sup> TNA, FO 1093/193, p. 6.

with forty-five machine operators in action.’<sup>116</sup> Initially, British cryptanalysts faced limitations, as there were no mechanical devices necessary to intercept the German systems.<sup>117</sup> This prompted further improvements in the decryption process.<sup>118</sup> Bletchley became a primary outlet of intelligence in the war.<sup>119</sup> There was still a ‘flood of intelligence’ similar to that of the First World War, but in this case ‘it became an expert routine’ rather than overwhelming.<sup>120</sup> Hut 3 processed intelligence from Hut 6, and by the end of the war was breaking at least two dozen different Enigma cyphers.<sup>121</sup>

Bletchley saw a leap forward in cryptologic innovation, establishing foundational mathematical and cryptological principles.<sup>122</sup> In addition, breaking of Enigma helped produce high-grade intercepts, giving British decision-makers access to intelligence of exceptional importance.<sup>123</sup> Intelligence generated increasingly valuable output from 1942 onwards.<sup>124</sup> SIGINT therefore supported many operational successes.<sup>125</sup> Enigma-derived intelligence and deception are seen as being central to Allied victory, because of how it shaped D-Day planning.<sup>126</sup> While interception of Enigma traffic was essential and proved groundbreaking, this undermines other factors within the war, such as the newly effective Double-Cross System.<sup>127</sup> This system improved their use of intelligence and helped generate more effective means of deception, such as Operations Mincemeat and Fortitude.<sup>128</sup> However, the increase in professionalism in these departments may have been catalysed by the prioritisation of intelligence at BP.

Goodman argues that the effectiveness of British intelligence during the war saw better inter-service cooperation, claiming that the JIC ‘had finally come of age’.<sup>129</sup> Despite this, coordination remained weak, with the JIC being described as a largely peripheral body that played little active role in

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<sup>116</sup> Aldrich, *The Black Door*, p. 104

<sup>117</sup> A.G. Dennison, ‘The Government Code and Cypher School Between the Wars’, *Intelligence and National Security*, 1.1 (1986), pp. 48-70 (p. 60) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/02684528608431841>>

<sup>118</sup> TNA, HW 43/2, p. 672.

<sup>119</sup> TNA, HW 43/2, p. 670.

<sup>120</sup> Calvocoressi, *Top Secret Ultra*, Foreword.

<sup>121</sup> Calvocoressi, *Top Secret Ultra*, p. 66.

<sup>122</sup> Sandy Zabell, ‘Commentary on Alan M. Turing: The Applications of Probability to Cryptography’, *Cryptologia*, 36.3 (2012), pp. 191-214 (pp. 192-211) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01611194.2012.697811>>

<sup>123</sup> Samir Puri, ‘The role of intelligence in deciding the Battle of Britain’, *Intelligence and National Security*, 21.3 (2006), pp. 416-439 (p. 429) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/02684520600750661>>

<sup>124</sup> Puri, ‘The role of intelligence in deciding the Battle of Britain’, p. 428.

<sup>125</sup> Welchman, *The Hut Six Story*, p. 94.

<sup>126</sup> Aldrich, *The Black Door*, p. 115.

<sup>127</sup> John P. Campbell, ‘A Retrospective on John Masterman's *The Double-Cross System*’, *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, 18.2 (2005), pp. 320-353 (p. 328) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/08850600590911972>>

<sup>128</sup> Walton, *Spies*, p. 44.

<sup>129</sup> Michael Goodman, *The Official History of the Joint Intelligence Committee. Volume I, From the Approach of the Second World War to the Suez Crisis* (Routledge, 2014), p. 151.

coordinating assessments.<sup>130</sup> This limited efficiency, because while MI6 is credited with fostering Bletchley's growth, it operated within a system marked by rivalry and disputes over control of Hut 3.<sup>131</sup> Hinsley characterises institutional setbacks as arising whenever multiple bodies shared responsibility, reinforcing that the system was not fully professionalised in organisational terms.<sup>132</sup>

Despite this, the JIC developed a greater authority, with Cavendish-Bentinck demonstrating sufficient confidence to criticise the Chiefs of Staff as "stubborn and short-sighted", signalling a willingness to challenge senior military opinion in the interest of the service.<sup>133</sup> Goodman is praising Cavendish-Bentinck in particular with elevating the JIC's professionalism, describing him as 'astute' and 'capable of producing harmony'.<sup>134</sup>

Throughout the war, British intelligence underwent a process of professionalisation but did not do so institutionally. Wartime pressures forced growth, encouraging the systematic use of civilians, better intelligence processing, and closer integration in national policy. However, professional effectiveness did not equate to institutional maturity. Expansion remained ad hoc, and there was a continued reliance on improvised recruitment, inadequate infrastructure, and inter-service rivalry evident in both official files and memoir accounts. While the expansion and innovation in cryptology had value, its achievements rested on weak foundations.

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Sources about late-war and post-war intelligence settlement claim seamless professionalism and greater maturity within the service. While there were many successes, with the service becoming one of the biggest and strongest allied agencies, there were issues of retrenchment and a return to staffing issues after the war. Integrating the services caused complications and failures to adapt suggested reforms, which shows a lack of continued professionalisation in the service.

Towards the end of WWII, official GC&CS accounts emphasise greater interservice cooperation.<sup>135</sup> The Intelligence Machine was hailed as 'the first attempt anywhere [...] to set out a blueprint for a complete, interlocking, peacetime system'.<sup>136</sup> However, these retrospectives are self-justified, which

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<sup>130</sup> Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, p. 9.

<sup>131</sup> Hughes, 'The British Secret Intelligence Service, 1909-1949', p. 720.

<sup>132</sup> Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, p. 3.

<sup>133</sup> Goodman, *The Official History of the Joint Intelligence Committee*, pp. 142-157.

<sup>134</sup> Goodman, *The Official History of the Joint Intelligence Committee*, pp. 148-150.

<sup>135</sup> TNA, HW 43/2, p. 740.

<sup>136</sup> Davies, *The Authorised History of British Defence Economic Intelligence*, p. 126.

leads them to underplay the service's earlier failures, such as the technical unpreparedness of early war.<sup>137</sup>

Despite recognition of the need after learning from the inter-war failures, British intelligence showed persistent failure to retain lessons after the Second World War. The conditions of the post-war service were a product of peacetime neglect and wartime expansion.<sup>138</sup> In the immediate post-war period, the SIS experienced financial attrition and a loss of expertise, as many wartime intelligence officers were academics who served only for the duration of the war before resuming their academic careers.<sup>139</sup> Personnel losses left the service unable to reconcile SIGINT records, because 'the people with the necessary knowledge [were] no longer available.'<sup>140</sup> Similar to conditions of the service at the end of the First World War, staffing cuts constrained capacity despite a high technical potential.<sup>141</sup> This shows a lack of retained lessons in how to professionally manage a peacetime service.

According to Davies, one success of the service was effective centralisation. Davies frames centralisation as 'a great increase in efficiency'.<sup>142</sup> Official reports are similarly positive about intelligence efficiency.<sup>143</sup> However, they both underplay institutional uncertainty noted in the reforms.<sup>144</sup> The service even acknowledges its own structural weaknesses - most notably the absence of recorded judgments, which senior officers admit hindered continuity.<sup>145</sup> Goodman's claim that the system merely required "constant refinement" arguably downplays the severity of persistent managerial and professional failures.<sup>146</sup> Unofficial post-war recollections emphasise exhaustion and decline, rather than reform.<sup>147</sup> The post-war service failed to adopt important organisational recommendations. Welchman repeatedly claims in his account of Hut Six that his 'recommendations

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<sup>137</sup> TNA, HW 43/2, p. 60.

<sup>138</sup> TNA, HW 43/2.

<sup>139</sup> Daniel Shiu, 'The influence of Bletchley Park on UK mathematics', *Cryptologia*, 49.4 (2025), pp. 372-387 (p. 372) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01611194.2025.2457086>>

<sup>140</sup> TNA, HW 43/2, p. 688.

<sup>141</sup> Martin Rudner, 'Britain Betwixt and Between: UK SIGINT Alliance Strategy's Transatlantic and European Connections', *Intelligence and National Security*, 19.4 (2004), pp. 571-609 (p. 576) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0268452042000327528>>

<sup>142</sup> Davies, *The Authorised History of British Defence Economic Intelligence*, p. 112.

<sup>143</sup> Roger Fleetwood Hesketh, *FORTITUDE: A History of Strategic Deception in North Western Europe April, 1943 to May, 1945* (The Overlook Press, 1949), Introduction.

<sup>144</sup> Daniel W. B. Lomas, "... the Defence of the Realm and Nothing Else": Sir Findlater Stewart, Labour Ministers and the Security Service', *Intelligence and National Security*, 30.6 (2015), pp. 793-816 (p. 812) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2014.900268>>

<sup>145</sup> TNA, CAB 301/25, p. 10.

<sup>146</sup> Goodman, *The Official History of the Joint Intelligence Committee*, p. 161.

<sup>147</sup> Peter Wright and Paul Greengrass, *Spycatcher: The Candid Autobiography of a Senior Intelligence Officer* (Dell, 1987), pp. 5-7.

had not been followed.’<sup>148</sup> As a self-interested source, his complaints about pay - arguing that ‘brilliant cryptologists should be able to earn a higher salary than the Director’ - risks exaggerating the service’s neglect too.<sup>149</sup> Thus, it is important to account for a balance in these separate viewpoints. The lessons would have been retained better than the inter-war circumstances, but not as effectively as official reports or authorised histories seem to portray. Jeffery corroborates a stagnation in the service, noting there were unresolved structure and recruitment crises.<sup>150</sup>

Authorised narratives portray the JIC as a centre of authority, but contemporary evidence complicates this picture. Some managerial reforms progressed more comfortably after the war. Attlee valued MI5’s independence and kept it under his ‘personal control’, showing a greater utilisation of the service.<sup>151</sup> However, post-war authority is heavily overstated in Goodman’s authorised history, stating that Britain was ‘the great originator and purveyor of modern intelligence’.<sup>152</sup> He quotes how Britain sought to “educate United States departments in [their] views.”<sup>153</sup> This reflects institutional self-justification within the authorised history rather than a more detached analysis. An FO memorandum shows that intelligence leaders resisted JIC integration into the service, insisting SIS be kept ‘aloof from regular Government Committees’ for secrecy.<sup>154</sup> Proposals for ‘a unified Secret Service’ were rejected amid fears of bureaucratic overreach.<sup>155</sup> Officials acknowledged that the JIC’s work was overly focused on “organisational and security issues”.<sup>156</sup>

Overall, these developments in the post-war service reveal professionalism in the service as uneven. While intelligence gained strategic recognition and because technically sophisticated, the service failed to retain wartime lessons about personnel management. Professionalism in the SIS advanced awkwardly, constrained by self-justification and peacetime neglect.

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British intelligence between 1909 and 1949 was not fully professional in an institutional sense. While it achieved moments of high operational effectiveness – particularly during wartime - it failed to sustain these advances in peacetime. Even its wartime successes, such as those in SIGINT and the

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<sup>148</sup> Welchman, *The Hut Six Story*, p. 180.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid

<sup>150</sup> Jeffery, *MI6*, pp. 590-591.

<sup>151</sup> Aldrich, *The Black Door*, p. 141.

<sup>152</sup> Goodman, *The Official History of the Joint Intelligence Committee*, p. 207.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> TNA, FO 1093/193, p. 9.

<sup>155</sup> Jeffery, *MI6*, p. 588.

<sup>156</sup> Goodman, *The Official History of the Joint Intelligence Committee*, p. 170.

Double Cross system, were driven by crisis and enemy weaknesses rather than robust structures. While Britain emerged as one of the leading nations in intelligence, it failed in properly institutionalising it.

Professional weaknesses persisted throughout this period, including in recruitment, record-keeping, funding, and coordination, as well as enduring inter-service rivalry. Despite wartime expansion, intelligence was treated by authority as a temporary device rather than a permanent national capability. Consequently, issues of financing and complacency arose in the inter-war and post-war years. Internal resistance to reform, and centralisation further stalled sustained professional development.

While British intelligence underwent a process of professionalisation, this development was irregular and fragile. Its successes reflected adaptive responses to crisis rather than the emergence of a professional system. Therefore, British intelligence succeeded not because it was fully professionalised, but because Britain was successful in improvising under pressure while avoiding political and financial costs of maintaining a professional intelligence system.

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