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Britain's Secret Intelligence Service in Asia During the Second World War

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The past twenty years have seen the rapid growth of a new branch of international history, the serious academic study of secret services or 'intelligence history' with its attendant specialist conferences and journals. Two main causes for this development can be identified. The first was conceptual, namely the increasing recognition that the study of international history was greatly impoverished by the reluctance of academic historians to address a subject which appeared capable of shedding considerable light upon the conduct of international affairs. Two leading historians underlined this during 1982 in a path-breaking collection of essays on the subject, suggesting that intelligence was the 'missing dimension' of most international history.¹ The second development was a more practical one, the introduction of the Thirty Year Rule during the 1970s, bringing with it an avalanche of new documentation, which, within a few years, was recognized as containing a great deal of intelligence material.² In the 1980s historians had begun to turn their attention in increasing numbers to the intelligence history of the mid-twentieth century. They were further assisted in their endeavours by the appearance of the first volumes of the official history of *British Intelligence in the Second World War*.³

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¹ Christopher Andrew and David Dilks (eds), *The Missing Dimension: Governments and Intelligence Communities in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1984). See also John L. Gaddis, 'Intelligence, Espionage and Cold War Origins', *Diplomatic History*, 13, 2 (Spring 1989): 191–213; Donald Cameron Watt, 'Intelligence and the Historian', *Diplomatic History*, 14, 2 (Spring 1990): 199–205.

² On British intelligence archives during the 1970s and 1980s see, Wesley K. Wark, 'In Never-Never Land? The British Archives on Intelligence', *The Historical Journal*, 35, 1 (Spring 1992): 195–202.

³ F. H. Hinsley et al., *British Intelligence in the Second World War: Its Influence on Strategy and Operations*, Vol. 1 (London: HMSO, 1979).

Accordingly the 1980s saw the development of what some have described as the 'British school of intelligence studies', deeply historical in its approach and with the Second World War and its immediate legacy of a developing 'Western intelligence community' as its primary focus.⁴ There was also a growing consensus that new information on intelligence had significantly altered the prevailing understanding of the Second World War.⁵ Yet there remained one obvious omission amid this growing body of scholarly literature on intelligence during the Second World War. Remarkably little attempt has been made to investigate intelligence in Asia, and almost nothing has been written on the British Secret Intelligence Service during the war against Japan.⁶ There are several reasons for this. Most importantly, the official historians of British intelligence decided not to extend their work on Europe and the Middle East to cover Asian theatres, arguing that Asian subjects would require an Anglo-American approach that ran beyond their official remit. Meanwhile, a proportion of the unofficial historians who have turned their hand to the war against Japan have become unduly fascinated by the Pearl Harbor controversy, and have not seemed able to move beyond that intractable historical quagmire. Others have presumed that there is simply not enough primary material, believing that most relevant archives remain closed to public inspection.⁷

On the last point they have been wrong. In reality the wartime files of the three armed services teem with material generated by the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS). One explanation for this might be that the cover name adopted by SIS in Asia after 1942,

⁴ Donald Cameron Watt, 'Intelligence Studies: The Emergence of a British School', *Intelligence and National Security*, 3, 2 (April 1988): 338-42.

⁵ See, for example, Zara Steiner, 'Deception and its Dividends', *Times Literary Supplement*, 7-13 Dec. 1990, p. 1,310. For a superb synthesis of the impact of intelligence on the European War see Ralph Bennett, *Behind the Battle: Intelligence in the War with Germany, 1939-45* (London: Sinclair Stevenson, 1994).

⁶ There are two notable exceptions at the level of field operations. A good account of SIS activities in Malaya is given in Ian Trenowden, *Operations Most Secret: SOE The Malayan Theatre* (London: William Kimber, 1978), pp. 123-46. SIS also makes brief appearances in Terence O'Brien's partly autobiographical *The Moonlight War: The Story of Clandestine Operations in South-East Asia, 1944-5* (London: Collins, 1987).

⁷ Amongst the official historians of British intelligence the exception is Michael Howard who has included a chapter on the war against Japan in his volume on deception, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, Vol. V. The most recent literature on Pearl Harbor includes David Kaiser, 'Conspiracy or Cock-up? Pearl Harbor Revisited', *Intelligence and National Security*, 9, 2 (April 1994): 354-72; D. C. S. Sissons, 'More on Pearl Harbor', *ibid.*, pp. 373-80.

the 'Inter-Service Liaison Department', seems to have confused the departmental 'weeders' who prepare files for release, more than it confused the enemy. As a result, entire files dealing with SIS have sat in the Public Record Office since the late 1970s. Moreover, in the 1990s the Waldegrave Initiative on Open Government led to a decision to begin the process of releasing approximately 10,000 files generated by the Special Operations Executive (SOE), a sister service to SIS. The material dealing with SOE in Asia, released in 1993, contains a surprising amount of material on relations between SOE and SIS. Taken together with equally voluminous releases of intelligence material in the United States, it is now possible for the first time for unofficial historians to undertake some assessment of the nature and activities of the British SIS in Asia during the 1930s and 1940s. Accordingly, this essay seeks to shed some preliminary light upon a hitherto unexplored subject, the troubled Asiatic branch of SIS from the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937 to termination of Britain's post-war administrative duties in Southeast Asia in 1946.⁸

That SIS was not an impressive organization in any part of the world during the inter-war years is already well understood. Underfunded and moribund, SIS as a whole deteriorated through the 1920s and a decade later was entirely unprepared for war.⁹ SIS in Asia was the 'Cinderella branch' of a broadly impoverished service. This can be partly explained by the primarily colonial interpretation of intelligence requirements East of Suez during this period which ensured that, while police intelligence was active, SIS was almost non-existent. Although by mid-1941 belated efforts were made to 'ginger up' SIS, good networks took months, if not years, to construct and so the opportunity for remedying the situation in Asia had already passed.

The general problems that beset SIS during the 1930s and 1940s were already being addressed by late 1939 with the arrival of a new SIS chief, Sir Stewart Menzies, at its London headquarters at Broadway Buildings close to Pall Mall. In 1940, anxious to press for improvements, the Foreign Office, to which SIS was subordinate,

⁸ This most recent release is described in Louise Atherton, *SOE Operations in the Far East: An Introductory Guide to the Newly Released Records* (London: Public Record Office, 1993).

⁹ The classic account is Christopher M. Andrew, *Secret Service: The Making of the British Intelligence Community* (London: Heinemann, 1985), pp. 339-447.

appointed a diplomat, Patrick Reilly, as Personal Assistant to Menzies, with the intention of keeping a closer eye on SIS.¹⁰ Having lost many of its networks in Europe during 1940, SIS was able to start afresh, working in new and productive areas such as deception. It also gave more attention to counter-intelligence in foreign territories (which lay outside the remit of MI5). These efforts against Axis secret services, such as the German *Abwehr*, were greatly assisted by Ultra which permitted the perusal of *Abwehr* communications. Indeed SIS, who controlled signals intelligence, increasingly basked in the reflected glory of the codebreakers at Bletchley Park. In theory this gave SIS a breathing space to transform itself into a more modern and efficient service, but in reality these wartime reforms moved at a constabulary pace.¹¹

But the experience of SIS in Asia after 1941 was distinctly different in character. Unlike SIS in London, it encountered new problems that became more awkward and intractable as the war progressed. In Japanese-occupied Asian countries it laboured under a number of special disadvantages. It was hard to find high-grade oriental agents with recent knowledge of occupied countries and it was difficult for European agents to move or operate in remote Japanese-controlled areas without the knowledge and co-operation of the local population. Consequently, a different British clandestine service, the newly constituted SOE, which was busy training resistance groups and developing contact with leading indigenous figures, discovered that it enjoyed a far larger intelligence net. SIS was quickly outstripped by the amateur saboteurs of the new SOE organization. Indeed by 1945, in areas such as Thailand, agents independently inserted by SIS were more likely to be picked up and detained by the ubiquitous resistance than by the Japanese security police. The consequence was a long period of poor relations between SIS and SOE, punctuated by moments when SIS was increasingly inclined to concede defeat to its sister service.¹²

These operational problems, peculiar to Asia, were compounded by serious mistakes committed at a higher level, notably by the

¹⁰ Andrew, *Secret Service*, p. 467.

¹¹ Robert Cecil, 'Philby's Spurious War', *Intelligence and National Security*, 9, 4 (October 1994): 764-8; E. D. R. Harrison, 'More Thoughts on Kim Philby's Silent War', *Intelligence and National Security*, 10, 3 (July 1995): 514-26.

¹² The classic work on SOE remains M. R. D. Foot, *SOE in France* (London: HMSO, 1966). On SOE-SIS rivalry see David Stafford, *Britain and the European Resistance, 1940-45: A Survey of the Special Operations Executive with Documents* (London: St Anthony's/Macmillan, 1980), pp. 38-56.

regional head of SIS, Colonel Leo Steveni, during the period 1942–44. His unduly close relationship with the Indian Army and GHQ India led to pressure to deploy SIS in and just behind the battle area for the purpose of operational, even tactical, intelligence. This was a perverse development given that the traditional role of SIS was, in fact, long-range political, economic and strategic intelligence. The willingness of SIS to subordinate itself to local demands proved to be a serious mistake. Yet the pressures of local commanders in Asia were fierce and unrelenting and those organizations that did not respond risked being eclipsed by one of the many other rival clandestine services.

SIS in wartime Asia was thus beleaguered by two separate types of difficulties. Firstly, operational problems that were unique to that part of the world. Secondly, managerial problems mostly related to the complexities of an organization responsible to its 'Head Office' in London, yet working in co-operation within regional or 'theatre' commands. These bureaucratic problems were widespread during the Second World War, but they were exacerbated by the distance between London and the centres of command in Asia. As a result, by 1945, SIS in Asia had deteriorated badly and was only saved from *de facto* extinction by the intervention of Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, the Supreme Allied Commander South East Asia, and his far-sighted clandestine operations supremo, Captain G. A. Garnons-Williams, RN. Their decision was a radical one. They urged the withdrawal of SIS from the war against Japan altogether, suggesting that it concentrate resources on developing long-range projects focused on the post-war period, and to which SIS was temperamentally more suited.¹³

I

The generally dismal nature of British intelligence provision in Europe during the inter-war years has already been explored to a

¹³ On Mountbatten and South East Asia Command, see Christopher Thorne, *Allies of a Kind: The United States, Britain and the War Against Japan, 1941–1945* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1978); Philip Zeigler, *Mountbatten: The Official Biography* (London: Collins, 1985); Peter Dennis, *Troubled Days of Peace: Mountbatten and South East Asia Command, 1945–46* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987). On Garnons-Williams, see Charles Cruickshank, *SOE in the Far East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 88, 171.

considerable degree. However, in attempting to understand the specially impoverished nature of SIS in Asia prior to the Second World War, it is essential to appreciate that East of Suez, Britain placed an overwhelmingly *colonial* emphasis upon intelligence concentrated upon the internal security of British territories. The British colonial governments in India, Malaya and Hong Kong had developed, over many decades, effective, if narrowly focused, security intelligence services designed to address internal threats from nationalists, communists or other types of 'agitators'. Their undoubted success contributed to an atmosphere of complacency. Meanwhile, very little in the way of resources or first class personnel was devoted to secret service activities designed to address the problems of external foreign threats and potential adversaries in Asia such as Japan, China and the Soviet Union.¹⁴ Concern about this imbalance only began to mount in Whitehall from the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937. In the Spring of 1938 the Air Ministry despatched its deputy head of intelligence, Wing Commander Wigglesworth, on a three-month tour of Asia to examine all aspects of the British intelligence apparatus in that region. Wigglesworth's expectations were low and he was not disappointed. He discovered that SIS had only two officers in Asia, located at Shanghai and Hong Kong. The state of SIS representation at Shanghai was particularly shocking. Although initially wary of intruding into SIS business, he could not let the situation pass without comment. He reported: 'Both at Hong Kong and at Shanghai I was asked by many if I knew "Steptoe". No, who was he? Oh, he's the head of the secret service organisation at Shanghai—he's the arch-spy—everyone in China knows who and what "Steptoe" is!' Harry Steptoe's cover at Shanghai was that of a Vice-Consul and his office was in the consular buildings. But he made little pretence of being a consul and his real work aroused 'curiosity'. Surely, he asked, SIS could do better than this?¹⁵

This was not mere exaggeration by Wigglesworth or by those he interviewed. Steptoe was, by any standards, an extremely colourful

¹⁴ On inter-war imperial security intelligence, see Richard J. Popplewell, *Intelligence and Imperial Defence: The Secret Service of the Indian Empire, 1904-1920* (London: Frank Cass, 1995); Frederick S. Litten, 'The Noulens Affair', *The China Quarterly*, 138 (June 1994): 492-512.

¹⁵ Wing Commander Wigglesworth (AI2), 'Notes on the tour of RAF and Combined Service Intelligence Organisations in the Far East', Part V: Shanghai, 30 June 1938, AIR 20/374, PRO. For a fleeting glimpse of Steptoe during the mid-1920s see Bernard Wasserstein, *The Secret Lives of Trebitsch Lincoln* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 233-4, 244-5, 248-9.

figure. He enjoyed wearing exotic non-regulation uniforms and had developed a unique surreptitious walk that lent an air of subterfuge to everything that he did. As a result his cover was non-existent.¹⁶ As early as December 1933 the American Military Attaché in Shanghai, Lieutenant Colonel Drysdale, had confidently identified Steptoe as the 'British intelligence agent'. This was partly because his name did not appear in the list of his own consulate's personnel and also because of his peculiar activities which led Drysdale to think that he was on some sort of secretive 'roving commission'.¹⁷

Predictably, the intelligence gathered by SIS at Shanghai was meagre. A few Chinese dock-labourers were utilized as coast-watchers in Japan. But reliable Chinese agents were elusive. In China they found it increasingly hard to travel freely in what was now a war zone. The Yangste River had been closed to traffic and informers watching the progress of the Sino-Japanese War had to travel slowly by land routes. Accordingly, the information that SIS managed to pick up from the missionaries and traders who worked for them was invariably out of date. Soviet Asia also presented an awkward target. Although there were plenty of White Russian exiles in Shanghai, penetrating into Soviet Siberia was all but impossible and two SIS agents were already on trial there. Wigglesworth noted: 'There are not many Russians who are prepared to enter Siberia when they know that suspicion means "liquidation"'.¹⁸

In mainland Southeast Asia, an area of growing strategic importance, there was no permanent British intelligence representation of any kind. Even during 1940, with Japan extending her presence into French Indochina, SIS did not see fit to station officers there, nor

¹⁶ I am dependent on private information for insight into some of Steptoe's more colourful attributes. One of Steptoe's more notorious SIS colleagues offers a similarly low opinion of him: 'The near-mental case was Steptoe of Shanghai, who had covered the whole Far East for SIS between the wars. How it happened was still a mystery to me: I found it difficult to believe that he could hold any job for a week.' Kim Philby, *My Silent War* (London: MacGibbon and Key, 1968), p. 77.

¹⁷ Drysdale, 'British Intelligence Service in China', G-2 Report No. 8704, 6 Dec. 1933, 9944-A-190, RG 165, United States National Archives (hereafter USNA).

¹⁸ Wigglesworth Report, Part V: Shanghai, AIR 20/374, PRO. On intelligence and Japan see also Wesley K. Wark, 'In Search of a Suitable Japan: British Naval Intelligence in the Pacific Before the Second World War', *Intelligence and National Security*, 1, 2 (April 1986): 189-212; John Ferris, "'Worthy of Some Better Enemy": The British Estimate of the Imperial Japanese Army and the Fall of Singapore', *Canadian Journal of History*, 28, 2 (August 1993): 223-56; Antony Best, 'Constructing an Image: British Intelligence and Whitehall's Perception of Japan, 1931-1939', *Intelligence and National Security*, 11, 3 (July 1996): 403-23.

were there any permanent service attachés. The latter function was fulfilled by overworked staff officers from Singapore who occasionally undertook tours through Bangkok, Saigon and Hanoi. This was in contrast to the Japanese embassies and consulates, where the number of service attachés was growing fast.¹⁹ Nevertheless, British diplomats in the region were not entirely devoid of secret information, for on some issues they could turn to the powerful private clandestine apparatus run by large firms in the area such as Armstrong Vickers and also Asiatic Petroleum, the local subsidiary of Royal Dutch-Shell. In December 1938, Sir Josiah Crosby, the British Minister in Bangkok, explained to his superiors in London that

the intelligence service of the local branch of the Asiatic Petroleum Company is such an efficient one, there is no information which I can myself usefully impart . . . It is they, indeed, who keep the [British] Legation up to date and to whom I myself have to resort for what is afoot.

Nevertheless, British officials were unhappy about their dependency on companies who might carefully select the material that they decided to pass to the authorities.²⁰

Both before and during the Second World War the majority of British secret information in Asia came not from agents but from intercepting and decyphering signals communications. Prior to 1939 the main British intercept station was at Stonecutters Island in Hong Kong Harbour. Wigglesworth toured these facilities in 1938 and, given the extraordinary value of intercept operations, he was stunned by the physical dilapidation at Stonecutters Island. The accommodation in the intercept building was totally inadequate: 'even a washing place is being used as an operating room'. Personnel were being worked literally round the clock. One operative complained to him that, since arriving three years ago, he had not enjoyed a single weekend of leave. This paucity of staff meant that while Japanese high policy material was decrypted immediately, operational material backed up and all tactical intelligence was simply discarded. The lack of physical security at the station was also quite remarkable and

¹⁹ On the fast-expanding Japanese clandestine network, see E. Bruce Reynolds, *Thailand and Japan's Southern Advance, 1940-1945* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994), pp. 177-81, 210-11, 221-3; Richard J. Aldrich, *The Key to the South: Britain, the United States and Thailand During the Approach of the Pacific War, 1929-42* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 128, 185, 222-3, 340-1; Peter Elphick, *Singapore: The Pregnable Fortress* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1994), pp. 27-44.

²⁰ Crosby to FO No. 562, 28 Dec. 1938, F206/204/40, FO 371/23589, PRO.

he noted that 'Chinese cooks . . . for the operators mess work within a few feet of the operation rooms'.

These inadequacies were partly explained by a recent decision to halt development at Stonecutters Island and instead to consider relocating the whole operation to Singapore. As Japanese forces expanded into China, Hong Kong was increasingly a small British island in a Japanese sea. The possibility of a surprise attack launched by Japanese forces located in Formosa, or on Hainan Island, preyed constantly on the minds of the military staff and, despite protests from the Navy, the British Chiefs of Staff increasingly viewed Hong Kong as an indefensible outpost. The intercept station, located at the highest point on Stonecutters Island, was very vulnerable to both air attack and gunfire, albeit there were some alternative underground facilities. Therefore, in 1939 the focus of British intelligence in Asia moved to Singapore.²¹

II

Matters improved little during 1940 and 1941. The obvious inadequacies of SIS in Asia were a particularly sore point for the Commander in Chief Far East, Admiral Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, who felt that the newly appointed Chief of SIS in London, Sir Stuart Menzies, was deliberately neglecting Asia in favour of the more immediate needs of the war in Europe and the Middle East. On 6 January 1941 Brooke-Popham completed a tour of inspection which reviewed British intelligence organizations in Asia, a tour not unlike that undertaken by Wigglesworth three years before. Dismay at what he uncovered prompted him to fire off an immediate protest to the British Chiefs of Staff in London:

Weakest link undoubtedly is S.I.S. organisation in Far East. At present little or no reliance is placed upon S.I.S. information by any authorities here and little valuable information in fact appears to be obtained. I am satisfied that the identity of principal officer at Shanghai, Hong Kong and Singapore is known to many. Their chief subordinates are in general local amateurs with no training in intelligence duties nor adequate knowledge of military, naval, air or political affairs. Agents are chiefly uneducated Chinese and up

²¹ Wing Commander Wigglesworth (AI2), 'Notes on the tour of RAF and Combined Service Intelligence Organisations in the Far East', Part IV: Hong Kong, 30 June 1938, AIR 20/374, PRO.

till now in Thailand and Indo China reliance has been placed entirely upon French sources of information.

He added that while SIS had, several times, expressed the intention to send an officer out from London to review the situation, nothing had been done. He now considered that 'action is required at once' and he demanded the appointment of an overall regional head for the SIS organization in Asia 'with power to make changes in personnel without delay'.²²

London had long been familiar with the farcical nature of SIS provision in Asia and had chosen to do nothing about it. A senior representative from SIS in London was finally despatched to Singapore to undertake a review in May 1941. This representative was Geoffrey Denham, a businessman with extensive interests in Java. Denham and Brooke-Popham agreed that, over time, a regional director could remedy many of the problems, but they also worried about the complete lack of any SIS organization in Burma, which they presciently suggested 'will become a principle centre in war'. Brooke-Popham was impressed by Denham and persuaded London to allow him to stay on to become the first SIS regional director, noting that 'his business activities would provide good cover for his work'.²³ In future Denham would reside at Brooke-Popham's intelligence centre, the Far Eastern Combined Bureau, but would nevertheless remain 'responsible to "C"', 'C' being the acronym for the Chief of SIS in London, Sir Stuart Menzies.²⁴

The problems identified by Brooke-Popham could not be resolved quickly even though the need for better intelligence was clearly pressing. In August 1941 he was confronted with dramatic events in French Indochina. Japan already enjoyed bases in northern French Indochina, which she had forced the Vichy government there to concede during the previous year. Japan now extended her position to include a number of bases with airfields in the south of the country, within range of Malaya. Brooke-Popham ordered his intelligence officers to 'spare neither time, nor trouble, nor expense in obtaining up to date information about the state of preparedness of these

²² C. in C. FE to COS, 6 June 1941, WO 193/920, PRO.

²³ C. in C. FE to COS No. 13672, 17 June 1941, WO 193/920, PRO. See also (Hist) (DD), 'Dispatch on the Far East by Brooke-Popham', 1 June 1942, CAB 120/518, PRO. Denham was a director of Anglo-Dutch Plantations Ltd., a rubber concern in Java.

²⁴ WO to C. in C. FE No. 70866, 7 June 1941, WO 193/607, PRO.

aerodromes'. But little information was forthcoming.²⁵ Indeed, even in mid-1941, SIS continued to circulate reports which contained a great deal of material passed to them by the French, whose own service was not well regarded.²⁶ SIS in London even distributed French reports on Asia around Whitehall without bothering to translate them. Whitehall departments were not impressed and dismissed this sort of material as 'valueless'.²⁷

Denham's arrival was not entirely without effect and more adventurous programmes were gradually set in train. In the last months of 1941, SIS, along with British special operations personnel, did begin to develop relations with the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), despite the reservations of the colonial government in Malaya. The MCP supplied several Chinese agents who received wireless training to provide a stay-behind network which would report on the main Japanese lines of advance during an invasion. However, as Brooke-Popham himself observed, Denham could not create an elaborate network overnight and this, in practice, was what Denham was now asked to do.²⁸

Brooke-Popham's complaints need to be approached with caution, for while his specific observations about SIS were well founded, his general complaints about a lack of warning of the Japanese attack on Malaya are puzzling and at variance with the facts. British signals interception at Singapore was providing a stream of material on Japanese activities in the region, and from early 1941, Bletchley Park had begun to produce a great deal of high-grade Japanese diplomatic material. With access to this intercept material we might ask why Brooke-Popham was so concerned to secure improvements to the traditional human forms of intelligence gathering practised by SIS, and why he was so critical of SIS in his after-action report of 1942? There are at least two reasons for this.

The first answer lies in a fascinating document entitled 'Warning

²⁵ Brooke-Popham to FECB, 21 Aug. 1941, AIR 23/1865, PRO. See also (Hist) (DD), 'Dispatch on the Far East by Brooke-Popham', 1 June 1942, CAB 120/518, PRO.

²⁶ See, for example, MI6 Political Report No. 111, 'A Statement of Japanese Policy: French Information from Shanghai', WO 208/895, PRO.

²⁷ Steveni (MI6) to MI2c and MI3a, 17 April 1941, CX.37400/I/818 (untranslated), WO 208/1219A, PRO; Winterborn (MI2c) minute 28.12.40 on MI6 CX.37502/991, 21 Dec. 1940, *ibid*.

²⁸ These agents were controlled by Major Rosher of SIS in Singapore, R. Gough, *SOE Singapore, 1941-2* (London: William Kimber, 1985), pp.68-89.

of Attack by Japan' produced by the Far Eastern Combined Bureau at Singapore in December 1940. Completed a full year before this contingency actually confronted them, this lucid analytical paper reviewed the various types of intelligence indicators that might be expected to provide reliable warning of a Japanese attack. It weighed the dividends that were offered by every type of source, ranging from highly secret signals intelligence to openly available material culled from the daily press. Surprisingly, while the paper conceded that signals intelligence produced good information, they feared that, 'possibly under German influence', improved Japanese cypher security might suddenly render Singapore blind. They also feared that this material might be used as conduits of deception or 'bluffs' by the Japanese and so Singapore demanded old-fashioned visual confirmation of everything. Given that Britain had little long-range aerial reconnaissance capability in Asia this could only be provided through visual sightings by SIS agents of three main intelligence targets: troop and transport concentrations, unusual naval movements, and concentrations of shore-based aircraft. It was for this reason that the Far Eastern Combined Bureau echoed the express concerns of Brooke-Popham about the state of that SIS in Asia in 1940 or 1941.²⁹

But there was a second reason for the vigorous criticisms made by Brooke-Popham. Like so many of his operational staff, he was temperamentally disposed to believe that the Japanese simply would not dare attack Malaya while they were preoccupied in China. As a result, he was inclined to discount reports that suggested that his own command was the target of the obviously increasingly Japanese preparations in Southeast Asia. He was also inclined to discount intelligence estimations of the effectiveness of Japanese forces. After 1942, Brooke-Popham attempted to use the undoubted fact that British intelligence had been organizationally weak to distract from the fact that the Japanese preparations had been fairly transparent and as much as two weeks' firm warning of the impending attack on Malaya had been available to him. As other historians have noted, after the war official historians quickly identified this disingenuous aspect of Brooke-Popham's account, but their sensitive findings were not made public.³⁰ Above all, the extraordinary expansion of the scale

²⁹ FECB Intelligence Survey No. 1822, 'Warning of Attack by Japan', 9 Dec. 1940, WO 208/888, PRO.

³⁰ Ferris, '“Worthy of Some Better Enemy?”'.

of the Japanese intelligence and subversion effort in Southeast Asia in late 1941 had made Japan's own detailed intentions very clear to those prepared to listen.³¹

III

Following the fall of Singapore, SIS decamped to India. This move coincided with the arrival of Lieutenant Colonel Leo Steveni as the new Director of SIS in Asia.³² Steveni, who remained until March 1944, was a crucial factor in the depressed fortunes of SIS in this region for the rest of the war. In order to understand Steveni's contribution we must explore his background. Steveni was a career SIS officer and during the late 1920s and early 1930s he had served in Persia at Meshed where he was required to watch Soviet activity. After 1936 he returned to London but the focus of his work remained the Soviet Union. Much of his time was spent gathering information through timber-trading operations in the Baltic and he was 'intimate' with many Soviet officials, particularly those based at the Soviet Exports Department in London.³³ In 1939, at the time when there were growing worries about the Soviet threat to India, SIS also attached him to the War Staff at the India Office as a Soviet specialist. Here, in an organization that consisted of officers drawn from the Indian Army, he commented on appreciations and examined the possibility of agent penetrations into southern Russia with Afghan help.³⁴

From mid-1940 and through to early 1941, he remained in London but was now given SIS responsibility for military intelligence relating to Asia and he spent much of his time liaising with MI2c,

³¹ On warning of an invasion by Japan, see Ong Chit Chung, 'Operation Matador and the Outbreak of the War in the Far East', Ph.D., University of London, 1985, pp. 372-90; Antony Best, *Britain, Japan and Pearl Harbor* (London: Routledge, 1995). On Japanese clandestine activities, see Eric Robertson, *The Japanese File: Pre-War Japanese Penetration in World War Two* (Hong Kong: Heinemann Asia, 1979).

³² Steveni (SIS) to Baker, Ops/34, 17 March 1944, AIR 23/7679, PRO.

³³ Crombie (IO) to Collier (FO), 4 Oct. 1939, (PZ/6153), L/P&S/12/308, IOLR; Steveni memorandum, 'Recent Events in Eastern Europe (through Soviet eyes)', 26 Sept. 1939, (WS 1201), L/WS/1/99, IOLR. The Soviet Export Department which contained many of Steveni's long-term contacts was based at Melbourne House, Aldwych, London.

³⁴ Comments on the COS appreciation 'Russian Threat to India', 2 Oct. 1939, (WS 1201), L/WS/1/99, IOLR. This file is entitled 'Misc Reports Prepared by Major Steveni'.

the section of the Directorate of Military Intelligence at the War Office that dealt with Asian matters.³⁵ By June 1941 he had been promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and was clearly heading for more senior responsibilities within SIS. An experienced career officer with a comprehensive and current knowledge of Asia, he was the obvious candidate to succeed Denham as Asian regional director.³⁶ Meanwhile Denham returned to London and, in March 1943, was still kicking his heels looking for a suitable role at Broadway Buildings.³⁷

More or less contemporaneous with Steveni's arrival in mid-1942, SIS in Asia adopted the same cover-name employed by SIS at GHQ Middle East, namely the 'Inter-Service Liaison Department' (ISLD). For the rest of the war the terms 'SIS' and 'ISLD' were used interchangeably in Asia. Similarly SOE went by the local name of 'Force 136' in this part of the world, while the MI9 escape organization chose the name 'E Group'.³⁸ SIS had two main stations in India. Its principal station appears to have been Baroda House in New Delhi, which dealt with policy, staffing and administrative matters along with most of the correspondence with London. As the war developed SIS also grew a forward station at Belvedere House in Calcutta where it received most of its radio reports from the field and which was conveniently close to the headquarters of one of its main customers, General Slim's 14th Army at Barrackpore.³⁹

Given that Steveni had already worked closely with senior Indian Army officers on the War Staff of the India Office in London it was natural that, from mid-1942, SIS should have co-operated closely with the intelligence sections of GHQ India.⁴⁰ As a result, when

³⁵ Major Steveni (MI6), CX37065/1/186, to Ridsdale (MI2c), 12 Feb. 1941, WO 208/895, PRO.

³⁶ See, for example, Lt Colonel Steveni (MI6) to MI2c, CX.65400/349, 25 June 1941, WO 208/1900, PRO; Lt Colonel Steveni (MI6b) to MI2c, CX.37400/577-9, 1 Sept. 1941, WO 208/254, PRO; Lt Colonel Steveni (MI6b) to MI2c, CX.28037/666, 19 Oct. 1941, *ibid.*

³⁷ In early 1943 Denham was hoping to be made 'Inspector of our Australian organisation' in view of his good knowledge of Java. SIS Australia was then working into the Netherlands East Indies with Dutch co-operation. Entry for 19 March 1943, Wilkinson diary, 1/2, 2, Churchill College, Cambridge (hereafter CCC).

³⁸ The local cover-names for clandestine organizations proliferated throughout the war. For ease of comprehension the terms SIS and SOE have been retained throughout this essay.

³⁹ See, for example, Beddington (SIS), Baroda House, Delhi, to Jones (London) concerning allocation of additional temporary and local ranks to SIS personnel, 6 Jan. 1944, WO 203/6383, PRO.

⁴⁰ For example of GHQ-inspired operational intelligence gathering in Burma, see memorandum by Steveni (SIS) to Cawthorn (DMI GHQ India), 'Operation Buz-zard—No. 40', Ops/40, 26 Oct. 1943, AIR 23/7682, PRO.

Mountbatten's new South East Asia Command (SEAC) moved to Ceylon in early 1944, SIS was reluctant to leave its established home in India for the anonymous sea of huts that constituted his headquarters at Kandy on Ceylon. There were other reasons for Steveni's reluctance to move to Kandy. Steveni was not held in high regard by Mountbatten or SEAC, and from mid-1943 Broadway began a long and unproductive search for a replacement. SIS only shifted the balance of its headquarters activities to Kandy with the eventual arrival of a successor to Steveni, Brigadier P. Bowden-Smith, in mid-1944.⁴¹

In India, Steveni was continually hampered by a scarcity of transport and agents, factors which tended to compound the general mistake of tasking SIS with battle intelligence duties. From 1942, SIS and SOE in Asia were in continual competition for scarce air transport to allow the insertion of their agents and also to re-supply them. This reflected bitter parallel arguments over the allocation of aircraft that were under way in London and which eventually percolated up to the level of Churchill and the Cabinet Defence Committee.⁴² However, in Asia these problems were exacerbated by the fact that aircraft often found it impossible to locate a dropping zone by night over the jungle and many missions were therefore aborted, returning with their full complement of agents or stores. Nor would SIS and SOE share aircraft for missions in contiguous areas.⁴³

As in other theatres, all aircraft were in great demand for 'straight' military operations and both Mountbatten and the RAF were initially reluctant to divert them for special duties.⁴⁴ It was only in the Summer of 1943 that a special RAF unit, Flight 1576, was allocated to SOE and SIS for the purpose of agent insertion. Although the unit was small, Steveni and his newly appointed operations officer, Lieutenant Colonel Rankin, believed that the formation of this unit would open a new chapter in their operations.⁴⁵ This was far from being the case, for during 1942 and 1943 combined, SIS

⁴¹ Entries for 7 and 9 July 1943, Wilkinson diary, 1/2, 2, CCC.

⁴² See, for example, the acrimonious discussions between Churchill, Eden, Selborne and the COS at DO (43) 7th mtg., 2 Aug. 1943, AIR 8/1749, PRO.

⁴³ On the problems of RAF special duties during the war against Japan, see O'Brien, *The Moonlight War*; Air Vice Marshall Probert, *The Forgotten Air Force: A History of the RAF in the War Against Japan* (London: Brasseys, 1995).

⁴⁴ Mountbatten, writing to the COS in December 1943, welcomed the transfer of 9 battered Catalinas from West Africa for special duties, but stood firm against the use of Liberator bombers for this sort of work, SEACOS 50, 22 Dec. 1943, AIR 23/2132, PRO.

⁴⁵ Steveni (SIS) to Jonas (RAF), Ops/Q/41, 17 Aug. 1943, fol. 4A, AIR 23/7678, PRO. See also Lalaltol (SIS) to Jonas (RAF), Ops/A/28, 3 June 1943, fol. 1A, *ibid.*

dropped only seven parties of agents by aircraft, all of them into nearby Burma. There were several reasons for this. The new special duties flight initially consisted of a few Hudsons, an aircraft of limited range that could not reach areas beyond Western Burma. The RAF were also inclined to divert special duties aircraft for other purposes at the last minute, to the abiding fury of SIS. In December 1943 Steveni wrote to the RAF commander responsible, advancing the argument that 'as Intelligence must always precede Operations our claims for extra aircraft should be given pre-operational priority'. But all such arguments fell on deaf ears.⁴⁶

SIS were only granted limited access to the long-range Catalina flying boat in January 1944, while the long-range Liberator aircraft became available in March of the same year. SIS seized this double opportunity to mount its first airborne operation into Thailand, code-named Operation SUN, albeit the RAF report records laconically that the five agents 'were captured soon after landing'. Even after these longer-range aircraft came on stream, SIS continued to focus its airborne effort on providing operational intelligence for the war in Burma. During the first half of 1944, about 90% of its 33 airborne missions went to Burma, with only a handful of personnel despatched further afield into Thailand or Indochina.⁴⁷

Aircraft were not the only form of transport available. The alternative was transport via submarine and then inflatable boat. However, this was a hazardous method of launching an operation. By January 1945 a statistical survey of accounts about agents being captured revealed that 'in 90% of cases the hunt was started due to the discovery of a boat on the beach'.⁴⁸ Air transport by night over the jungle in appalling weather conditions was also hazardous and the numbers of agents lost in transit was surprisingly high.⁴⁹

Air transport was not the only resource problem faced by SIS. The growing number of clandestine organizations in Asia also competed for indigenous agents. The problem of finding high quality agents with the right local knowledge and background for operations into specific areas other than Burma was formidable.

⁴⁶ Steveni (SIS) to Jonas (RAF), Ops. A112, 23 Dec. 1943, fol. 21, AIR 23/7679, PRO.

⁴⁷ Coleman memorandum, 'Clandestine Air Operations: A Brief History of Operations in South East Asia, 1 June 1942-31 May 1945', AIR 23/1950, PRO.

⁴⁸ Minutes of P Division, 43rd mtg., 9 Jan. 1945, AIR 23/2137, PRO.

⁴⁹ See, for example, the letter concerning the loss of two special duties aircraft sent by Steveni (SIS) to Baker (RAF), Ops/34, 17 March 1944, AIR 23/7679, PRO.

By 1944 an 'exhaustive search in India and Ceylon for desirable prospects' was under way. But even when potential agents were found, their local knowledge was often sadly out of date. Eventually SIS, SOE and the equivalent American organization, the Office of Secret Services (OSS), decided to collaborate on an innovative scheme to solve the problem. The Colonel, Richard Heppner, Head of OSS in Mountbatten's SEAC, described this to his superiors in Washington:

We have, however, evolved a new technique which should prove more fruitful . . . What this amounts to is nothing less than piracy on the high seas off the coast and in the harbours of the East Indies. On each submarine mission undertaken, our conducting officers have the subsidiary task of boarding junks and country craft and capturing passengers and members of the crews. In one operation we gathered 16 Indonesians in our net. Of these at least five are potential agent material. Moreover the intelligence we have gotten from them through exhaustive interrogation has been, in some cases spectacular and I feel we are really beginning to pierce the veil of silence . . . We plan to expand this sort of activity.⁵⁰

The unfortunates who disappeared from junks in this manner found themselves interned in Ceylon at Mahara where there was a purpose-built camp which served as a 'holding tank' for potential agent material.⁵¹ Its size continued to grow, receiving over 100 prisoners in a few weeks during the Summer of 1944, and eventually being divided into Japanese and non-Japanese wings.⁵² Understandably, this new source of interrogation and recruitment for the clandestine services was controversial and SOE, one of its main customers, became so worried during July 1944 that it recommended closure. John Keswick, a senior SOE officer, insisted that 'the practice of taking these prisoners should be discontinued, in view of the political implications'.⁵³ But from the operational point of view Mahara was simply too valuable to be dispensed with, and instead its activities expanded. In 1944 these activities included experimental attempts by SOE at what they described as 'reconditioning' of Japanese

⁵⁰ He continued: 'With this sort of information it will be possible to land OGs at selected points with the mission of not only exfiltrating desirable people but also with the additional mission of liquidating others, such as Jap Divisional Commanders and the like.' Richard Heppner, Chief of OSS SEAC, to Donovan, 18 July 1944, File 510, Box 512, Entry 110, RG 226, USNA.

⁵¹ Deak memorandum, 'Mahara Examination Centre, Ceylon', 18 July 1945, File 2694, Box 159, Entry 154, RG 226, USNA.

⁵² D of I (SEAC)'s 8th mtg., 10 Aug. 1944, AIR 40/2443, PRO.

⁵³ D of I (SEAC)'s 7th mtg., 8 July 1944, *ibid.*

prisoners.⁵⁴ SIS seems to have secured a sizeable percentage of these agents while Mahara was in operation, fending off the competing claims of SOE, OSS and E Group.⁵⁵ Even so, Mahara could not meet the growing appetite of SIS for indigenous agents, so by March 1945 SIS had persuaded SEAC's coastal raiding organization, the Small Operations Group (which consisted largely of Marines), to ferry its personnel on operations 'to try snatches for bodies'. But this new practice proved too dangerous and SIS eventually decided that snatch operations should be halted.⁵⁶

From late 1943 it was Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander in South East Asia who presided over these activities. Mountbatten was not only keenly interested in intelligence, but was also a special operations enthusiast of a boyish sort. It followed from this that he gave considerable thought to the co-ordination of clandestine activities within South East Asia Command (SEAC). The priority of claims by SIS and other clandestine organizations for potential agents, aircraft and other resources were efficiently refereed within SEAC by Priorities Division or P Division. Given that SEAC boasted more than twelve clandestine organizations by 1944, some sort of co-ordinating mechanism was essential to prevent them cutting across each others wires. As a result, P Division grew in stature and authority, gradually exchanging the function of co-ordination for effective control. By mid-1944 the Head of P Division, the highly capable Captain G. A. Garnons-Williams RN, supported by an American Deputy, had effectively become Mountbatten's day-to-day clandestine organizations supremo.

IV

SIS would probably have been content to co-exist with SOE and other competing clandestine bodies, frequently refereed by Garnons-Williams and P Division, until the end of the war. Friction with paral-

⁵⁴ D of I (India) to D of I (SEAC), DMI/6937, 16 Aug. 1944, *ibid.* C.f. C. D. Laurie, 'The "Sauerkrauts"; German POWs as OSS Agents, 1944-5', *Prologue*, 26 (Spring 1994): 49-60.

⁵⁵ See, for example, the claims made for 3 Mahara detainees by Wing Commander Perkins of SIS recorded in minutes of P Division 50th mtg., 5 March 1945, AIR 23/2137, PRO.

⁵⁶ Remarks of Colonel Tollemache (SOG) and Major Ferguson (SIS) in minutes of P-Division, 51st mtg., 12 March 1945, AIR 23/2137, PRO.

lel organizations such as SOE was present in most theatres and was only to be expected. What SIS had not counted on was a forceful and dramatic takeover bid by an overt organization, the Headquarters of General Slim's 14th Army in Burma. At the outset of the war against Japan the function of SIS had initially been defined as intelligence in the 'strategic role' and for this reason the Army was initially happy to accept that, although 'subject to local co-ordination' SIS was nevertheless 'responsible directly to its own head office in London'.⁵⁷ However, in practice, as we have seen, Steveni allowed SIS in Asia to be quickly drawn into the task of gathering operational intelligence in the Japanese rear area in Burma, and even in the battle area itself. As a result, the 14th Army took a growing interest in its activities.

Slim had been complaining about the inadequacies of intelligence in Burma since the end of 1943, insisting that 'it was far from being as complete or accurate as in other theatres' and that he was offered almost no information about Japanese reserves.⁵⁸ His relations with SIS deteriorated further during October 1944 as SIS moved more of its headquarters activities to Mountbatten's SEAC HQ on Ceylon and had less contact with HQ 14th Army at Barrackpore. Perhaps this belated move was a deliberate attempt by SIS to achieve some distance, for Slim's 14th Army HQ was increasingly inclined to vet SIS plans, attempting to veto some operations and slimming down their personnel requirements wherever possible.⁵⁹ By November 1944 Slim was ready for a showdown. 'The Chief expressed himself as exceedingly dissatisfied with I [Intelligence]', developing these criticisms into a case for Army control over the allocation of tasks to SIS and a reorganization of intelligence gathering throughout Burma.⁶⁰

All this came to a head on 4 January 1945 during a highly charged conference on operational intelligence in SEAC, held at the 14th Army's rear area HQ at Barrackpore just outside Calcutta. Here, Slim's staff officers advanced a number of proposals so radical that they reverberated all the way to London. Slim's Chief of Staff, Major-General Walsh, opened the conference with a provocative suggestion. He remarked that the Americans operated one unified secret service

⁵⁷ Memorandum by Brigadier Walsh (CGS ALFSEA), 'Clandestine and Special Organisations in ALFSEA', Appendix B: ISLD, April 1945, fol. 88, WO 203/55, PRO.

⁵⁸ Slim, *Defeat Into Victory* (London: Cassel, 1956), pp. 191–2.

⁵⁹ BGS (I) to BGS (O), 23 Oct. 1944, WO 203/367, PRO.

⁶⁰ Deputy BGS (I) Main HQ to BGS GS (I), 17 Nov. 1944, *ibid.*

in Burma called OSS which 'was giving excellent service'. Why not amalgamate all the British secret services operating into Burma, including SIS and SOE, and then subordinate this British body to the better organized and more efficient American OSS? Walsh must have known privately that this idea was unacceptable to both Mountbatten and to his superiors in London, but he enjoyed making it all the same.

Garnons-Williams acted as spokesman for the various secret services in SEAC at this conference and he quietly rejected this as 'unsound'. But Slim's officers pressed home their attack on a new front. Brigadier Gwyn, Slim's senior intelligence officer, complained that all operational intelligence collected by both SIS and SOE had first to be collated and sifted by SIS in Delhi before it was belatedly passed on to 14th Army HQ. By this time it was usually stale. Gwyn insisted that he would rather have the intelligence delivered direct, albeit in its raw form. The 14th Army would rather do its own collation and analysis, cutting out SIS from this activity.

This was a valid point and Garnons-Williams now began to give some ground. He warned that they were now treading on matters of high policy that would have to be referred to Sir Stuart Menzies, the Chief of SIS in London. Nevertheless, he admitted that he had raised the central problem of SIS doing unsuitable tactical work in Burma in discussions with Menzies during a visit home in July 1944. Menzies had agreed that this was undesirable, expressing a wish to get SIS out of battle area work in Burma, leaving it to anyone who cared to fill the gap. But Slim's staff officers did not grasp the sensitivity of the ground upon which he was treading. Major-General Walsh took all this as an admission of defeat and retorted: 'There you are! why should not Force 136 [SOE] take over ISLD [SIS]'?

Walsh's iconoclastic suggestion was wholly serious. Other officers explained that, as the Burma campaign was entering its final stage there was less need for SOE to conduct sabotage and in practice SOE and its guerrilla bands were increasingly employed to conduct armed reconnaissance, fulfilling 'a strong arm intelligence role'. The inescapable facts were that, on the ground, SIS and SOE in Burma were now doing the same job. The Army came back to the example of the American OSS with one easily controlled organization, which was doing the work of more than twelve poorly co-ordinated British clandestine and semi-clandestine bodies in Burma.

It fell to Garnons-Williams to make constructive proposals that both accommodated the sensitive politics of rival secret service

organizations based in London and took full account of the situation on the ground in Burma. As a short-term measure all operational intelligence would now go direct to forward headquarters, including that of Slim's 14th Army, without any SIS collation or analysis. In future, P Division would allocate whatever clandestine service was best placed to collect intelligence in each area, regardless of its formal role. In the long-term, SEAC would seek to absorb all operational intelligence gathering under the control of one service in Burma. This was likely to be SOE who would also absorb local army reconnaissance groups like 'Z' Force and 'V' Force. Moreover, in Burma, operational intelligence, not sabotage, would now be SOE's first priority until Mountbatten told them otherwise.

The proposals put forward by Garnons-Williams were certainly radical. They suited Slim's 14th Army in Burma, but they cut across the accepted functional divisions between different secret services as agreed in London. Accordingly, Garnons-Williams warned that all this would have to be cleared a second time with Menzies in London 'as it involves British S.I.S. policy'.⁶¹ SIS had no more trouble from Slim and the 14th Army, for two months later the curious decision was taken to remove him as commander. Nevertheless SIS were now in a tight corner. From the start of the war they had taken a wrong turning and concentrated on operational intelligence in Burma, an area in which SOE had quickly overtaken them.⁶² Slim had articulated a wider problem that would not go away and his demands had acted as a catalyst. After Barrackpore, an increasingly confident SOE tried to establish control over all operational intelligence gathering by agents throughout Mountbatten's command.

V

The precise nature of the operational problems that had been plaguing SIS in Burma during 1944, and which allowed SOE to steal a march upon them, can be thrown into relief by examining the fate of an individual SIS party, Operation BARNOWL, launched in September 1944. This operation illustrates the typical problems confronted in Burma when operating independently and without the

⁶¹ Account of meeting held at Barrackpore 4.1.45, *ibid.*

⁶² While there is no evidence of a connection between this issue and Barrackpore it had caused irritation at a high level in London. On the sacking of Slim see Ronald Lewin, *Slim: The Standardbearer* (London: Leo Cooper, 1977), pp. 237-47.

assistance of the local resistance organizations. Operation BARN-OWL involved sending an SIS coast-watching party by submarine to Mergui, an island off the coast of southern Burma, from where they were to report on shipping and Japanese movements by radio. This part of the operation was successful, but they were soon embarrassed by an encounter with five of the local indigenous population whom they captured to maintain the security of their position. In the words of the report: 'They were presented with the alternative of bumping them off or having them taken away by aircraft.' The BARNOWL party explained their predicament by radio and senior SIS officers approached the RAF with a view to mounting some sort of extraction. The RAF were impressed by their arguments noting 'we should make every effort to save this ISLD [SIS] party from the extremely unpleasant duty of committing murder in cold blood' and agreed to send in a Catalina aircraft. They also noted the additional practical argument that these were 'five valuable prisoners' worthy of interrogation at the very least. But at this point radio contact with the party was lost. Attempts were made to conduct air reconnaissance but bad weather prevented any further progress. There is no further record regarding the fate of the BARNOWL party who were presumed captured or killed.⁶³

The major problem then was simply an operational one: SIS was at a significant disadvantage compared to SOE with its powerful resistance organizations on the ground. But this was exacerbated by administrative problems through 1943 and 1944. SIS Headquarters at Broadway in London knew that Leo Steveni left much to be desired as the regional head of SIS and Brigadier Beddington, one of the Deputy Directors of SIS in London who superintended Asian activities, had been engaged in an ineffective search for a replacement through much of 1943. The role was regarded as immensely unattractive. One possible candidate for the post, Colonel Gerald Wilkinson, having declined, then observed in his diary that this was 'an area where our organization [*sic*] is so ineffective, the obstacles so difficult and the future requirements so great . . . a vigorous new administration is what is required'. Wilkinson asked Brigadier Beddington why he did not go himself, but the Brigadier pleaded old age and ill-health. Instead, an ineffective 'compromise patchwork' of

⁶³ Letter of introduction for Commander Skyrme (SIS) from Air Vice Marshall Whitworth Jones (SEAC) to Air Marshall Sir Guy Garrod (ACSEA), 20 Sept. 1944, fol. 96, AIR 23/7678, PRO. See also 628 SD to Strategic Air Force (BAFSEA) 225 Grp, 3 Oct. 1944, *ibid*.

improved training was put in place and Stevani remained by default.⁶⁴

Broadway was only propelled into action by a complete collapse of Mountbatten's confidence in SIS leadership in April 1944. Stevani was now 'a complete laughing stock at the Supreme Commander's meetings'. Beddington himself had been sent out to review matters in India and Ceylon but made no better impression on Mountbatten. During one conversation towards the end of his visit, Mountbatten rounded on Beddington, confronted him with a litany of complaints and asked him bluntly: 'Are you a knave or a fool?'. Beddington had lamely replied that he must be a fool. Radical change was now unavoidable. Menzies decided that, in London, Beddington should no longer superintend Asian matters and this task was passed to Commander Gibbs. Stevani was removed but still no career SIS officer was willing to replace him 'in an area where everything remains to be done'. In the end, Menzies's choice fell upon someone from outside SIS, a cavalry officer called Brigadier P. Bowden-Smith. This officer, acquired through Menzies' antediluvian clubland selection system, was regarded as 'a nice chap and had a sound record', but as Colonel Wilkinson remarked, he 'does not know the first thing about our work and it is doubtful if he sees the crying need for complete revamping and energizing of the whole organization'. Accordingly, despite the arrival of this new SIS director in Asia, matters did not improve much during the latter part of 1944.⁶⁵

It was against this background of dire SIS operational and management problems that the struggle for control of intelligence collection within Mountbatten's SEAC accelerated as the war in Asia entered its final stages. By the Spring of 1945 Garnons-Williams decided that persistent problems required that the whole issue of intelligence collection be confronted again. On 16 April he wrote to Colin Mackenzie, the Head of SOE in Asia and also to Bowden-Smith, the new regional Head of SIS, calling for a meeting 'to iron the matter out'.

⁶⁴ Wilkinson observed that Beddington did not want to be far removed from the post-war opportunities of Europe when Germany was defeated, while Wilkinson himself was about to escape to Washington DC, entries for 7 and 9 July 1943, Wilkinson diary, 1/2, 1 CCC. See also Hughes memorandum, 'Colonel Wilkinson SIS', 15 Sept. 1943, File 446, Box 46, Entry 106, RG 226, UNSA.

⁶⁵ Record of a conversation with 'Little Bill' Stephenson of British Security Co-ordination of New York, entry for 4 May 1944, Wilkinson diary, 1/2, 2, CCC. Wilkinson observed privately in his diary: 'How stupid and worthless of Brigadier B. to get himself and our organisation in this useless mess'. See also conversation with Colonel Charles Ellis, entry for 4 April 1944, *ibid.*

He warned that if a sensible agreement could not be reached, then Mountbatten would intervene and settle the issue for them.

He also took the opportunity to offer his preliminary views. Intelligence gathering had suffered from initial confusion for a variety of reasons, the most important of which had been 'ill-direction' by previous regional directors of SIS. In SEAC intelligence was belatedly evolving into two main target groups: (i) long-range intelligence on political, economic and social targets; and (ii) operational military targets. This, he added, was how 'it should have been from the beginning'. For unavoidable practical reasons the second category, operational intelligence, was now dominated by SOE. But he also warned that the intrusion of SOE into wartime intelligence gathering should not be regarded as a precedent. 'It is important that we preserve a long range view in which the British Secret Intelligence Service shall (a) carry out its proper function and (b) have an eye to the future'. The time would come when military operations ceased and the methods used by SOE to gather intelligence would no longer be applicable. Therefore, despite all of its shortcomings, Garnons-Williams signalled that he was determined to defend SIS from further erosion. He warned:

The greatest danger in the past . . . has been interference by the Military and other Organisations with the British Secret Intelligence Service and continued steps are being taken, with the fullest support of the C.O.S. and S.A.C. [Mountbatten] himself to undo the harm which has been done in the last two or three years. It is not the concern of anybody what the British Secret Intelligence Service does and any inquisitiveness on the part of unauthorised persons tends to compromise one of our main British weapons.⁶⁶

But his exhortations for a dispassionate approach which would focus on future requirements fell on deaf ears.

On 19 April Mackenzie replied to Garnons-Williams and claimed that in reality the gathering of operational intelligence by human agents throughout SEAC was wholly dominated by SOE. In Europe, he explained, operational intelligence had largely been collected by civilian agents in the same way as long-term intelligence. But in SEAC, he insisted, 'conditions are entirely different', adding that there were three main reasons why this was so. First, many local inhabitants had neither the patriotic motive nor the level of education to provide adequate secret agents. Second, the alternative, Euro-

⁶⁶ Garnons-Williams (HPD) to Mackenzie (SOE) and Bowden-Smith (SIS), P-Div. M/4/A, 16 April 1945, HS 1/304, PRO.

pean agents, could not mingle unnoticed with local population, as they could in Europe. Third, a much larger proportion of the local population in which they had to move was 'neutral or even hostile'. He felt confident that any analysis would show that intelligence produced by oriental agents without European leadership 'has been relatively small'. In short, he argued that while in Europe it was desirable to keep SIS and SOE separate, 'this distinction is neither possible nor desirable in this theatre'. SOE should be the dominant intelligence collector in all of SEAC while SIS would be relegated to the 'collation, interpretation and distribution of intelligence'.⁶⁷

How convincing were Mackenzie's claims? Documents produced later that year by SOE provide some fairly precise answers (albeit they are hardly an impartial source). During the period April–August 1945 SOE claimed to have undertaken a careful statistical analysis of the source of intelligence reports issued by SIS concerning Malaya, Siam and French Indochina. In all cases SOE claimed to be providing over 70% of the material. There were no figures for Burma because intelligence was now passed straight to formations in the field, but SOE guesstimated that they were producing 90% of Burma material.⁶⁸ Nevertheless SOE conceded this was an analysis of quantity not quality. Moreover, there were some subjects in which SOE showed little interest. Typically, all intelligence from human agents on enemy technical and scientific developments such as radar and chemical warfare seem to have emanated from SIS rather than SOE sources.⁶⁹

Bowden-Smith responded by pointing out that Mackenzie's 'whole argument' was based on the contention that the achievements of oriental agents were relatively small. This, he flatly stated, 'is not true'. He also insisted that a European could still operate in charge of a small party behind Japanese lines, unattached to any guerrilla band. This, he conceded, was difficult 'but not impossible'. Nor did he accept Mackenzie's ever-expanding definition of operational intelligence which seemed to include all things military whether they

⁶⁷ Mackenzie (SOE) to Garnons-Williams (HPD) G/425/3217, 19 April 1945, HS 1/304, PRO. Mackenzie's superiors in Baker Street were aware of his attempts at aggrandizement and on 21 April he warned them that Bowden-Smith had instructions from his own superiors at Broadway Buildings 'which practically prohibits their collaboration with us on our terms or any sensible terms', to A.D. Personal from B/B 100, No. 256, 21 April 1945, *ibid.*

⁶⁸ Memorandum, 'Summary of I.S.L.D. Reports', 8 Sept. 1945, HS 1/210, PRO.

⁶⁹ See, for example, the report on a chemical warfare factory in Thailand at CX.37200/65/7859, 25 July 1945 to MI6b, WO 208/2238, PRO.

were inside or outside the battle area. Instead he insisted that, in enemy rear areas, troop movements and order of battle information was best acquired by single static SIS agents. He was willing to attach SIS officers to some SOE parties. Nevertheless, he warned that this 'should not be regarded as the only way' of gathering intelligence.⁷⁰

SIS offered some figures in support of their contentions which focused on the independent assessment of their intelligence by the Services. Over a two-year period to the end of August 1944 the Services had assessed 3,233 SIS reports as either 'of value' or 'of considerable value'. Without extensive research they could not give a precise figure on the proportion of these results obtained from oriental agents penetrating deep into occupied territory without the direction of European officers in the field. But their conservative estimate was a proportion of 75%. They also offered the concrete examples of their work in eastern Burma and southern Thailand prior to March 1944, when these areas were out of range of photographic reconnaissance. Oriental agents working for SIS had also stolen invaluable documents from Japanese naval vessels. Nevertheless, SIS figures deliberately ignored the period after August 1944, which had witnessed 'the rapid growth' of SOE parties in the field.⁷¹

SIS and SOE selected different criteria and different time-periods in order to present the best possible figures and there is little point in comparing them. However, what could not be disputed was that by the end of the war SOE had grown much bigger than SIS and the presence of its resistance forces in Japanese-occupied Asia was almost ubiquitous. This was reflected in their authorized staff levels, for in January 1945 the Joint Intelligence Committee reported that in contrast with SOE's permitted Asian ceiling of 1250 men, SIS was permitted only 175. The actual figures for establishment also reveal an even starker contrast, for on 1 December 1944 numbers for SOE personnel were 1122, while SIS could muster only 86 personnel in Asia.⁷²

At the end of April, having received a variety of submissions, Garnons-Williams offered his final judgement. Demonstrating his own considerable capabilities, it was Garnons-Williams, not Bowden-Smith, who advanced the most persuasive case for pro-

⁷⁰ Bowden-Smith (SIS) to Garnons-Williams (HPD) ISLD/266, 25 April 1945, HS 1/304, PRO.

⁷¹ Appendix 'I.S.L.D. Intelligence Analysis', 24 April 1945, *ibid.*

⁷² JIC (45) 17, 'Allocation of Personnel with Knowledge of Far Eastern Languages', 14 Jan. 1945, WO 220/52, PRO.

pecting SIS. He began tactfully by reviewing the past and blaming some previous problems on the underfunding of the inter-war years. He also observed that while the personnel of clandestine services always seemed to display the characteristics of 'jealousy' and 'scoop mindedness', nevertheless the activities of the two services were, in his mind, more complementary than most people recognized.

Turning to the present and the future, he chose first to remind them of the inherent and long-standing principle that SIS was 'not amenable to control by anyone except the British Prime Minister'. He then explained that his judgement was driven by the fact that the end of the war was now in sight. 'The danger we are faced with' he warned, is of the large SOE organization 'upsetting the small Service of S.I.S., which by long-range standards is infinitely the most important'. They needed to look to the future when SIS would return to its peacetime role of gathering long-range political, social and economic intelligence, 'its true role'. Accordingly, he suggested that all wartime agent work directed at military targets be handed to SOE or to the American OSS, allowing SIS to focus on the future.

This radical proposal was buttressed by two further factors. Firstly, SIS would have its work cut out adjusting to peacetime operations. He observed caustically that 'no single member of ISLD (SIS) in this Theatre will be of the slightest use after the war because he is completely and absolutely "blown" already and the organisation will have to be built anew'. Secondly, and more importantly, there was the crucial but unspoken factor of signals intelligence 'which fortunately is unknown to all except 5 officers' in SEAC. Garnons-Williams observed that, if one took into account that SIS London was also in general control of signals intelligence, then agents accounted for less than 8% of the whole contribution that SIS made. The future clearly belonged to this crucial and extremely secret source. Nothing should be allowed to damage or interfere with the organization that controlled it, however inept the direction of its human activities might have been during the war in Burma.⁷³

SIS did not like this decision, which gave SOE control of wartime intelligence from agents in SEAC. Nevertheless, in areas where SOE

⁷³ Garnons-Williams (HPD) to Mackenzie (SOE) and Bowden-Smith (SIS), P-Div. P/1/A, 28 April 1945, HS 1/304, PRO. For examples of SIS control of signals intelligence see, for example, S. G. Menzies, Chairman of the 'Y' Board, to Secretary of

primacy was accepted, such as Malaya, relations between Bowden-Smith and Mackenzie now quickly improved. As early as 11 May 1945, in a new round of discussions, Bowden-Smith freely conceded that much of his activities in the Malaya area 'could not be described as S.I.S. as they were concerned in the collection of operational intelligence'. Moreover, in Malaya, the bulk of information clearly came from the communist guerrilla forces through SOE channels. With the caveat that SIS should be free to develop its own separate Koumintang network in Malaya, they reached a detailed agreement whereby all SOE parties would have single SIS officers attached to them.⁷⁴ In future only SOE would deal directly with the communist guerrillas. All operational and strategic intelligence would be passed over the SIS link to their station in Calcutta, with the proviso that they would have to indicate whether SOE agreed with the view expressed.⁷⁵ The agreement between SIS and SOE concerning Malaya, although complex, was an effective one, which recognized the importance of preserving their key asset, good relations with the guerrillas on the ground.

The recommendations of Garnons-Williams were sensible, but arguably he had little choice, given the overwhelming SOE presence in Japanese-occupied territories. SOE dominance extended even to the more complex situation that obtained in French Indochina. By May 1945 Colin Mackenzie's SOE was confirming its *de facto* control of all the French secret services in Asia. This control extended not only to the French equivalent of SOE, the sabotage body *Service d'Action* (SA), but also the French intelligence body, *Service de Renseignements* (SR) who were the equivalent to SIS. SOE enjoyed these close relations with SR for historical reasons. During 1942 and 1943 the main SR centre in Asia had been the French Military Mission Headquarters in China under General Pechkoff. SOE had developed 'informal' contacts there at a time when SIS 'were forbidden by their London office to have any contact with General Pechkoff'. Mackenzie reached an agreement with Pechkoff whereby he secured 100 per cent co-operation from both SA and SR in return for an SOE promise to inform the French of all their activities in outline. SIS could not

State for India, 16 May 1942, enclosing 'Reorganization of the "Y" Services in India and Ceylon', Broadway SW1, 7 May 1942 (WS 15136), L/WS/1/897, IOLR.

⁷⁴ Meeting on Co-ordination of Clandestine Operations in South East Asia between Mackenzie, Bowden-Smith and Garnons-Williams, 10 May 1945, HS 1/103, PRO.

⁷⁵ Minutes of a meeting held at HQ Force 136, 24 April 1945, HS 1/103, PRO.

persuade their London office to sanction a similar agreement. During 1944, as SR expanded its operations, it turned to SOE for its logistical support. In December 1944 Mackenzie wrote to Commander Gibbs of SIS, asking whether he would consider a closer working relationship with SR, who were prepared to report to the SIS station in Calcutta. But Gibbs was unable to obtain a clear directive and both SA and SR personnel arriving in India continued to be sponsored by SOE.

Now, in the early Summer of 1945, Mackenzie asked SEAC for a ruling that formalized SOE's already dominant position. He argued persuasively that, given the close integration of French SA and SR activities, it would be 'simpler and more effective' for all French organizations to be sponsored by one British organization. More importantly, Mackenzie insisted that SIS were not in a position to offer SR the required radio provision in Indochina and he warned that if 'SR find that their demands are not met, they will inevitably turn to the Americans'. This latter point was unanswerable.⁷⁶

The new SEAC machinery for the control of the French clandestine services, agreed in May 1945, reflected the predominance of SOE.⁷⁷ All French operations into Indochina would be planned collectively to avoid any crossed wires. It was also agreed that not only in SR operations but also in SA operations 'more stress should be laid on intelligence and reconnaissance'. Yet while intelligence had become the central concern of all these organizations, and while Indochina could hardly be considered a 'battle area', nevertheless it was Mackenzie of SOE who chaired joint meetings between the four services, including SIS. Detailed planning of both SA and SR operations was handled by SOE and it was Mackenzie who dictated SR priorities and instructed SR on the appropriate size of groups to be inserted for intelligence work.⁷⁸ Mackenzie also extracted from the

⁷⁶ Memorandum from Mackenzie (SOE) to Head of P Division, 'Subject: S.R.', 13 April 1945, HS 1/80, PRO. This document has been sanitized before release by the removal of one of its thirteen paragraphs.

⁷⁷ Minutes of a meeting on SA and SR plans and commitments held with Force 136 and ISLD at HQ Force 136, 15 May 1945, File G425/3499, Quai d'Orsay, Paris. I am indebted to John W. Young for permitting me to see a copy of this document.

⁷⁸ Mackenzie informed SR that its initial plan to insert groups of six agents was wrong and smaller groups were more appropriate for intelligence gathering, minutes of a meeting held at Kandy chaired by Mackenzie, 19 April 1945, to discuss SA and SR plans, File G 123, *ibid.* I am indebted to John W. Young for permitting me to see a copy of this document.

French a categorical assurance from them that they would not put a clandestine station of any sort into China.⁷⁹

That these arguments were arrived at locally underlines the fact that SOE and SIS in London had no interest in resolving such disputes peacefully. In May 1945, Esler Dening, Mountbatten's Chief Political Adviser, found it necessary to complain to the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee about the attitude of senior London-based staff officers. Colonel Taylor of SOE and Commander Gibbs of SIS had recently been to SEAC, but they had refused to co-operate and 'one rather despairs of them working together at all'. Their presence had undermined recent local agreements. Dening offered Thailand as a classic example of somewhere they were now supposed to work on 'a fifty-fifty basis'. But SIS claimed that SOE had never passed anything to them and refused to acquaint them with some of their missions in the country. Dening was ignorant of the general state of impasse that existed in Whitehall regarding SOE-SIS relations, a situation to which even Churchill had long resigned himself.⁸⁰

Nevertheless, the experience of SIS officers working into Thailand confirmed that they had little choice but to throw in their lot with SOE. As late as July 1945, SIS was still trying to mount its own independent clandestine operations into this country, but without success. At this point SOE already had fourteen different groups operating under the auspices of the Thai resistance organization including Brigadier Jaques, who was regarded as Mountbatten's personal representative in the country. The resistance were greatly confused by the arrival of parties 'of a second British organization' and this was creating suspicion of British intentions at a time when Mountbatten was sensitive about the resistance in this country.

SIS had recently put three parties of Chinese agents into Thailand, two with the active co-operation of the resistance and a third independently. The latter 'were completely compromised' within two days. The lesson was clear. The officer in charge of Thai operations conceded that SIS 'cannot establish a network with Siamese agents without help of resistance movement' adding that the chance of survival of Chinese parties infiltrated by independent clandestine means 'is extremely remote'. Instead, he suggested putting in more trained

⁷⁹ Minutes of a meeting held at ISLD on 8 Aug. 1945 between DGER, Force 136 and ISLD, HS 1/95, PRO.

⁸⁰ Dening (CPA) to Cavendish-Bentinck (JIC) No. 1519, 11 May 1945, WO 203/5625, PRO.

SIS intelligence observers to work with SOE to 'improve both quality and volume of the intelligence emanating from the resistance movement'. In short, even in Thailand, hundreds of miles beyond the battle area, SIS increasingly found it necessary to work with SOE networks.⁸¹

VI

Most SIS resources in Asia were concentrated in SEAC under Mountbatten. However, SIS was also active in the China Theatre and in MacArthur's South West Pacific Area and here the experience of SIS was exactly the reverse of that in SEAC. In China, Chiang Kai-shek was conducting little more than a phoney war with the Japanese and there was only limited fighting. SIS was therefore able to concentrate on long-term political and economic reporting which reflected their traditional role. Moreover, in late 1943, when Mountbatten arrived to take up command of the newly created SEAC area, he secured the personal agreement of Chiang Kai-shek 'to SIS operating freely in China, especially in coastal areas'. In practice the senior SIS representative in China, Lieutenant Colonel Gordon Harmon, based in Chungking, did meet some bureaucratic obstruction.⁸² Nevertheless, SIS developed fast and by the end of December 1943 SIS operated five radio stations in China with permission to open three more. Throughout China, SIS took the cover title of the 'General Liaison Office'.⁸³

Nor were SIS overshadowed by SOE in China. In September 1944 the JIC in London decided that all intelligence gathering in China, other than that relating specifically to prisoner escape work, would come under SIS. SOE and the proliferating numbers of other British clandestine organizations were cut out of the picture and the tough Military Attaché in Chungking, Major-General Gordon Grimdsdale, was given the task of enforcing this settlement.⁸⁴ The only serious bureaucratic problem confronted by all British and French services in China, and indeed by the American OSS, was deliberate obstruc-

⁸¹ SIS Calcutta to London No. 263, 12 July 1945, WO 203/4472, PRO.

⁸² Gage (Chungking) to Dening (SEAC), 10 Nov. 1943, WO 203/5606, PRO.

⁸³ Steveni (SIS) to Jonas (RAF), Ops. A112, 23 Dec. 1943, fol. 21, AIR 23/7679, PRO. See also R28-45, 'British Intelligence in China', 16 Jan. 1945, File 1573, Box 496, Entry 190, RG 226, USNA.

⁸⁴ JIC to SACSEA No. 92601 (MI17) 10 Nov. 1944, WO 203/367, PRO.

tion by an eccentric American naval intelligence organization, known as Navy Group China, headed by Commander Miles. During late 1944, Menzies in London co-operated with other services in an attempt to achieve what he described as 'the complete removal of MILES and his organisation'. But their combined efforts failed to remove the troublesome Miles and Navy Group China from the China Theatre.⁸⁵ Navy Group did not noticeably hamper the activities of SIS in China. Even from the limited amount of material currently open to public inspection it is clear that SIS in China was providing high quality political intelligence. During 1945 SIS was able to give a precise picture of the delicate negotiations between the Chinese Communist delegation in Chungking, Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists and the American Ambassador, the irascible General Hurley. SIS was clear that these talks had ended in failure long before this became publicly apparent and was even able to summarize the text of letters sent by Chou En-lai back to the Communist headquarters in Yunan, confirming this.⁸⁶ SIS were also clear that this would not affect the continued Communist struggle against the Japanese in Communist-held areas. SIS followed in detail the attitude of the Communists to the United Nations conference at San Francisco in 1945, to which they had been permitted to send a delegate.⁸⁷ The reason for this clear picture was simply that SIS sources included Chou En-lai himself who was 'in close personal touch' with the SIS representative in Chungking, as were military representatives in the Communist delegation.⁸⁸

Similar observations could be made about SIS in MacArthur's South West Pacific Area where it was gathering operational military intelligence under the auspices of its local manifestation, Secret Intelligence Australia (SIA). But SIS was also engaged in gathering political intelligence. Here, at Churchill's specific request, SIS had attached Colonel Gerald Wilkinson to MacArthur's staff. Having served in New York earlier in the war, Wilkinson was well acquainted with the American political scene. His main task was to watch developments that might have an impact on British long-term interests.

⁸⁵ To P. from C.S.S. himself, No. 828, 14 Nov. 1944, WO 203/6451; Mountbatten to Wedemeyer 'eyes alone' (draft) presumed Nov. 1944, *ibid.*

⁸⁶ MI6 Political Report No. 15 to FO, 8 April 1945, WO 208/474, PRO; see also MI6 Political Report No. 13 to FO, 3 April 1945, *ibid.*

⁸⁷ MI6 Political Report (CX 28100) 'Chinese Economic Policy', 3 July 1945, WO 208/474, PRO.

⁸⁸ MI6 Political Report No. 13 to FO, 3 April 1945, WO 208/474, PRO.

He was regularly called back to London where he had private meetings with Churchill and reported on such subjects as MacArthur's presidential ambitions and his likely prospects for success. In common with SIS in the United States he was also required to watch those who wished to overturn the agreed Anglo-American strategy of 'Germany First'. Characteristically, when Wilkinson was in London, the invitations to visit No. 10 often came unexpectedly by telephone after midnight.⁸⁹

VII

The emphasis that Garnons-Williams had placed on Britain's long-term post-war requirements in Asia also sat comfortably with the general reorganization of British secret services at the end of the war, albeit this was probably accidental. As the end of the war approached, speculation began to mount concerning the possible future shape of the British intelligence community. Would London allow both SOE and SIS to survive into the post-war period? If not, who would predominate? As early as 1943, William Stephenson, the senior SIS representative in the United States had offered the opinion that: 'S.I.S. is old and rather obsolete compared with S.O.E. and that S.O.E. is likely to survive after the war because of its younger and abler organisation; that it may in fact, alternatively take over S.I.S.'. ⁹⁰ But in reality, during December 1945 and January 1946 exactly the opposite occurred. In London the decision was taken to retain SIS and disband most of SOE. SIS then absorbed a small remnant of SOE as its Special Operations and Political Action Section. This is not the place to recount the complex political manoeuvring in London that led to this decision, but Robert Cecil captured its essence when he remarked: 'SOE was liquidated with almost indecent haste. If relations with SIS had been more cordial, one first-class organization could have been created out of the best of two elements but the chance was missed'. ⁹¹

As usual, rules established in London did not always apply in Asia. Here Mountbatten contrived to retain 549 SOE personnel (about

⁸⁹ 'Interview with Prime Minister', entry for 15 March 1943, Wilkinson Diary, 1/2, 2, CCC. Sir Charles Portal (CAS) was also present. See also entry for 12 May 1943, *ibid.*

⁹⁰ Entry for 24 Feb. 1943, 1/2, 2, Wilkinson diary, CCC.

⁹¹ R. Cecil, 'C's War', *Intelligence and National Security*, 1, 2 (April 1986): 82.

half his wartime strength) as late as March 1946 and some SOE personnel were still operating in 1947. Mountbatten made a strong case for slowing the disbandment of SOE in SEAC, based on the unstable post-war conditions prevailing in Burma, Malaya, Indochina and Indonesia. In all these countries sporadic fighting was still in progress beyond September 1945. Nevertheless, these numbers are startling when we consider that, by comparison, SIS never had more than 100 staff in the region at any point during the war. SOE post-war duties included disarming and controlling guerrillas in Malaya, assisting the French secret services against the Viet Minh in Indochina, augmenting a crucial intelligence screen in volatile areas of Thailand and Indonesia and continuing SOE's wartime currency operations in China.⁹² In the Autumn of 1945, aware that SOE was being quickly liquidated elsewhere, Mountbatten adopted the local name Allied Land Forces Para-Military Operations or 'PMO' for his remaining SOE organization. In February 1946 Mountbatten was instructed that Para-Military Operations must be renamed Special Operations in order to reflect new SIS terminology and control in London. But in Asia these remained essentially SOE parties and the required change was not implemented.⁹³

The large PMO organization was less important in the Netherlands East Indies (subsequently Indonesia). This area had previously been under the control of MacArthur and the South West Pacific Area. But at the end of the war Mountbatten's area was massively expanded and this territory suddenly fell under his control. Thus in October 1945, Mountbatten despatched a representative of P Division, Group Captain Cliff, to see General Blamey in Australia to investigate what sort of preliminary intelligence screen was available in this area. SIS had enjoyed a rather successful war in Australia, re-titling their local organization Secret Intelligence Australia or SIA. Initially headed by an Australian, Colonel Roy Kendall, and based in Melbourne and Brisbane, they integrated much more successfully than the American OSS, whom MacArthur would not allow into the theatre.⁹⁴

⁹² R. J. Aldrich, 'Unquiet in Death: The Post-war Survival of the Special Operations Executive', in A. Gorst, L. Johnman and W. S. Lucas (eds), *Contemporary British History: Politics and the Limits of Policy* (London: Pinter, 1991), pp. 201–2.

⁹³ SACSEA to WO, 9 Feb. 1946, WO 203/4943, PRO.

⁹⁴ Wilkinson to Dewing, 15 Feb. 1943, 1/4, Wilkinson papers, CCC. By September 1945 the role of Head of SIA had passed to Squadron Leader S. L. Britain. On this see Reports of General Headquarters, Far Eastern Command, Military

But by September 1945 plans had been drawn up for the rapid liquidation of all clandestine service groups operating in SWPA, including SIA. Cliff organized a conference with the Australians to explain why this decision should be reversed. Mountbatten urgently needed an intelligence screen to assist with his future occupational role in troublesome places like the Netherlands East Indies and a postponement of SIA liquidation thereby was obtained. Instead, fifty-two Australian clandestine personnel remained in Borneo until they could be replaced by SEAC clandestine groups. It was also agreed that Wing Commander Pitt-Hardacre would lead a party of thirteen SIA personnel (a mixture of British and New Zealanders) attached to a party from the Dutch intelligence organization NEFIS, and that they would establish a joint station at Batavia. There were already four other SIA parties in Java and a further one in Batavia. Before Cliff departed he was given a prescient warning by the SIA station in Brisbane that a civil war was likely between Soekarno and the Dutch as soon as the interlude of British administration appeared to be drawing to a close.⁹⁵

All these efforts amounted to the redirection of wartime operational parties. However, by mid-1945 SIS were also following the advice of Garnons-Williams and deploying more experienced officers in the more traditional role of political intelligence gathering. The best example of this is the work of Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Trevor-Wilson, who had previously served with SIS counter-intelligence at Algiers.⁹⁶ Because of his familiarity with the French he was now despatched to Chinese-occupied northern French Indochina where he liaised on a weekly basis with Ho Chi Minh. Trevor-Wilson was highly capable and well suited to this delicate task. Historians sifting back through the morass of reports generated by the many different agencies during this complex period in the history of Indochina have singled out Trevor-Wilson's reports as the most perceptive and objective. He was able to follow the differences between the dominant Viet Minh and the other competing national-

Intelligence Section, General Staff (Vol. 4 Operations of AIB), Box 42, Unit Diaries, Histories and Reports, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri.

⁹⁵ Report of Special Mission to General Blamey, C. in C. AMF, for discussion into the future of SIA in Australia, NEFIS Organization in NEI, by G/Cpt W. H. Cliff, SEACU/G/P Div, 9 Oct. 1945, HS 1/303, PRO.

⁹⁶ For Trevor-Wilson's unique employment in North Africa prior to the Second World War, see Desmond Bristow, *A Game of Moles* (London: Little and Brown and Company, 1993), pp. 18–19.

ist parties such as the Dong Minh Hoi. More importantly, he quickly discerned the contrast between the north, where the population was already having the unfortunate experience of Viet Minh rule, and the South, where they were as yet idealized. In the north, he reported: 'The administration was completely disorganised . . . the Treasury has been completely emptied . . . Government has been carried on by terrorist tactics, e.g. arbitrary arrest, suppression of free press etc.' Nevertheless, he noted, there was no evidence of any contact with Moscow.

Trevor-Wilson remained in Hanoi well into 1946 forming a close relationship with Ho Chi Minh. Remarkably, Ho Chi Minh ordered his police to assist Trevor-Wilson in arresting Major-General A. C. Chatterjee, Deputy Commander of the Indian National Army who was then residing in Hanoi, who was hoping eventually to flee to China or Russia. Trevor-Wilson then accompanied Ho Chi Minh to Paris during his abortive negotiations with the French during 1946, returning to take the official title of British Consul in Hanoi. He remained for several years and enjoyed the confidence of both the Viet Minh and the French.⁹⁷

Beyond 1946, as British occupational activities were wound down, SIS representation in Southeast Asia was increasingly associated with the presence of a Foreign Office Special Commissioner for the region in the form of Lord Killearn. The co-ordination of political intelligence in the region was a function allocated to him and his staff at Singapore and the senior SIS representative there was attached to his office in the Cathay Building at Singapore.⁹⁸ The JIC Far East, initially under P. S. Scrivner, was also associated with the Special Commissioner machinery and was co-located in the same building.⁹⁹ Although Hong Kong quickly became the 'front line' for intelligence gathering in Asia, Singapore remained the head office. Here new figures such as James Fulton and Maurice Oldfield established a modern peacetime structure for SIS in Asia.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Report by Trevor-Wilson, 28 Dec. 1945, WO 203/5563, PRO, quoted in P. M. Dunn, *The First Vietnam War* (London: Hurst, 1985), pp. 328, 351–2.

⁹⁸ COS (46) 155, 'SEAC: Re-organisation of HQ', 20 June 1946, AIR 20/2665, PRO. On Killearn see Tilman Remme, *Britain and Regional Cooperation in South East Asia, 1945–49* (London: Routledge, 1994).

⁹⁹ Scrivner (JIC Far East) to Foulds (Manila), 4/42/48, 1 May 1948, FO 964/44, PRO.

¹⁰⁰ Some wartime officers, such as Trevor-Wilson, were retained on a part-time basis into the 1960s. Interview with former British special forces officer.

VIII

The nature of the British Secret Intelligence Service in Asia before and during the Second World War is best summed up by Colonel Edmund Taylor, the Deputy Head of P Division, who remarked that 'SIS in that part of the world is a rather sleepy organisation'.¹⁰¹ It had been rendered drowsy by chronic under-resourcing in the period prior to 1940 of a sort that was even worse than that afflicting the Europe branches of the service. During 1940 and 1941 the attention of SIS headquarters in London was elsewhere and there was little improvement. From 1942 it deteriorated yet further because its new Director, who was too close to GHQ India, allowed it to be used for an unsuitable purpose. Thus by 1945, surrounded by unsatisfied customers, and eclipsed by a vigorous SOE and by signals intelligence, SIS in Asia seemed on the verge of being put to sleep forever. It was only saved in the short-term by the foresight of P Division and then by the turn of events in London at the end of the war.¹⁰²

The problems of SIS in Asia can be explained in two different ways. Firstly, in Asia there were clearly special factors at both the operational and administrative level that debilitated SIS prior to 1945. But we can also observe a second type of problem that was generic to most secret services working in most wartime theatres. SIS, like most centrally-controlled services, encountered problems in making the transition from peace to war. Wartime Asia was now dominated by theatres within which commanders were anxious to subordinate everything to their control. SIS suffered partly because it allowed itself to be subordinated to GHQ India at an early stage of the war and Slim wished to take this process to its logical conclusion. Yet if SIS had ignored regional structures they would have risked being further marginalized by other clandestine organizations more receptive to the requirements of commanders. Similar problems recurred in the context of the

¹⁰¹ Debrief of Edmund S. Taylor (OSS SEAC) by Read, 21 Sept. 1944, Donovan Papers, US Army War College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

¹⁰² By 1945 many had become accustomed to the luxury of signals intelligence which arrived in 'real time'. By contrast, even when SIS secured valuable agent intelligence from Japanese occupied countries, it was often regarded as too tardy to be reliable. In August 1945 Captain Eric Northcott of SIS in London forwarded a recent report on railway destruction in Malaya to MI2, who noted that this material was nearly a month old, adding that if this material had been current it would be of real importance. But now it needed further confirmation. Northcott (MI6b) to MI2, CX 37400/63/331, 3 Aug. 1944 (information dated 18 July 1945), and minute by Mitchell of MI2, 14 Aug. 1945, WO 208/1539, PRO.

Korean War, resulting in furious exchanges between MacArthur and centralized American agencies in Washington DC.¹⁰³

Moreover, regulations concerning security which were laid down by SIS Headquarters in London prevented a weak SIS from developing the sort of collaborative relationship with SOE, or the American OSS or with the various French services that could have helped to mask their own inadequacy in Asia. SIS refused to operate under joint Anglo-American direction and was much more insistent than SOE on subordinating all its activities directly to 'head office' in London. This problem was widespread. Typically, in January 1945, Eisenhower's SHAEF Command in Europe had proposed subordinating SIS operations to a joint Anglo-American clandestine planning committee. However, SIS replied that 'it would not be practicable for SIS to operate under an Anglo-American command. SIS insisted that whatever unit carried out their operations should be entirely under British command for policy.' A similar line was taken up by SIS in the Middle East.¹⁰⁴

It is only now that one of the underlying reasons for this stand-offishness is becoming clear. The tasks of SIS included distributing highly sensitive signals intelligence decrypts, including the traffic of neutral and even allied countries. The British were breaking some American diplomatic communications at least until December 1941 and Bletchley Park took a great interest in the communications of Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist government throughout the war. They were also routinely breaking Free French traffic through the war and examples include exchanges between French diplomats in the Middle East and de Gaulle in Paris as late as May 1945.¹⁰⁵ This subject is alluded to in retrospective reports prepared at the end of the war which recorded: 'What we called "*THE ALLIES MAY NOT SEE*" were a number of CX's containing reports of our having which "C" did not wish our Allies to become aware. These we circulated

¹⁰³ See, for example, JCS 1969/33, 'Command Relationship of CINCFE with CIA After Cease Fire and Armistice in Korea', 13 Oct. 1952, 385 (6-446) Sec. 49 SC Files, RG 218, USNA.

¹⁰⁴ Payne (SIS) addressing a meeting held at the Air Ministry, 4 Jan. 1945, AIR 20/7968, PRO.

¹⁰⁵ This material released into series HW1 at the PRO is discussed in Christopher Andrew, 'The Making of the Anglo-American SIGINT Alliance', in Hayden B. Peake and Samuel Halpern (eds), *In the Name of Intelligence* (Washington DC: NIBC Press, 1994), pp. 95-109. See also the essay by Katherine Brown, 'Intelligence and the Decision to Collect It: Churchill's Wartime Diplomatic Signals Intelligence', *Intelligence and National Security*, 10, 3 (July 1995): 449-67.

(so that they would not be in the files of our Sections where our Allies might work) and had no further responsibility.¹⁰⁶

Against the background of these awkward problems, Garnons-Williams as the Head of P Division (HPD) made a major contribution to the management of clandestine organizations in Asia generally, and to the specific protection of SIS as a service in Asia. His contribution underlines one of the crucial lessons of intelligence management during the war; tinkering with the system to achieve the right bureaucratic apparatus was at times important, but more often the determining factor was the quality of personnel. Sadly for SEAC, Garnons-Williams was injured in an aeroplane crash and although he recovered physically, his psychological health deteriorated towards the end of the war.¹⁰⁷

Finally, it should be emphasized that any verdict on SIS operations in Asia must be a tentative one. SOE may look more effective partly because most of what remains of its records are now open to public inspection. The SIS material presently available is much smaller in quantity.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, the emerging picture of SIS in Asia during the 1930s and 1940s is not a flattering one. In the Summer of 1943, Colonel Gerald Wilkinson returned to London for discussions with a number of senior intelligence officers across Whitehall. He lamented 'Far East Intelligence from C's organisation has now dwindled to a trickle from a few Chinese coolies'.¹⁰⁹ When the full SIS archives for the Second World War are finally opened to public inspection, perhaps in the not too distant future, they are unlikely to suggest a different verdict.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ N.I.D. 12 memorandum entitled 'B.J. Series of Diplomatic Messages', n.d. (presumed c. 8 Oct. 1945), ADM 223/298, PRO; 'Report on S.I. Volume 2904-2930', N.I.D. 12, 8 Oct. 1945 *ibid.* This subject remains sensitive and the some documents relating to this subject, released in 1994, were nevertheless sanitized by the removal of certain paragraphs.

¹⁰⁷ General Penney (D of I SEAC) noted that Garnons-Williams was now so nervy that he 'just can't stand being alone', Penney to Mrs Penney, 28 June 1945, 4/20, Penney papers, Liddel Hart Centre for Military Archives.

¹⁰⁸ It is also clear that in the case of certain types of SIS operations, no written record was kept. See, for example, the remarks in 'Clandestine Air Operations: A Brief History of Operations in South East Asia, 1 June 1942-31 May 1945', prepared by Squadron Leader Coleman, AIR 23/1950, PRO.

¹⁰⁹ One of these officers was Commander Ian Fleming, entry for 13 July 1943, Wilkinson diary, 1/2, 2, CCC.

¹¹⁰ While a great deal of documentation has recently been released pertaining to British intelligence the author would be grateful to hear from practitioners who served in the period prior to 1960 at the Department of Politics, University of Nottingham, NG7 2RD, UK.