RESTRICTING KNOWLEDGE: CHANNELING SECURITY INFORMATION IN RECENT HISTORY

Workshop at the German Historical Institute Washington (GHI) and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (WWICS), December 8-9, 2016. Conveners: Keith R. Allen (University of Gießen), Simone Lässig (GHI), and Christian Ostermann (WWICS). Participants: Florian Altenhöner (Humboldt University, Berlin), Astrid Eckert (Emory University), Michael Gordin (Princeton University), Rebecca Lemov (Harvard University), Eva Jobs (University of Marburg), Oxana Kosenko (Saxon Academy of the Sciences), Kristie Macrakis (Georgia Institute of Technology), Derrick Mallett (U.S. Army Command and General Staff College), Sönke Neitzel (University of Potsdam), Tim Nenninger (National Archives and Records Administration), Kathryn Olesko (Georgetown University), Dominik Rigoll (Center for Contemporary History, Potsdam), Patrick S. Roberts (Virginia Tech), Robert P. Saldin (University of Montana), Douglas Selvage (Stasi Records Agency, BStU), Jean-Michael Turcotte, (L’Université Laval), Heidi Tworek (University of British Columbia).

In a 2004 essay entitled “Removing Knowledge,” Harvard historian of science Peter Galison observed that while we do not know how much information the U.S. government keeps classified, the amount may well exceed two hundred Libraries of Congress. Not only are we uninformed about the scope of this vast empire of classified information — Galison claimed that the universe of files very probably widely surpasses what is publicly accessible — we understand little about how thousands of U.S. government Original Classifiers mark so-called National Security Information classified, secret, and top secret.

How government agencies block, obfuscate, and channel knowledge still remains understudied more than a dozen years after the publication of Galison’s essay. Our workshop’s objective was to bring together scholars to explore how vast reservoirs of learning were tagged, pigeonholed, and impeded from circulation during the recent history of the U.S. and other nations. Galison points out that suppressing insights from all but a handful of experts and security officials took on new dimensions during the intercontinental scramble to acquire and hide knowledge about nuclear weapons. For this reason, we asked Michael Gordin, distinguished historian of science at Princeton University, to share with us his insights into how the secrets of the nucleus were obtained and shrouded from German-speaking
technical experts. In his keynote lecture at the GHI, “Kernwissen: Nuclear Information and the Germans, 1939–1949,” Gordin pointed out that scholarship on nuclear history too often disconnects the quest to obtain highly sought after technical advice from the guarding of security information. Scholars also tend to situate the flow of people and information central to this extraordinary story in national histories and historiographies. And yet, as Gordin convincingly demonstrated, science during the first nuclear decade easily crossed professional and political boundaries. To acquire a nuanced understanding of how this formative era unfolded in different nations competing to obtain access to the world’s most coveted secrets, Gordin encourages us to analyze how networks of knowledge creation and restriction spanned professional and national frontiers.

Held at the Wilson Center, our workshop addressed a broad range of questions about the non-transmission and targeted circulation of information, including but not limited to those put forward by Peter Galison’s essay and Michael Gordin’s lecture. Sessions were devoted to three topics: archives, prisoners of war, and states.

Oxana Kosenko’s presentation examined the appropriation of seized German archives by Soviet security agencies. Kosenko demonstrated how such “trophy” records served as ammunition in internal struggles to curry favor with Soviet leader Josef Stalin. Concurrently, Kosenko explored how captured German documents provided a basis for cooperation with security agencies among states in east-central Europe occupied by Soviet forces. As Douglas Selvage noted, the foreign intelligence branch of East Germany’s Ministry of State Security (Stasi) faced the challenge of managing a deluge of new surveillance following the country’s international recognition in 1972. A steep increase in information acquisition appears to have prompted an uptick in information exchange with the security agencies of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary, and especially the Soviet Union. According to Selvage, the KGB’s ability to enlist the Stasi’s unofficial collaborators and spies in the West demonstrated that the Stasi was not a foreign intelligence agency of a sovereign state, but rather essentially a branch office of the KGB. Whereas Selvage’s account is based on evaluation of foreign intelligence records today available (after a three-year waiting period) at the Stasi Records Agency, historians of the East German foreign intelligence service doing research only a decade ago, such as Kristie Macrakis, faced the challenge of glean- ing insights from former intelligence officers, defectors, and agents.
As Macrakis discovered, domestic intelligence records of the East German regime, and especially declassified material from Britain and the U.S., serve as a partial corrective to the often unverifiable assertions of former espionage provocateurs.

The means and terms by which captured German documents were shuttled between vanquished nations and victors and the Stasi’s instrumentalization of Nazi pasts also figured prominently in Dominik Rigoll’s presentation. A Berlin-based historian who works for the Forschungsgruppe zur Geschichte der Innenministerien in Bonn und Ost-Berlin (Research Group on the History of the Interior Ministries in Bonn and East Berlin), he documents the means federal officials employed to withhold incriminating information from public circulation; these include security classifications still very much in place in 2017. Rigoll noted that threats poised by select exposures of knowledge about Nazi pasts emerged from communist, later East German, propagandists, but also from background checks requested by the American National Security Agency. Nazi pasts were not a significant obstacle to West German-American cooperation in intelligence circles, however. As Eva Jobs, formerly a researcher to the commission funded by the German Foreign Intelligence Service (Bundesnachrichtendienst, or BND), makes clear, after Germany’s defeat the taint of Nazism was quickly tempered by the shared experience of warfare and an avowed commitment to mid-century heterosexual norms.

Another antecedent of German-Anglo-American accord was the humane treatment of foreign detainees: British and American coercion of human intelligence sources, especially German POWs, even during the Second World War, appears to have been unusual. During their incarceration, Americans and their most important allies (as Sönke Neitzel’s groundbreaking research on Britain’s Combined Services Detailed Interrogation Centers makes clear) were often solicitous toward German internees. As Derek Mallett’s study of U.S. questioning conducted at the secret interrogation center at Fort Hunt in Virginia illustrates, extracting information through interrogation and eavesdropping of over three thousand German POWs between 1942 and 1945 succeeded by developing working relationships with detainees. Extracted from German-speaking foreigners and circulated in published form to English-speaking allies, the documents crafted by Germans and their English-speaking captors nonetheless appeared to have had no meaningful impact on postwar American
military policy. Mallett’s assessment should not obscure the fact that the exploitation of German prisoners played a significant role in drawing together American, British, and also Canadian intelligence officials in extensive forms of inter-allied cooperation, as Jean-Michel Turcotte’s survey of the hundreds of camps sprinkled across North America made clear.

Just as the presenters confirmed that the concealment and circulation of security information in earlier eras was more of a multinational enterprise than one might imagine, our workshop demonstrated that current understandings of information retrieval and denial are drawn too narrowly from the experiences of the Second World War and the cold war in Europe and North America. The relative absence of knowledge from earlier eras should pique the curiosity of scholars: as Florian Altenhöner illustrated, the small if influential intelligence apparatus of the Weimar Republic sufficed to investigate communist subversion and its links to the Soviet Union while at the same time cooperating with Soviet intelligence services in addressing the perceived threat of a country regarded by both defeated powers as a new shared enemy: Poland. The Abwehr’s flexibility extended further. Weimar security officials bestowed favors to Ukrainian counterparts insofar as they assisted German military intelligence in fending off threats, perceived or real, poised by the interwar Polish state.

Overall, the workshop’s presentations offered insights into the essential challenge described by Peter Galison: explaining how various types of documents become classified as “secret” in the first place. Prompted by thoughtful commentaries from Astrid Eckert, Rebecca Lemov, and Sönke Neitzel, our discussions provided windows into behind-the-scenes struggles to ensure how classified knowledge was steadfastly — if by no means always successfully — denied broader circulation. A shared topic of all three sessions — one absent from Galison’s essay — was the means by which clandestine information held by security agencies in one nation were transferred to, or withheld from, foreign powers, occupiers-cum-allies regarded with wariness, and sworn ideological enemies. A related phenomenon highlighted by the presenters was the persistent influence of jockeying within vast security organizations on the largely unseen, day-to-day operations of extraction, dissemination, and analysis. Future scholars might be encouraged to take up these and other dimensions of secrecy’s infrastructure in earlier historical eras (an approach worthy of emulation is University of Southern California historian Jacob
Soll’s biography of Jean-Baptiste Colbert). Accounts that acknowledge what Michael Gordin described as the constant blur between technical and security information, cast as a narrative situated not so much within but between nations, also remain largely unwritten.

The workshop’s last panel brought us closer to the concerns of America’s fraught political present, as well as another dimension of information retention unaddressed by Galison: the conscious neglect of intelligence insights by the highest-ranking government officials. Patrick S. Roberts and Robert P. Saldin’s paper showcased how U.S. presidents misuse and purposefully ignore insights compiled by intelligence organizations. Rather than seek ways in which intelligence may have succeeded in informing policymaking, the two political scientists presented case studies of presidents and their closest advisers putting forward various rationales to ignore or discount intelligence dossiers compiled by security and intelligence analysts. Among their examples for the nonuse of intelligence information was knowledge of what American government officials regarded as a secret Israeli-South African nuclear test in the South Atlantic in 1979, an incident that continues to generate differences of opinion (especially among non-experts). Roberts and Saldin explained how the collection of airborne radiological evidence and evaluation of satellite imagery detecting double flashes consistent with nuclear explosions were insufficient to resolve all doubts. In the absence of frank acknowledgement by the two governments presumably involved, Israel and South Africa, U.S. President Carter’s decision to appoint a panel of experts to study the events in question may very well have been motivated by a desire to increase ambiguity about the alleged test rather than to clarify what had actually occurred near the Prince Edward Islands off Antarctica.

As our workshop drew to a close, less than three blocks away another U.S. president was taking the extraordinary step of ordering the director of national intelligence to conduct a formal investigation of clandestine meddling by foreign hackers with the support of the Russian government in the November 2016 presidential election campaign. Whether this particular limited disclosure of concealed security insights yields greater understanding, or still further opacity, remains unknown. What can be said is that the selective release of fact and interpretation by intelligence officials and the elected officials they ostensibly serve seems likely to gain still greater relevance in the months to come.
Secrecy’s tenacious hold on myriad forms of information extends beyond the purview of America’s sprawling intelligence and security bureaucracies. Trade law, as Galison observed, is in select cases nearly as vigorously defended as nuclear secrets. As our wrap-up discussion made clear, themes we identified with reference to the classification, diversion, and non-transmission of information should be applicable to many other domains of human inquiry. Anti-epistemological histories of medicine, the environment, and accountancy await their narrators.

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