

Selection and training

The Role of US Army Military Attachés Between the World Wars

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British and American ability to read Axis radio communications during World War II was an important contribution to Allied victory in 1945. Cryptological breakthroughs like ULTRA and MAGIC undeniably were impressive and significant, but most of the information that the US Army had about the armed forces of the Axis powers before December 1941 came from the routine, tedious, and often unappreciated peacetime collection efforts of US Army military attachés.

Attachés were the Army's eyes and ears abroad in the days before satellite photography and sophisticated electronic intelligence collection techniques. They were not spies. They used overt means and sources to collect facts about foreign weapons specifications, military doctrine, and order of battle.

The US Army had military attachés in Rome, Berlin, and Tokyo in the 1920s and 1930s. They stayed until the United States entered World War II in December 1941. American officers watched the Fascists consolidate their rule in Italy, Hitler rearm Germany, and Japan begin its march of conquest in Asia. They sent thousands of reports on these developments to the Military Intelligence Division (MID) of the War Department General Staff (WDGS) in Washington. Most reports languished forgotten in the files, even though the arms and services (infantry, cavalry, artillery) could borrow copies for study.

The overwhelming majority of reports were heavily factual and were too narrowly focused to be useful to the War Plans Division, the strategic planning arm of the WDGS. They covered such topics as the number of men in a motorized rifle regiment, the specifications of a new 105-mm cannon, or how a combat engineer company functioned. These reports were surprisingly

accurate. Others, dealing with speculative and nonquantifiable matters like civil-military relations, proved wildly wrong. In 1934, for example, the American military attaché in Berlin reported that a monarchical restoration under the leadership of Field Marshal Ludendorff was imminent.

There is no evidence that attaché reports influenced either American weapons development or strategic planning before the war. Prof. Ernest May of Harvard concludes that the forces with which the United States entered World War II "were designed virtually without analysis of intelligence about potential enemies. Roosevelt and his armed services simply ordered the most powerful weapons which American industry could produce and Congress would finance."

MID's files were an underused source of information about Axis military power. One reason may be the Army's attitude toward its attachés and their work. Officers went overseas with almost no training except in codes and rudimentary finances. Officially, the Army maintained that it chose only the best men and gave them superlative training. This position contrasted sharply with the attachés' experiences and recollections.

The Orphan Branch

Attracting talented officers to intelligence work and to attaché positions was a constant problem before World War II. During the appropriations hearings for fiscal year 1942, Brig. Gen. Sherman Miles, the Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2 (Military Intelligence), testified that his branch often had difficulty persuading officers that intelligence was a specialized job. Many officers considered attaché duty a career dead end. Lt. Col. Truman

The author retains a copy with full citations for interested readers.

Smith, one of the most successful American military attachés in Berlin before World War II, called MID the orphan branch of the General Staff and discovered that attachés “lacked prestige and were little regarded or listened to.”

Much of the blame for this perception rests with MID and the Army itself, for neither did anything to persuade officers that intelligence work was important and could be a valuable career in its own right. Attachés were on temporary detail from their branch or service and returned when their tour ended. Most talented and ambitious officers sought combat command positions, promising greater chances of promotion, and considered noncombat assignments, like intelligence, obstacles to advancement.

General Miles indirectly blamed the Army’s promotion policy for G-2’s inability to attract talented officers. After the war, he told Congress during the hearings on Pearl Harbor that military intelligence never attracted the numbers of top-quality officers that he would have liked. He acknowledged that, because many of the best officers preferred combat commands, “We did not have a free field for the selection of personnel, and quite rightly. We did the best we could with the personnel and the funds we had available.”

Besides its promotion policies that favored the command of combat troops, the Army failed to provide the attaché corps with a career educational system. The high command never encouraged the attaché corps to develop its own identity and tradition through a system of specialized and progressive training courses. Unlike the combat arms, which had their own school systems imparting the finer points of their craft, attachés could not attend a basic, then intermediate, then advanced attaché course. This type of education fostered professionalism and esprit de corps in the combat arms and led combat officers to identify closely with their branch.

Selection and Training

Any officer could indicate his interest in attaché duty on a duty preference card. The chiefs of the different branches also compiled lists of suitable and available candidates. MID placed this information in its files, along with language proficiency lists.

When an attaché post became vacant, MID compiled a list of officers with the desired qualifications. The division compared the candidates’ efficiency ratings and then ranked the officers. The tentative choice was the man with the best overall qualification willing to accept the assignment. MID then wrote a memorandum to the Chief of Staff—in which the officer’s branch chief and G-1 (Personnel) of the WDGS concurred—recommending the appointment. If the Chief of Staff approved, the appointee became the Army’s newest military attaché.

No officer went to his new post without receiving prolonged and intensive training, according to statements in MID’s files. In the annual report of intelligence activities prepared on 30 June 1931, G-2 claimed that it familiarized attachés with conditions in their host country, told them what information G-2 had about the host country, and told them what information was missing. Gen. Harry Knight, Chief of G-2, told War College students that new attachés received extensive instruction in principles, policies, and procedures as well as definite missions to accomplish overseas.

Reality was different. Knight and the upper levels of the Army’s intelligence bureaucracy may have *thought* that attaché training was exemplary, but the recollections of the men “trained” as attachés is so different that one wonders if they were all in the same army.

Before Maj. Truman Smith became the military attaché in Berlin in 1935, he spent two weeks in training at MID. During his time in Washington, he said that he received superficial instruction in codes and finance but little else. Nonetheless, he thought the time he spent was valuable, for he discovered “how inadequately organized, staffed, and financed the MID was.”

Maj. Ivan Yeaton reached the same conclusion when he was preparing to become the military attaché in Moscow in 1939. G-2’s instruction in security and codes left him “with the feeling that it had been a very superficial course.” Yeaton also learned that G-2’s files on the Soviet Union were undervalued and unorganized. No one in the East Europe section—which covered the Soviet Union—seemed to know what to do with the

files. Reports on Soviet military organization, strategy, tactics, weapons, and similar topics overwhelmingly relied on official Soviet sources. Yeaton got the impression that the attaché in Moscow could obtain nothing other than what the Soviet authorities wanted him to have.

Conspicuously absent from Smith's and Yeaton's accounts is any kind of writing instruction. An attaché spent much of his time writing reports but received no training to help him prepare them effectively. The art of drafting a coherent, concise, and thorough narrative escaped most officers. "My observation is that if there is any one thing in which the average Army officer is weak," the Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2 complained in 1923, "it is in his ability to paint a brief pen picture of a situation and not to clutter it up with details and data as to make it unintelligible."

Some attachés were able, through their own ability, to write effective reports in spite of MID's failure to prepare them for this task. Others were not, and the results were predictable. The military attaché in Cuba, for example, peppered MID with superficial and useless reports. An exasperated Col. J. A. Crane, chief of the Attaché Section in MID, carefully explained to him the types of reports Washington needed. "Picture a hemisphere situation arising which necessitates the United States sending the assistance of an expeditionary force," Crane wrote to the hapless officer. "Picture yourself as the Commanding General of this force. Then ask yourself what information you and your staff *must* have before you can make intelligence plans for the expedition."

The culmination of an attaché's "training" was a final interview with the Chief of Staff. Truman Smith's meeting with Gen. Douglas MacArthur was perfunctory but memorable:

I was shown in to General MacArthur. He was seated at his desk, his jacket of a loud rancous [sic] tweed, smoking a cigarette. He looked at me considering, waved me to a chair and began pacing the room back and forth as was his custom when considering a problem, smoking furiously. He stopped in front of me. I rose.

"You are very young to be going to Berlin."

"Yes, sir."

Pacing again. I sat down.

He confronted me again. I rose.

"You have no rank."

"Yes, sir."

Pacing. Then he stopped once more and once more I rose.

"Well, Smith, I have only this to say to you. I have long noted when young officers go abroad they very soon end up in the British pocket. Now, Smith, my advice to you is never go to bed with a corpse."

He waved me away.

With that advice, Smith left for Berlin.

Problems at the Post

When an attaché arrived at his new post he faced obstacles concerning rank, language, money, and his relationship with the Ambassador. MID gradually addressed the first, was ambivalent about the second, was powerless to do anything about the third, and left the fourth to the personality of the attaché himself.

Other members of the local attaché corps usually out-ranked the new American attaché. Maj. W. E. Shipp, the military attaché in Riga, Latvia, wrote that foreign officers regarded the American attachés with a mixture of amusement and condescension. Foreign attachés, usually colonels and generals, believed that their American colleagues were little more than ambassadorial aides with social duties.

Some attachés could speak the language of their host country; many could not. Language proficiency was controversial. Brig. Gen. W. K. Naylor, Chief of G-2, told an Army War College class in 1923 that whether an attaché should be able to speak the language of his host-country was "open to question." Naylor

feared that an attaché fluent in his host-country's language risked losing his objectivity. Most attachés strongly disagreed because the ability to speak with foreign officers was an essential part of an attaché's duties. Based on personal experience, Major Shipp suggested to MID that *every* officer sent to a foreign country meet minimum language requirements. MID ignored Shipp's advice.

Lack of money was a constant problem that MID never solved. MID wanted its attachés to have an independent source of income to supplement their pay and allowances because, as one head of G-2 admitted, "in many foreign countries an officer's pay and allowances do not permit him creditably to represent his government." Attachés received many invitations to parties and receptions and had to reciprocate. Lt. Col. Truman Smith called this part of the job "very trying and very boring," but social functions were lucrative sources for collecting information informally. The British military attaché in Berlin, Maj. Kenneth Strong, recalled that German officers routinely volunteered sensitive and valuable information about their country's rearmament because they thought another war with Great Britain would ruin Germany.

The United States was in a serious economic depression, and Congress was not about to increase MID's budget so that a few attachés could host cocktail parties in Paris, Berlin, Rome, London, Moscow, and Tokyo. Unfortunately, the annual appropriations battle reinforced the perception in the Army at large that the attaché corps was nothing more than a well-heeled country club.

All American military attachés were directly responsible to the War Department through the Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2, but they also were members of the Embassy staff and advised the Ambassador on all military matters affecting US national interests. The Ambassador, as the accredited representative of the US Government, technically was the attaché's commanding officer and could have him recalled for any reason.

Cordial relations between the Ambassador and attaché sometimes were difficult to maintain. William Dodd, one of the American ambassadors to Germany in the 1930s, had a poor opinion of the military attachés on the

Embassy staff. Dodd believed that attaché training was deficient, that the attachés were unduly attracted to the discipline of the Nazi Reich, and that they were not suited for their real mission, which he imagined was spying.

The Ambassador thought that his attaché, Col. Jacob W. S. Wuest, lacked objectivity and analytical skill. "Wuest," he wrote, "knows German well, and is watchful of his opportunities, but the military appeal is strong and he instinctively approves of the army drills and demonstrations—contradictory as these are to the interests of the United States." Dodd had little patience with what he considered Wuest's hysterical overreactions to German rearmament.

In October 1934, Dodd confided to his diary that Wuest predicted imminent war. The attaché had just returned from a motor trip around Germany in which he saw extensive military activity. Dodd dismissed Wuest's warning because the attaché "was not specific and I had little time to listen."

When Maj. Truman Smith arrived in Berlin in August 1935 to relieve Wuest, he knew his relationship with Dodd might be a problem. Smith decided that he would try to maintain a good working relationship with the Ambassador and his staff—regardless of the difficulties.

If Dodd thought that Wuest was hysterical and infatuated with the German Army, Smith believed that the Ambassador was uninterested in German rearmament. Smith later recalled that "not once in the two ensuing years of Dr. Dodd's service in Berlin did the Ambassador make any request of the military attaché to furnish him data on either the German Army or air expansion."

Conclusions

After the war, Congress held extensive hearings on the intelligence failure that led to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. No hearings were held to determine whether the US Army adequately prepared its military attachés for duty or whether MID properly used their intelligence reports. Why were Congress, the War Department, and the Army evidently satisfied with a

training system that by today's standards was deficient? In part, attachés collected "departmental intelligence" for the MID rather than what Sherman Kent would later term "strategic intelligence" for the president. The Army never intended that the military information the attachés collected was to aid in the formulation and conduct of American foreign policy; it was for the Army's defense planning. More important, defense planning before the war was based upon different assumptions than it is today.

The armed services used the intelligence they gathered for their own planning, which the 1930's doctrine of "national defense" narrowly circumscribed. With President Wilson's crusade in Europe over, Americans rushed to what President Harding called a "return to normalcy." The widespread belief that the war was an aberration directly affected the US Army's planning by focusing efforts on the defense of the continental United States.

The doctrine of "national defense" reflected the country's prevailing political climate of isolationism, for it required only that the Army defeat an armed invasion of US territory. Sending another expeditionary force overseas, as Wilson did in 1917, was unthinkable for most policymakers and the majority of the public. Historian Charles Beard spoke for many Americans in 1939 when he wrote that "Not until some formidable European power comes into the western Atlantic, breathing the fire of aggression and conquest, need the United States become alarmed about the ups and downs of European conflicts, intrigues, aggressions, and war." According to this view, which many policymakers and public opinion leaders held, a small constabulary army and a navy dedicated primarily to coastal defense were sufficient for American needs.

The Army's intelligence requirements to meet its obligations under "national defense" were minimal. All military planners needed to know were a potential enemy's

order of battle, tables of organization and equipment, doctrine, and mobilization and manpower figures. Consequently, the digests that the MID kept on each country were factually heavy and analytically light.

The MID did not analyze intelligence as contemporary professionals understand the idea. Emphasis on analysis began after the war, when the *US Strategic Bombing Survey* revealed that many American conceptions and assumptions about the German economy's ability to produce war materiel were wrong. Instead of simply amassing facts, the intelligence bureaucracy needed some way to translate the mass of data into meaningful conclusions. Doing this effectively required integrating traditional military variables with psychological, political, and social considerations.

The early bias in favor of collection rather than analysis extended to the military attachés in the field. Their superiors expected them neither to analyze information nor to synthesize and explain raw data. Their job was to collect the kinds of quantifiable information that MID wanted. MID probably considered extensive training unnecessary, because the division assumed its attachés could count and could easily compile order-of-battle data, production figures, and mobilization projections.

Improved training may have enabled the US Army's military attachés to write more accurate and useful reports, but better reports likely would have made no significant difference in the Army's preparation for combat in 1941. The attachés were part of a system that discouraged the development of intelligence professionalism. That system would change only after the shock of global war and the emergence of the United States as a superpower with worldwide security interests.