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Why is there no IR scholarship on intelligence agencies? Some ideas for a new approach

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Abstract

Scholarship on intelligence studies suffers three key limitations: 1) it fails to grasp that the knowledge-production of agencies is value-laden and thus political in itself; 2) scholarship disregards most of the non-English speaking world and 3) focuses nearly exclusively on foreign intelligence. I suggest that these limitations are due to a broader theoretical poverty of intelligence studies, and present three concepts through which a richer analysis may emerge: 1) »security« in the sense of understanding the meaning of security that intelligence agencies use as a basis for operating; 2) »secrecy« to investigate the concrete measures that agencies use to create and manage secrecy and 3) »bureaucracy« to investigate the day-to-day work done by the bulk of intelligence employees. These concepts turn the gaze towards the concrete, institutional processes of intelligence production, rather than towards abstract models such as the intelligence cycle, which dominate current scholarship. Intelligence studies needs to borrow from the rich tradition of organizational sociology and critical IR to develop a more thorough understanding of what intelligence agencies actually do, and what their effect on international politics is.

Introduction

On the sixth of June, 1975, Erich Mielke, East Germany's State Security Minister, received a letter outlining the request that members of Egypt's intelligence agency receive training from the Stasi on the »conspiratorial opening and closing of doors, cupboards, safes, etc.«. Mielke handwrote »Approved!« on the document, thus paving the way for the Egyptian agents to be received for

training in autumn 1975 at a Stasi foreign intelligence service site.¹

Thirty-five years later, on the seventh of May, 2015, two days ahead of the first state visit to Germany by the new Egyptian president Abdel Fatah Al-Sisi, an article appeared in Berlin's newspaper, *Der Tagesspiegel*, detailing the range of training that Egyptian agents would receive that year at German police and security institutions (Gehlen et al., 2015). Throughout 2015, the ministry would host six workshops for Egyptian intelligence agency and police officers, at a cost of over EUR 100,000. In addition, agents of Egypt's State Security Agency would receive on-the-job training during the final match of Germany's national football league on the thirtieth of May, working alongside their German counterparts. Eventually, several Egyptian agents would work-shadow for several months at Germany's national police agency (ibid.).²

As these two anecdotes highlight, relations between Germany and Egypt's intelligence agencies³ have been long-standing, and have continued across borders of time, space, and politics (Krieger 2013). One would imagine that this exchange over the decades would have attracted

1 MfS, Main Department A, Memorandum, 6th June 1975, in BstU, OTS, Nr. 1534, pp. 134-135.

2 In April 2017 the German government formalised its security cooperation with Egyptian police and intelligence agencies, signing an extensive formal security cooperation agreement (Deutscher Bundestag, 2017).

3 There is no clear terminology about intelligence agencies. They may be referred to as intelligence agencies, intelligence institutions, secret services, or security services. In this article, I primarily use the term »intelligence agency« without attributing to this phrase an a priori definition as intelligence agencies can take on a variety of forms.

the attention of international relations scholars. However, this has not been the case. Hardly any knowledge exists about the international relations and international activities of Germany or Egypt's intelligence agencies, and academic analyses are practically non-existent.⁴

The lack of IR research into intelligence agencies has been repeatedly remarked upon since the mid-1980s, and still, today, the situation continues (Andrew, 2004; Der Derian, 1993; Fry and Hochstein, 1993; Hastedt, 1991; Krieger, 2004). The theoretical poverty of intelligence studies is frequently mentioned (Gill et al., 2009). In this article, I argue that these two lacunae are related. IR research is sorely required into the vast and politically significant international activities of intelligence agencies. However, for this research to take place, a number of significant theoretical shortcomings of existing intelligence studies need to be challenged. Several deep-seated and wrong-headed assumptions about the *raison d'être*, the functioning, and the political importance of intelligence agencies make it difficult for theoretically interested IR scholars to engage in intelligence research. This is so because firstly, they need to explain to a theoretically myopic audience (composed of intelligence scholars) why the existing shortcomings are important and secondly, because they then have to confront a theoretical and conceptual void. There are very few shoulders to stand on (Van Puyvelde and Curtis, 2016).

Still, the time has long arrived to take up the question: what is the relevance and meaning of intelligence agencies in modern international relations (Collado Seidel, 2013; Davies and Gustafson, 2013)? This article, which is based on the early stages of a 5-year study of German and Arab intelligence agencies' international relations, outlines a research agenda by presenting the most glaring gaps in existing scholarship, and by offering some theoretical considerations to inspire future study. I argue that to address intelligence agencies' international work, first, a new theoretical

⁴ A significant, primarily descriptive literature exists on the East German services. A smaller, often semi-academic literature exists on the West German and Egyptian services. Both rarely comment on their international work. Some examples include Sirrs, Owen, *The Egyptian Intelligence Service: A History of the Mukhabarat, 1910-2010*, London: Routledge, 2011; Abu Al-Fadl, Abdalfatah, *Kuntu Nā'iban Li-Ra'īs Al-Mukhābarāt*, Cairo, Egypt: Dar El Shorouk, 2001; Krieger, Wolfgang »The German Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND): Evolution and Current Policy Issues«, in: *The Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence*, 790-805. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012; Dietl, Wilhelm, *Deckname Dali: Ein BND-Agent packt aus*, Köln: Eichborn, 2007; Gieseke, Jens, *The GDR State Security. Shield and Sword of the Party*, Berlin: BStU, 2002; Maddrell, Paul, »The Economic Dimension of Cold War Intelligence-Gathering: The West's Spies in the GDR's Economy«, *Journal of Cold War Studies* 15, no. 3 (July 1, 2013): 76-107.

and methodological approach to the relationship between modern states and their agencies is required. IR scholarship's numerous innovations in the past two decades, including the integration of discourse theory, the »practice turn« (Bueger and Gadinger, 2015), the application of ethnographic research (Vrasti, 2008) and critical security studies (Salter and Mutlu, 2012), offer a number of useful concepts and research methods that can be mobilised to develop interesting and effective research questions.

This article is split into three sections. The first section provides a literature review of existing intelligence scholarship. The second section analyses three dominant limitations of this field, which are of particular relevance to IR. Thirdly, three concepts, through which a nuanced view of intelligence agencies may emerge, are treated: security, secrecy, and bureaucracy.

Intelligence History and Intelligence Studies

The academic literature on intelligence agencies is broadly split into two related fields: intelligence history and intelligence studies (Fry and Hochstein, 1993). Intelligence history is more strictly disciplinary, and most scholars active in this field are historians by training. Intelligence studies is more diverse, and contributing scholars come from a range of backgrounds, including a significant number of those who are former practitioners (Phythian, 2017a, 2017b).

Intelligence history, which has a strong base in the UK, Germany, and Austria⁵, is particularly focused on the development of European and US foreign intelligence during the two World Wars and the Cold War. A great variety of themes exist within these limited periods. Frequently, articles or books investigate the role of intelligence during specific historical episodes. A typical example of an article title may read: »Operation TIGRESS: deception for counterintelligence and Britain's 1952 atomic test« (Dylan, 2015). Broader themes treated by intelligence history are, for example, the international cooperation of allied intelligence agencies, the comparative study of the activities of one intelligence agency in different fields of operation, or, more rarely, the comparison between the behaviour of different intelligence agencies during particular historical episodes (Aldrich, 2009; Davies, 2002; Farson et al., 2008).

Assessing the value of specific operational methods during historical events is an important area of inquiry. Significant moments of intelligence failure are another recurring theme, especially concerning the recurring problem of faulty com-

⁵ Two important European institutions are the International Intelligence History Association based in Würzburg, Germany and the Centre for Intelligence, Propaganda, and Security Studies at Graz University, Austria.

munication between intelligence institutions and political decision makers. More recently, a small literature on the topic of national intelligence cultures has emerged, somewhat analogous to the literature on strategic cultures, which historically investigates whether different countries have developed distinctive cultures regarding their intelligence communities (de Graaf and Nyce, 2016; Phythian, 2014). What quickly becomes clear is that in terms of the larger and smaller events analysed, intelligence history is closely related to topics of interest to international relations scholars: the focus is nearly always on matters of international politics and/or international conflict.

Intelligence history scholars much less frequently consider the history of intelligence agencies that exists before 1914 and after 1990 (Iordanou, 2016: 306-7). The extreme case of intelligence failure surrounding the 2003 invasion of Iraq is an important exception, which has been considered from many angles. How was it possible for UK and US leaders to distort intelligence knowledge without facing any significant opposition from within the intelligence community? Why did European intelligence agencies possess so little, and indeed, contradicting information about the crucial matter of Iraq's weapons programmes? Why was the existing information not processed or shared among allies? Was the root of the problem a communications failure between intelligence agencies and the executive branch? Was the lack of Arabic language skills to blame, or were their analytic skills deficient? Here, we can already see how intelligence history overlaps with the more contemporary themes of intelligence studies discussed further below.

The more limited literature dedicated to the history of intelligence agencies before 1914 mainly considers either the development of modern European intelligence agencies since the 18th century, or the role of intelligence in different empires during antiquity. One noteworthy article on espionage in early modern Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries by the Spanish literary scholar Diego Navarro Bonilla makes a fascinating exception (Navarro Bonilla, 2012). Bonilla convincingly argues that the small, not yet fully territorialised states of early modern Europe already included elements of the institutionalisation of intelligence agency work. Bonilla writes: »...the political theory of the modern state that originated in the fifteenth century offers fertile ground for connections between state theory and secret information«. He adds that interestingly, in 16th century Venice (one of the early European states with significantly developed domestic and foreign intelligence institutions), the term for ambassador was »spia onorata«, the »honourable spy« (ibid: 285, on early institutionalisation of intelligence in Venice also see Iordanou, 2016).

The development of Europe's intelligence agency bureaucracies from 1850 onwards is marked by a rapid growth of documentation, files, papers and technical instruments, which have been the focus of some study (Kafka, 2012; Vismann, 2000). However, existing scholarship is largely descriptive and fails to analyse this process in the context of the growth of the European territorial nation state as such. The work by the German historian Wolfgang Krieger is an important exception that draws on very rich historical research to make crucial theoretical observations about the relationship between the bureaucratisation of surveillance, and modern, national rule. Krieger convincingly argues that the development of today's near-to ubiquitous professional and bureaucratic intelligence agencies is closely linked to the demands and dynamics of modern warfare and government over increasingly connected, eventually nationally defined populations and territories (Krieger 2009: 13-14, 118-135).

Also of note is the well-developed literature on the contemporary history of French intelligence security and intelligence agencies, which comprises historical works (Faligot and Kauffer, 2013; Faure, 2004) that nevertheless venture into political and sociological analyses of the relationship between intelligence and modern states and societies (Dewerpe, 1994; Laurent, 2009).

Studies of medieval and antique writings on espionage, surveillance, and rule focus on a few key texts. Sun Zu's famous *The Art of War* about warfare in 5th Century BC China, or the *Arthashastra*, a text about government in 2nd century BC India, may serve as examples (Musco, 2016; Ramachandran, 2014; Warner, 2006). These antique treaties analyse the creation of secret knowledge and the value that this knowledge may hold for an absolute or feudal ruler. Here, the arrival at secret knowledge and its use is highly personalised, as is the relationship between ruler and spy. Thus, a key question analysed by these ancient texts is what types of spies exist, what motivates spies, and how different types of spies may be most effectively treated and handled. The highly differing social and political context in which these texts were created puts into question their applicability and use for contemporary international relations scholars. Yet, on occasion, some of these insights from pre-modern history provide theoretical inspiration for understanding the contemporary relationship between the work conducted by intelligence agencies and state power. For example, the Italian political scientist Stefano Musco writes about a medieval Persian text from 11th century BC, which emphasises the close link between the ability to rule over a certain territory and being able to extend one's information networks across it (Musco, 2016). This insight can be traced back to ideas of rule developed in the antique Middle East, writes

Musco. Its relevance for contemporary IR is quite clear: the continuing efforts of governments to extend their information and surveillance networks into all types of existing space (which today, of course, goes far beyond classic understandings of state territory to include air and satellite space) demonstrate that surveilling a territory continues to be closely linked to ruling it (Johnson et al., 2017).

Intelligence studies, the more contemporary-oriented branch of intelligence scholarship, developed during the 1980s. The 1984 edited volume *The Missing Dimension* by two historians of modern diplomacy was a clarion call for contemporary historians to (re)consider the role of intelligence in contemporary diplomacy and warfare (Andrew and Dilks, 2014). Intelligence Studies' flagship journal *Intelligence and National Security* appeared in 1986, and was founded by British historian Christopher Andrews and the US Professor of Naval Strategy, Michael Handel. These two authors' interests continue to reflect the journal's interdisciplinary focus on historical studies and more theoretical analyses of contemporary intelligence work that is conducted mainly in the US and UK (Johnson, 2016).

Contemporary intelligence studies scholars consider the assumption that intelligence work consists of a cyclical process, termed »the Intelligence Cycle«, to be one of their main theoretical achievements (Phythian, 2013). This cycle consists of five steps: (1) The planning and directing of intelligence needs by political decision makers; (2) the collecting of intelligence; (3) the processing of intelligence; (4) analysis; (5) and its dissemination to decision makers – who then set the cycle in motion again after reassessing intelligence needs. A large part of intelligence studies literature is dedicated to, or is at least somehow linked to, the Intelligence Cycle, and is particularly concerned with the question of how its separate steps can be made more effective. The monumental 2012 *Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence*, for example, contains one chapter for every step of the cycle (as well as chapters dedicated to other topics) (Johnson, 2012).

Often, intelligence studies focus on how to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the work of (mainly US and UK) intelligence agencies. Within this shared aim, there are a huge variety of problems to be addressed and solved. Scholars regularly address technical challenges or opportunities regarding data-analyses, visual analyses or software innovations and their implications for intelligence collection or analyses. Others focus on the organisational difficulties that intelligence institutions frequently fail to address, including a problematic work culture or competition between different agencies with possibly overlapping mandates. Ethical questions are discussed, such as the tension between secret intelligence work and

democratic oversight, or the euphemistic debate (»enhanced interrogation techniques«) around the CIA's use of torture during the war on terror.

Despite an intensive debate among leading scholars, no generally accepted definition of »intelligence« has emerged (Lowenthal, 2011; Herman, 1996; Warner, 2002; Gill et al., 2009; Kahn, 2001). I only mention this here, as the search for this definition dominated a significant part of the intelligence studies literature for some time, though in the past decade interest in this question appears to have waned. »Intelligence« remains an ambiguous term, at least in the English language, and a central theory of what it is does not exist. Is intelligence more than information? Is it a process or a product? Is intelligence necessarily secret? Moreover, does it necessarily emerge from state activity, or is all information of relevance to senior decision makers considered intelligence? The response to such questions have resulted in divided opinions, even though much of this debate may simply be linked to the linguistic oddity that in English, systematic surveillance is mysteriously called »intelligence«, rather than »information« or »news« as in French or German (Farson, 1998: 52). From a qualitative and critical perspective, any attempt to define in a few words the institutionalised, bureaucratised and highly professionalised work of intelligence agencies, appears, in any case, misplaced, or at least much less important than arriving at an understanding about what this work means for the exercise of state power. For the sake of completeness, the following examples illustrate this nevertheless significant debate in the intelligence studies literature. Michael Warner, one of the leading US intelligence scholars and a former in-house historian for the CIA, defines intelligence as »secret, state activity to influence foreign entities« (Warner 2002: 16). Peter Gill, one of the leading British intelligence scholars developed the following definition: intelligence is »mainly secret activities – targeting, collection, analysis, dissemination and action – intended to enhance security and/or maintain power relative to competitors by forewarning of threats and opportunities« (Gill, Marrin and Phythian 2009: 214).

Three significant limitations of intelligence literature

Intelligence scholarship suffers from three significant and interrelated limitations. All of these are ultimately connected to the fact that practically all theoretical work done on intelligence agencies has been conducted from a functionalist, neo-realist perspective, which suffers from well-known theoretical and methodological limitations. In the following, I try to spell out how these three limitations have obstructed a more empirically grounded, critical analysis of intelligence agencies as a source and an effect of state power, before con-

tinuing with some suggestions as to how such a critical analysis could be developed.

Intelligence agencies as professional knowledge-providers

Most existing intelligence scholarship characterises intelligence agencies as neutral functionaries that, if working correctly, enhance state power by providing accurate and timely information to decision-makers.⁶ »Working correctly« is here understood as efficient and professional, both in terms of managerial effectiveness and in terms of accurate implementation of clearly defined intelligence procedures. Much of the literature is devoted to developing working methods and standards to achieve this, while ignoring the process of knowledge production, which is implied to be value neutral and dependent on technical variables (Rønn and Høffding, 2013). The small number of published articles, which critically examine the way intelligence agencies' knowledge production is based on certain values and reproduces a pre-supposed reality, have arguably failed to achieve a lasting impact, and the standard view in the field remains that »intelligence organizations provide objective assessment to decision-makers who may otherwise be (mis)guided by their own judgements« (Phythian 2012). From this standpoint, intelligence knowledge becomes comparable to other institutions of social enquiry, as illustrated by the following quote from an article investigating the epistemic status of intelligence:

»Our claim that intelligence is knowledge does not necessarily entail that intelligence work ought to be more academic or scientific. It merely recognizes that the inquiries already taking place within intelligence are no different than that of other scientific domains« (Rønn and Høffding, 2013).

6 Exceptions exist, of course, and some of them are discussed throughout the following sections. Exemplary, rich conceptualisations of secret services and/or of their work include: Eickelman, Dale F., »Intelligence in an Arab Gulf State«, in: Roy Godson (ed.), *Comparing Foreign Intelligence*, Virginia, USA: Pergamon-Brassey's International Defence Publishers, 1988, pp. 89-114; Al-Marashi, Ibrahim. »An insight into the mindset of Iraq's security apparatus«, *Intelligence and National Security* 18, no. 3 (September 1, 2003), pp. 1-23; Sassoon, Joseph, *Saddam Hussein's Ba'th Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011; Aldrich, Richard and John Kasuku, »Escaping From American Intelligence: Culture, Ethnocentrism and the Anglosphere«, *International Affairs* 89, no. 5 (2012); Cormac, Rory and Richard J. Aldrich, »Grey Is the New Black: Covert Action and Implausible Deniability«, *International Affairs* 94, no.3 (2018), 477-494; Gieseke, Jens, *Die DDR Staatssicherheit Schild und Schwert Der Partei*, Bonn, Germany: Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 2000.

From an empirically informed understanding of knowledge production within intelligence agencies, it is highly problematic to simply consider it, in the abstract, as akin to any other scientific domain, or indeed to characterize it as scientific at all. Yet doing so makes it easy to consider intelligence agencies as objective power-enhancers and/or risk mitigating factors, which is precisely the dominant conceptualisation in the literature. Jennifer Sims, one of the few international relations scholars to deeply engage the study of intelligence, developed the concept of »decision-advantage« to illustrate the neo-realist understanding of what intelligence agencies do for states (Sims 2010). By providing accurate information about other states, especially about things that these states would prefer to keep secret, intelligence agencies furnish their executive with a decision-advantage over those leaders, who do not have this secret information (and who do not know that others possess it). Especially militarily weaker states, so the assumption goes, are able to compensate their weakness via effective use of intelligence agencies (Sims, 2002, 2010).

Focus on the Anglo-Saxon world

A 2016 content analysis of around 2000 academic articles on intelligence demonstrates the literature's overwhelming focus on the Anglo-Saxon world: 70% of all articles studied the intelligence agencies of the USA or the UK (Van Puyvelde and Curtis, 2016). The remaining 30% were primarily focused on Russia or the Soviet Union, Germany and Israel (ibid). In fact, the literature's convergence is so complete that a 2013 edited volume about intelligence agencies across the world is simply titled »Intelligence Elsewhere« (Davies and Gustafson, 2013). The editors of this volume pose obvious, but neglected questions of high relevance for international relations scholars: what explains differences between the intelligence agencies of different states? They answer their own question by arguing that these differences can be explained in reference to distinct intelligence cultures, which arise from a state's specific historical and social characteristics.

The idea that distinct intelligence cultures exist that are analogue to the more developed concept of strategic cultures, has taken some root in the literature. Leading intelligence scholar Mark Phythian suggests conducting comparative studies of intelligence cultures and makes explicit reference to strategic culture as a model (Phythian 2014). Phythian presents several variables that could be used to frame such comparative study: strategic environment, regime type, organisational form, and social embeddedness (Phythian 2014: 30-33). Based on these assumptions, intelligence agencies can be compared according to the solutions they find to their mutual problems and institutional

constellations. Phythian argues that it is precisely such an anchored, systematic comparison that prevents explanations of the differences between intelligence cultures from falling back on ethnocentric arguments.

Yet, this perception can be critiqued by arguing that in fact, our knowledge about ›intelligence elsewhere‹ is so small that we simply cannot say with any certainty that intelligence agencies always face the same, or even similar, duties and challenges. If this is not the case, then why should culture or historical and social factors explain differences (and similarities) between agencies? Aldrich and Kasuku (2012) argue that the literature's overwhelming focus on the Anglo-Saxon world has created highly biased perceptions about what intelligence agencies do; in many countries, for example, foreign intelligence is not the primary duty of agencies at all, but rather surveillance and repression of domestic opposition. Moreover, of course, such domestic surveillance is and has always been, also a job performed by Anglo-Saxon and European agencies, a fact that has been largely ignored by intelligence scholars, possibly due to the taboo that long surrounded domestic surveillance in democracies and which now, arguably, has been somewhat shattered. If one considers intelligence work globally, argues Aldrich, one finds that domestic work is just as important as foreign targeting.

By ignoring ›intelligence elsewhere‹ the highly relevant question (for international relations scholars in particular) about the relationship between regime-type and intelligence work has either been ignored or investigated according to highly biased assumptions. Does the role and work of intelligence agencies fundamentally differ according to whether it is carried out within a democratic or dictatorial context? Or, is the difference rather one of degree (of violence, for example)? In the late 1990s, the prominent intelligence scholar Peter Gill suggested a classification of domestic intelligence agencies and their governments, broadly according to the idea that the more autonomous a domestic intelligence agency is, the more dictatorial its government. Here, the unaccountability of domestic intelligence agencies becomes a measure of the severity of a dictatorship. While this formula could, when turned around, function as an interesting research question (e.g., are the intelligence agencies of dictatorships more autonomous than those of democracies?) without empirical evidence, it remains no more than an assumption.

In fact, from the perspective of international relations scholars, the entire categorisation of intelligence agencies according to their domestic governance (e.g. regime type) appears extremely limited. In this categorisation, the violence carried out by agencies within domestic space is essentially what determines their categorisation as dicta-

torial and democratic. But what about the international, or overseas activities of agencies? The fact that a number of very powerful democracies have used, and continue to use, their agencies for highly violent activities abroad makes it misleading to simply categorise them as democratic, and thus as less violent and transparent (Austin, 2015). In addition, at least since the middle of the 20th century, agencies of democratically governed states have regularly cooperated with their counterparts located inside dictatorships. Agencies from democratically governed states have been involved in the creation of agencies in dictatorship, and continue to support them with technology and expertise today. This cooperation reached a depressing low point when American, British and, in at least one case, German, agents interrogated and/or tortured suspects held by foreign agencies in dictatorial states (Grey, 2007). The influence and work of domestic/foreign agencies do not end at the borders of their states. Rather, it can perhaps be argued, that intelligence agencies create a type of national and global governance that results in a fluid transition between, or layering of zones of democratic and dictatorial rule (Rejali, 2009).

Focus on Foreign Intelligence

Related to the literature's concentration on the Anglo-Saxon world is its excessive preoccupation with foreign intelligence, or rather its implicit assumption that foreign intelligence is the first and foremost task of any intelligence agency. Most of the many definitions of intelligence discussed in the literature include a focus on foreign entities. Implicit in this definition, of course, is the assumption that what intelligence agencies do, and why they exist, is to investigate and protect against the activities of foreign states and their citizens (or agents). While scholars regularly briefly mention other elements of intelligence agencies' work, such as counter-intelligence and domestic intelligence gathering (referred to as ›security services‹ in the English language literature), these are not the focus of most empirical research and are rarely mentioned in theoretical discussions.

Intelligence scholarship has not caught up with including domestic surveillance into the core activities of intelligence agencies everywhere. Instead, domestic intelligence work is still mostly considered as an anomaly, associated exclusively with authoritarian governments. For IR scholars in particular, the focus on foreign intelligence results in a number of significant research biases and gaps. The most important bias, perhaps, is that this focus emphasises that the intelligence agencies of different states stand in a relation of suspicion or even enmity towards each other. It also de-emphasises the many ways that intelligence agencies either actively maintain international relations with each other, or simply share many

interests akin to what James Sheptycki's work identified as a »transnational subculture« in the area of transnational policing (Sheptycki, 1998). Although the realisation that intelligence agencies do indeed closely surveil each other points to the mechanisms through which they possibly develop in each other's mirror image (and thus develop into a form of global governance), the focus on observing the foreigner/enemy has resulted in a blind spot to this fact (Maddrell, 2015). In this way, much academic theorising about agencies contributes instead to the production of a hegemonic idea about what intelligence agencies are, instead of investigating and analysing the relationship of this idea to material reality.

Three concepts for a new approach to intelligence agencies

The following section introduces three concepts, which may offer interesting lenses through which an empirically rich and analytically interesting approach to intelligence agencies could be developed. The three concepts presented here are security, secrecy, and bureaucracy. These are, of course, only suggestions to stimulate thought and discussion, and many more interesting avenues of research exist.

Security

Security is a well-established concept both in neo-realist and critical international relations theory, and the ways it has been developed in these traditions can be mined for intelligence research (Booth, 2005; Salter and Mutlu, 2012; Williams and McDonald, 2018). Most intelligence scholars, both historians and political scientists, proceed from the assumption that intelligence agencies exist in order to contribute to state security (Farson et al., 2008; Johnson and Wirtz, 2014). However, is this indeed so, and what does state security actually mean when it is operationalised by intelligence workers?

A debate exists within neo-realist paradigms about the relationship between intelligence agencies and international or global security (Hastedt, 1991: 64-65). Some scholars argue that in the case of very powerful states, intelligence agencies project sovereignty beyond national borders, which may or may not have destabilising effects. In pursuing global goals, powerful states use secret operations to maintain or enhance their power (Wieck, 2013: 150). Richard Aldrich calls this the exercise of hyperpower via intelligence work (Aldrich, 2013; Cormac and Aldrich, 2018). Numerous examples can be cited both for the stabilizing and destabilizing role of intelligence agencies. In the 1950s, the then US president Eisenhower resisted expanding the US nuclear arsenal largely due to intelligence work showing that Soviet weapons were not as dangerous as often assumed. During the 1962

Cuban Missiles Crisis, the CIA informed the then US President Kennedy that Russian head of state Khrushchev's aggressive attitude was not shared by other Soviet leaders. This information gave Kennedy the confidence to wait, rather than to order Cuba's immediate bombardment (Hitz, 2010: 261). However, the Cold War also provides for the destabilizing effect of intelligence agencies, such as the downing in 1960, of a US spy plane that had entered Soviet air space in order to collect aerial intelligence (the famous U2 incident). Contemporary politics also offers numerous examples for the destabilizing effect of agencies. One such incident is the fake vaccination programme mounted by the CIA in Pakistan to access bin Laden's DNA (Shah, 2011). Others include the surveillance of German leader Angela Merkel's mobile phone by US agencies (Appelbaum, 2013), and in the early 2000s, the provision of incorrect information to German intelligence agencies by the Iraqi informant »Curveball«, which was used by the Bush administration to justify attacking Iraq in 2003 (Drogin, 2008).

The cooperation of intelligence agencies, both via official and unofficial channels, may be considered a form of low diplomacy that allows states, which are formally at war or at odds, to work together (Aldrich, 2013). Here, intelligence agencies may help to maintain communication channels and contribute to finding diplomatic and peaceful solutions to conflicts. The fact that intelligence reform is now frequently included into security reform projects in Asia and Africa also furthers this view (Bruneau and Dombroski 2014). On the other hand, intelligence agencies allow democratic states to secretly carry out undemocratic politics at home and abroad (Grey, 2007; Rejali, 2009). Thus, agencies may actively undermine the very peace bonus that some scholars assume democracies carry.

The above debates do provide for some interesting and underexplored avenues into the relationship between international relations and intelligence agencies. Yet, what remains utterly missing from the literature is an approach that takes seriously the manner in which intelligence agencies themselves (re)produce certain notions of security and insecurity. Only a tiny body of historical studies and memoirs provide some information as regards to this question (Dietl, 2007; Juretzko and Dietl, 2005; Maddell, 2015).

For example, Ibrahim Al-Marashi's analysis of telegrams sent by regional Iraqi intelligence officers shows a remarkable standardisation of derogatory phrases applied to persons at the receiving end of state violence, be they civilians or fighters. Al-Marashi refers to this as the bureaucratization of language (Al-Marashi, 2003: 3). At the same time, state violence is minimised by describing, for example, house demolitions, or deportations as purification or as necessary measures. Al-Marashi convincingly argues that this language

demonstrates the security apparatus's obsession with criminalizing regime enemies while justifying its own, criminal violence (Al-Marashi, 2003: 21). Applying some insights from critical security theory and taking into account some of my initial research results from the archives of the East German intelligence agency, I would argue that Al-Marashi's analysis could be pushed further. The internal communication of the East German intelligence bureaucracy shows similar tendencies to use standardized derogatory terms for persons engaged in undesirable behaviour (e.g. traitor, for someone attempting to leave the country illegally), or euphemistic phrases for its own politically dubious activities (e.g. friendship activity for gifting weapons to a poorer state). While there has been no analysis of West German intelligence agencies' language and my research has not yet extended this far, criminologists have shown similar tendencies in West German police rhetoric with regards to terror suspects (Kretschmann, 2017). The question that arises is: why, if this communication is for internal purposes only and frequently marked top secret, is it necessary to use euphemistic and (often quite absurd) derogatory phrases? For whom is this stilted language? A second similarity that this brief comparison between Iraqi and German intelligence language shows is the repetitive use of ritualised forms of address, as well as ideological slogans. In both cases, officers and ministers address each other as »comrades«, the Germans sign off with »socialist greetings«, while the Iraqis encourage each other to »live long for the struggle«. Given the internal nature of the archived communication, it seems clear that the highly normative language was not intended to justify intelligence activities to potentially critical outside observers. Instead, the language probably served to reinforce a common perspective on contemporary politics among intelligence officers, to reassure each other of one's shared loyalty, commitment and goals, and to teach a particular interpretation of what state security meant at this point in time and how precisely intelligence officers were expected to serve it. From this perspective, the main purpose of Iraqi and German intelligence agencies appears to go far beyond than »providing information to policymakers that may help to illuminate their decision options« (Johnson, 2010: 3). Instead, the agencies emerge as sites where the meaning of state security is created and the link between linguistic security devices and concrete security practices is forged. The fact that these activities are conducted within the paradoxical situation of sanctioned secrecy sets them apart from similar processes within other state security institutions. It is to the puzzle secrecy poses that the next section turns.

Secrecy

What is actually secret about intelligence agencies? What effect can this paradox, that everyone knows about their simultaneously secret existence, have? Some of the most interesting research done on secrecy and intelligence is that of Louis Fisher, a specialist in US constitutional law. His work describes in detail the nitty-gritty legal procedures, through which the state-secret privilege is actually upheld and fought over. Since 9/11, both the Bush II and the Obama administrations have heavily relied on, and extended, the use of the state secret privilege to protect what Fisher describes as »abusive, illegal and unconstitutional actions« by the US government (Fisher, 2016; Fisher, 2010). The legal precedent upon which US courts base the state secrets privilege is the 1953 *United States v. Reynolds* case, in which three widows took legal action to access an army report into the plane crash that killed their husbands. Government officials claimed that the report contained secret information relevant to national security. However, two lower courts ruled that the widows' claim to a fair trial meant that the report should be checked at least »in camera« - e.g. by a judge. Eventually the Supreme Court ruled in the government's favour, creating the key precedent used to justify state secrets today. When the air crash report was eventually declassified, it was discovered that the government had lied. The report contained no information relevant to national security, but it showed that army officials had been negligent with airplane security.

Fisher's research shows that the procedures through which intelligence agencies' secrecy is created can be investigated, described, and analysed by looking at the (conflictual) practices that are mobilised in the process. His work provides excellent insights into the research methodologies and theoretical questions required to develop critical academic studies about the political effect of secrecy. Arguably, for international relations scholars, his work is nevertheless too concentrated on the domestic situation of the US. Secrecy provides intelligence agencies with significant autonomy and produces a layer of international relations that the discipline has yet to take into account. I mention here briefly only two fields of activity as illustration: firstly, international trade, and secondly, the exchange of knowledge about surveillance and the pre-emption of unrest. Research of archival and public information shows that German and Arab intelligence agencies were and are actively involved in the development and trade of weapons and surveillance technology. In the public record, instances of such trade are frequently described as scandals; IR scholarship should acknowledge this trade as a standard aspect of intelligence agency activity (Buthmann, 2004; Deutscher Bundestag 12. Wahl-

periode, 1994; Hippler, 1991; Naylor, 1999: 296–332; Privacy International, 2016; Todd and Bloch, 2003: 78-86). The East German Ministry for State Security, which ran a large, international weapons trade of which the rest of the government had only minimal knowledge, is an extreme example (Buthmann, 2004).⁷ Interestingly for IR scholars, this intelligence-industrial complex involved a significant number of West German agents and companies, indicating that the West German government, or at least its intelligence agencies, had good knowledge of this trade, which, on the Arab side, included customers and businessmen from Egypt, Iraq, Yemen and Jordan (Deutscher Bundestag 12. Wahlperiode, 1994: 184). This underexplored economic aspect of intelligence work draws attention to how actors that are generally understood as political may indeed shape the economic dimension of international relations, as has been convincingly argued by e.g. Laleh Kahlili (Khalili, 2017).

Regarding the international exchange of knowledge about surveillance and pre-empting (and repressing) unrest, there is plentiful evidence of the mutual exchange of knowledge between German and Arab intelligence (and police) agencies about what population groups require special attention or from which situations unrest may arise, about technological innovations in the field of surveillance, agent recruitment and anti-terror operations. This knowledge exchange takes place directly, via training, advisory and exchange programmes, as well as indirectly, via mutual surveillance of each others's operations and tactics. In both cases (trade and surveillance) German and Arab intelligence agencies engage in international activity, which, as it occurs relatively autonomously from other government policies, appears to form a separate layer of international relations outside of other state or market channels. Sanctioned secrecy, created via the accepted, limited government oversight of intelligence agencies, enables a whole set of international activity that currently remains outside the study of IR.

In addition to these examples of very concrete research into the activities of intelligence agencies enabled by the state-secret privilege there exists a long-standing philosophical and sociological investigation into the broader relationship between secrecy, the social word and state sovereignty (Almond, 2003; Simmel, 1908; Warner, 2012; Weber, 2002). For example, the German sociologists Georg

Simmel and Max Weber analyse the role of secrecy in the social life of individuals (Simmel) and as an element of bureaucratic power (Weber) respectively. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida investigated the ontological status of secrecy, and its relationship to sacred and thus sovereign knowledge. A secret, argues Derrida, holds the promise of sovereignty, because its existence simultaneously holds the promise of revelation of truth, e.g. of sovereign knowledge. Secrecy thus appears to be essential for meaning and communication, because its end would mean the end of all questions and thus all meaning: nothing more could be said (Almond, 2003: 463). Ever since Derrida's writings, a number of other philosophical works about the relationship between secrecy, truth and reality have appeared (Barbour, 2017). With regards to the study of intelligence agencies, this highly abstract literature nevertheless provides important food for thought about the way intelligence agencies may perform secrecy and how this contributes to maintaining the idea (or effect) of the state and its legitimate claim to sovereignty (Melley, 2012; Mitchell, 1991; Schlichte, 2004: 152-153; Schlichte and Migdal, 2005). Here, the performance of secrecy may serve as a constant performance of state's assumed, untrammelled sovereignty – which Foucault termed »the king's head«, and which may not have been cut off as resolutely as he assumed (Foucault et al., 2003; Neal, 2004).

Bureaucracy

Intelligence agencies are closely associated with bureaucratic organisation. As the captured files of the East German and Iraqi intelligence agencies show, their day-to-day operations were indeed intensely bureaucratic (Al-Marashi, 2003; Sassoon, 2011, 2014). US intelligence agencies, in 2010, produced an overwhelming 50,000 reports annually, meaning that many reports ended up being ignored (Priest and Arkin, 2010). Managing documents and files forms an enormous part of intelligence agencies' work and it is surprising that this is not even remotely reflected in the academic literature.

Using »bureaucracy« as a conceptual lens focuses attention on the practices of institutionalisation, which seem to govern the existence of modern intelligence agencies worldwide, at least to a degree (Hastedt, 1991: 63). The sheer volume of information and persons that intelligence agencies need to manage creates a need for standardisation at every level. As a result, agencies produce templates, standard operating procedures, and guidelines for the movement of files, communication, hiring processes, and so forth.⁸ Here, the

⁷ This trade formed part of the so-called »commercial coordination section«, created to raise foreign currency reserves for the GDR. The weapons trade was conducted primarily via the front company IMES and via a secret weapons storage facility near Rostock. In Germany, this trade has been quite well researched; however, not academically. There appear to be scarcely any English language sources on the topic. See for example http://www.ddr-wissen.de/wiki/ddr.pl?IMES_GmbH for some online material in German.

⁸ For example, the 1979 regulations manual of the Iraqi military intelligence agency contains 200 pages and specifies detailed standard operating procedures, ranging from job descriptions for even minor roles, to instructions on how

well-known bureaucratic demands for efficiency and brevity are found: the use of curtailed language and acronyms, the differentiation of professional roles, the uses of databases to eliminate human error, and the development of social profiles and categories. In this sense, intelligence agencies share many features of other state institutions. Yet, in other ways, the specific demands of intelligence work create inherent tensions to the bureaucratic mode. This is because human intelligence (e.g. the use of spies to harvest information) and to a lesser degree secrecy, requires the mobilisation of precisely those human elements that bureaucratic processes attempt to eliminate: emotions, unpredictability, risk, creativity, deceit, and charade.⁹ And: intelligence agencies serve an array of different masters pursuing contradictory goals: foreign ministries, which seek diplomatic solutions and cooperation, the military which prepares for warfare and the destruction of the enemy, and ministries of the economy, which seek to improve industrial output. This should create institutional tensions that go beyond the much-studied complications that bureaucracies tend to develop everywhere. Finally, political convictions (i.e., ideology) or at least patriotism has been and probably remains a very important factor shaping the work of agencies, adding a further layer of intensely human behaviour to their institutional design.

Anthropology, sociology and increasingly international relations have produced a fine body of work on how bureaucratic practices serve to materially implement the idea of the state (Bierschenk and de Sardan, 2014; Ferguson and Gupta, 2002; Schlichte, 2015; Schlichte and Migdal, 2005; Sharma and Gupta, 2006). Bureaucracies can produce state authority, including in contexts where national legitimacy is absent (Feldman, 2008; Piiparinen, 2008). Bureaucratic files contain and reproduce on command vast and specific information about large numbers of people and thus serve to create

to judge human sources, fill in and handle travel reports, or prepare ID badges - including template forms and pre-prepared texts. MfS, Main Dept.HA I, Memorandum, 6th May 1980, in BstU, Hauptabteilung (HA) I 13690, pp. 245-425. Similarly, the East German foreign intelligence branch Hauptverwaltung A (HVA) operated pre-printed questionnaires to be filled in with the personal data of persons about whom information was sought, included standardised categories for anything ranging from hair, skin or eye colour to language abilities, addresses and so on. MfS, Working Group (AG) Commercial Coordination, Summary Document for Mohamed Hasan, undated, in MfS, AG BKK 98/Teil 1 von 2, pp. 44-48.

⁹ An example of this tension is found in the above-mentioned personal data questionnaires of the Stasi. In one document, the standardised field »Occupation/Qualification« states, in incredibly neat handwriting: »weapons- and drug trader, company owner« - a clash between the bureaucratic logic of assigning every person an »occupation«, and the human intelligence logic of seeking out precisely those people engaged in non-standard and exceptional activities.

a population upon which the state can intervene. On the other hand, bureaucracies also allow people to participate in government and can create a group of loyal cadres (Eckert, 2014; Feldman, 2008: 20). Finally, the form and circulation of files determines who can access information, how information is shared, and what kind of information receives priority or falls to the wayside (Kafka, 2012; Vismann, 2000).

Approaching intelligence agencies through the lens of bureaucracy promises applicable and interesting research avenues for IR scholars. They could deliver relevant insights into, for example, bureaucratic procedures that create privileged access to knowledge, whether such access affects employees' loyalty to the state and whether comparable processes are at work in different states. Of similar interest could be the bureaucratic processes through which domestic intelligence work is distinguished from foreign work and how, in these processes, different aspects of state sovereignty are reproduced. In this regard, there appears to be an interesting distinction between German and Arab agencies. While German foreign intelligence agencies were, and are, interested in collecting all kinds of general and specific information about the Iraqi state and society, Iraqi agencies in Germany have been closely focused on their own citizens.¹⁰ Research that is nevertheless still in its early stages, has found not a single incident of a German citizen being handled as an informer for an Iraqi agency (in Germany), while the opposite case is relatively frequent. This appears to indicate that while German foreign agencies operationalise an interventionist understanding of German sovereignty, Iraqi foreign agencies rather function as an extension of domestic control over Iraqi citizens abroad (I emphasise that this research is still in its initial stages, and that no research has yet been conducted in Iraqi archives).

Conclusion

The study of intelligence agencies promises important innovations to IR. Firstly, much remains to be found out about the material reality of what agencies actually do in the international: what are their (micro-)practices, how are information and personnel managed, how do agencies communicate with other actors, how do they acquire technology, what departments do they run and for what purpose? A sheer endless number of questions remain unanswered. Secondly, proceeding perhaps from this material reality, the study of more abstract, but no less important questions promises rewarding insights: how do the actions of agencies construct domestic and international space? Do

¹⁰ The only exceptions identified so far are cases, in which Arab governments want to identify German engineering companies willing to (illegally) sell embargoed goods.

national cultures really determine the functioning of agencies? Or is it rather, that the particular knowledge that agencies produce about the international shapes its national culture? How do intelligence agencies contribute to the way international relations function and are governed?

In this article, I address the most glaring gaps in the study of intelligence by proposing a modest set of ideas that may galvanize IR scholars to take up the challenge. In addition, the article offers three methodological approaches, through which interesting, and empirically and theoretically rich research projects may develop: first, by looking at the way agencies contribute to and construct security, second, by studying the way secrecy is mobilized around intelligence agencies and third, by analysing how the bureaucratic practices of intelligence agencies intersect with the idea, effect and practice of state power.

IR scholars need not be deterred by an assumed lack of material about intelligence agencies. Substantive amounts of documents are available in archives and in public record, and can be supplemented with interviews. Diverse language abilities are indeed necessary to conduct comparative research of different agencies, and given the lack of secondary literature, intelligence research does require time and money. However, given the possibilities of breaking truly new ground in an area where little has been published, this should not pose too great of a challenge for the development of avenues into this exiting field.

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