Intelligence Collection during the Civil War

An Honors Thesis (HIST 470)

by

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Abstract

Intelligence and its collection is an everyday staple and necessity in the United States but it has not always been this way. Forms of intelligence have been conducted for all of American History, but it is widely believed that the true history of the intelligence began during the World Wars in the early twentieth century. However, intelligence was conducted long before that and through the examination of intelligence collection and methods during the Civil War this thesis demonstrates exactly why that history should indeed begin with this major nineteenth-century conflict and not the World Wars. During the Civil War many old forms of intelligence were used but many new forms were devised and developed and it is these new methods that are the roots of, and laid the groundwork for, the rise of intelligence during the World Wars.

Acknowledgements

Process Analysis Statement

Over the course of my time here at Ball State I have certainly grown as a writer, researcher, and historian all thanks to the wonderful classes in the Honors College, History Department, and Philosophy Department. When deciding on a topic for my thesis I chose to combine my past and time here with my future goals. Seeing as I want to work in the intelligence community, I decided that researching the history of intelligence in the United States would provide me with a unique approach to the study of the Civil War and an interesting topic that was relevant to my future aspirations. Unfortunately, very little has been written on the intelligence collection and methodologies during the Civil War, but I was up to the task. Years of choosing obscure topics to write papers on has lent me the researching skills to find sources and relevant information in unlikely places.

When I started my research, my topic was broad, merely examining the methodologies of the various types of intelligence that functioned during the Civil War. As my research progressed, I thought adding a section on the history of intelligence might be relevant. It was through this that I discovered that the Civil War is barely even considered in the history of intelligence in the United States. This was surprising considering the information I had found, and so I had identified exactly what I was going to argue. I was going to examine the methods of intelligence during the Civil War in order to prove that the history of intelligence should start with this war and not the World Wars, as it so often does. This is incredibly significant because that means that my thesis is not only writing about an already underexplored topic in the scope of Civil War history, but it is also attempting to expand the scope of the history of intelligence at large.

Identifying my topic, thesis, and locating my research was all relatively easy thanks to the experience I have gained in doing so from the past few years as an undergraduate. However, I faced a very different challenge with this thesis, one I was not expecting. Surprisingly, I found actually sitting down and writing my thesis to be quite difficult. I knew all of the information I wanted to cover but typing it out was a challenge. This year amidst everything in the world and my personal life, the end of the semester was difficult and finding that motivation to write was a struggle. Although as I began to write, I made sure to break it into chunks. I wrote about three to four pages at a time, sometimes more, sometimes less and spread it out over a few days. I think as a whole though taking this time and separating the writing out really helped to strengthen my paper. It ensured that each time I sat down to write I had a specific and clear goal in mind and that I wasn't trying to jam everything in at once. Taking that time was certainly a valuable lesson in the long run.

I am incredibly proud of what I have accomplished with this thesis and glad that it serves as a representative work for my time here at Ball State. I believe that through this thesis I successfully identify a variety of methods of intelligence that were conducted during the Civil War and that I convincingly argue that the foundations of modern intelligence are rooted in this major conflict and not the World Wars, as is so popularly conveyed. I believe the knowledge and experience I have gained from the execution of this thesis will continue to be relevant as I move forward in my life and hoped for career.

Introduction

In the world today the collection of intelligence for military, security, or political purposes is a normal and necessary function that is always operating and takes a wide variety of forms. This has not always been the case. Intelligence did not really begin to adopt its modern form until the World Wars and even then, it was not really until the Cold War that intelligence was seen as the everyday necessity for the United States. This, of course, does not mean that intelligence did not exist before the World Wars. In fact, intelligence has been conducted for all of American history, but there has been little examination of intelligence collection beyond works on spies and reconnaissance units. This paper examines the various methods of intelligence that were used by both the Union and the Confederacy during the Civil War, to argue that while the official history of intelligence has not been considered as starting until 1914 in the United States, many of the foundations of that intelligence began during the Civil War.

Historiography

Not much has been written on intelligence operations and methodology before the World Wars and hence there is not much literature on the Civil War itself. Many of the examinations that come close are discussions of the effectiveness and impact of intelligence on certain battles or decisions. There is also considerable research on spies and their stories, which are only a mere fraction of the intelligence operations during the Civil War. Most surveys of intelligence discuss how it was used and a very few merely mention how it was conducted and, in these cases, it is simply as a byproduct of discussing its impact on generals and their use of intelligence on or around the battlefield.

The use of intelligence during the Civil War by both the Union and the Confederacy was vast but sometimes evidence of these functions is lacking. The major deficit of information is on

the Confederate side of intelligence and there are many reasons for this. As the Union army closed in on the Confederate capital, Jefferson Davis and other officials burned a large number of official documents and correspondence. So, many documents pertaining to their intelligence operations or even organizations and individuals were completely destroyed, leaving very little behind. Another reason for this lack of evidence was post-war reconciliation. After the war, a country divided was coming together again and so talking about spying on each other became awkward. Officials did not want to linger on who spied on the other and Confederate spies were afraid to reveal themselves for fear of retaliation. In reports during the war and in memoirs afterwards, many instances of intelligence use or collection were entirely omitted.[1] Some spies wrote their own memoirs, but there are many more that did not and whose contributions we will never be able to recognize. Finally, because intelligence was in its early stages much of the important relevant evidence is buried between the lines and in other irrelevant reports or correspondence. That is to say, because of the difference in terminology and the lack of a formal recognition of intelligence or any separate organizations, evidence of actual intelligence operations is buried in the day-to-day reports, letters, and notes of other government agencies. And sometimes even then the language and definitions used pose their own barriers to historians who are attempting to sift through this information and determine its relevance to intelligence.

What is Intelligence?

How intelligence is defined today is very different than how it was framed back then. At that time, intelligence simply meant new information that had been gathered, while what is considered as intelligence today had no real name or grouping during the Civil War.[2] The closest

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[1] Edwin C. Fishel, *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1996), 6.

[2] Fishel, *Secret War for the Union,* 8.

equivalent was the term "Secret Service" but that also incorporated normal detective work which is not necessarily considered intelligence today.[3] Today the definition of intelligence has many complex working pieces and apparatuses, but in general terms it encompasses the gathering of knowledge and information to be analyzed and used in some way or form for military, political, or security purposes. There are many different aspects and types of intelligence today as well, some of which were used during the Civil War.

So, before diving into the nuances of how exactly intelligence was conducted, the following is a brief overview of the types of intelligence that were used during the Civil War and that will be discussed throughout this paper. One common form of intelligence is reconnaissance or cavalry units in the military. These units went ahead of the army and scouted in order to gain information on the enemy's whereabouts, size, positions, and potentially their plans. Another common and older form of intelligence was gathered from spies. Both the North and the South had many spies during the war and the use of spies for the gathering of intelligence had been used in the past and is still used, to some extent, today. During the Civil War, there were also two unique forms of intelligence collection that came from civilians and escaped slaves. Both of these forms of intelligence were entirely unorganized, but are nonetheless still relevant to the whole story of intelligence and how it was conducted during the Civil War. These three types of intelligence (reconnaissance, spies, and civilians) are known as human intelligence (HUMINT) today.[4] There are two types of HUMINT: Active and Passive. Reconnaissance and spies are active HUMINT while the intelligence gained through civilians and escaped slaves are passive HUMINT.[5] A staple of intelligence operations today are organized and centralized intelligence

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[3] Fishel, *Secret War for the Union*, 8.

[4] William B. Feis*, Grant's Secret Service: The Intelligence War from Belmont to Appomattox* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 4.

[5] Feis, *Grant's Secret Service*, 4.

bureaus and departments that are in charge of gathering, organizing, analyzing, and disseminating intelligence. At the beginning of the Civil War, there were no such organizations but during the war some organizations with a semblance to modern ones were formed. While today there are many other types and categories of intelligence collection, the aforementioned ones were those mainly used during the Civil War and so will be the focus of the rest of this paper.

Organization of Collection and Dissemination

Understanding how the Union and Confederacy organized their intelligence operations is crucial to understanding the methods of collection and their relevance. Unsurprisingly the organizational structure of intelligence was very similar in both the North and the South from the outset of the war. However, as time went on each adapted that structure to their own needs and added new pieces as they created them and developed a further understanding of intelligence and its role and importance to their efforts.

All intelligence that was conducted was technically done on behalf of the respective governments, but it was entirely controlled and operated by each individual general or army commander. The generals received all of the intelligence and information that had been gathered, and it was left up to them to analyze, organize, and to decide whether or not to put that intelligence into action. This means that every other aspect of intelligence collection was under the generals, and it was up to them to determine the extent of their intelligence operations. Because there was no central organization on a high level other than the generals themselves that means that the collection of the various types of intelligence were intermixed with each other.

Each general typically had some form of detective agency in their employment. These agencies used spies to gather intelligence for the general they worked for and if that general was

replaced, then that specific agency might no longer be used by the military. A new agency

chosen or favored by the new general would replace them. For example, at the beginning of the

war General George McClellan was commanding the Army of the Potomac and while in that

position he employed the Pinkerton Detective Agency to conduct intelligence gathering

investigations and operations.[6] After McClellan was replaced in November of 1862, the

Pinkerton Agency moved on to other things and was no longer under the employment of the

Union government.[7]

While the detective agencies functioned independently of the military, a staple in military

operations was the cavalry units. These held importance long before the Civil War because they

are essentially reconnaissance units tasked with observing and locating the position of the enemy

and any other information they can gather. They then report that information to their

commanders and the general so that it can be used for making battle plans and decisions. The

work of the cavalry is very much a form of intelligence. While gathering information on the

positions of the enemy they also used scouts, or spies, to try and gain more specific information

regarding the enemy.[8] This means that, so far, army commanders had two different sources of

intelligence, both with a different purpose and scope of operation but both made use of spies.

Yet another branch of intelligence that functioned under the military was the Signal

Corps. The Civil War was the first use of the Signal Corps in military history. This unit would

send coded messages via flag or torch movements across the battlefield, in order to communicate

with the other parts of the army. This system was not developed or even invented until the late

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[6] Allan Pinkerton, *The Spy of the Rebellion: Being a True History of the Spy System of the United States Army During the Late Rebellion, Revealing Many Secrets of the war Hitherto not made Public* (Hartford, Conn: M. A. Winter and Hatch, 1883), 245. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/34973/34973-h/34973-h.htm#Page_237
[7] Pinkerton, *The Spy of the Rebellion*, 583.
[8] William A. Tidwell, *April '65: Confederate Covert Action in the American Civil War* (Kent, Oh: Kent State University Press, 1995), 54; Fishel, *Secret War for the Union,* 5.

1850s meaning that as the war went on the use and sophistication of the Signal Corps advanced.[9] Aside from simply communicating through signals, this Corps also observed enemy movements and positions via a telescope from higher ground and attempted to intercept the enemy's flag or torch transmissions.[10] All of the gathered information would be relayed to the general on the battlefield in order for him to make use of it in his decisions and commands. So, while this is a separate and new branch in the military it conducted intelligence operations in a similar manner and with a similar goal as that of the cavalry but used different methods and was employed at different times.

After these three pieces, intelligence collection became a lot less organized and more scattered and random. Various commanders and other army personnel received intelligence from local civilians, enemy deserters or prisoners of war, contraband, and anything else that they stumbled upon. There are some spies that functioned independently of any organization and simply relayed information to the army and there were also various commanders that would send soldiers on a scouting mission behind enemy lines. Some of this information gathered would be deemed relevant enough to send to the general but at other times it was simply used by the commander operating in that area at that moment.

By the end of the war, there were many different organizations in the governments that conducted some form of intelligence collection based on their own needs and goals. Most of these are irrelevant, but there was an attempt to centralize and further organize this collection. For example, in March of 1865 the Confederacy passed a "bill to establish a Bureau for Special and Secret Service."[11] Among other things this bureau was to be responsible for various

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[9] Fishel, *Secret War for the Union*, 37.
[10] Fishel, *Secret War for the Union, 4.*
[11] Tidwell, *April '65*, 213.

intelligence operations. Of course, the war would end not long after this was passed, and the bureau was never officially implemented but it does demonstrate a progression towards and a need for a more organized system of intelligence.

Reflecting on this organizational structure of intelligence during the Civil War it can be seen how many overlaps and pieces there were within the various functions of intelligence. Each of these pieces was not always in communication with the other, especially if they operated under different generals. This also meant that sometimes relevant information did not make it to the person that could use it and that loyal spies were sometimes thought to be enemy spies. The flow of all the information to the general also meant that often times the general in charge was flooded with so much information that he did not have the time to assess all of it and relevant pieces of intelligence were often flooded in a sea of irrelevant information. [12] As the war progressed the importance and sophistication of intelligence operations and collection grew; new methods were discovered, and new solutions were implemented. Some of this can be seen in this discussion of the general organizational structure, but this becomes clearer with the analysis and discussion of the specific methods employed and used by each group.

Detective Agencies

While detective agencies are not technically considered a source of intelligence today, during the Civil War they incorporated many functions and methodologies into their work for the army or government that are very much forms of intelligence. There were many of these agencies functioning in different areas during the Civil War, but they all seem to have had a similar purpose and goal in regard to their intelligence functions. So, for the sake of brevity, this section will examine the Pinkerton Detective Agency as an exemplar of this type of intelligence.

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[12] Fishel, *Secret War for the Union*, 123.

The Pinkerton Detective Agency had been established long before the Civil War and had even worked with McClellan before the outset of the war.[13] This agency was brought under the employment of the Union when McClellan was called to Washington D.C. to take command of the Army of the Potomac in July of 1861 and remained under the employment of the army and United States government until November of 1862 when McClellan was replaced. Their initial purpose according to the head of the Agency, Allan Pinkerton, was as follows:

> My corps was to be continually occupied in procuring, from all possible sources, information regarding the strength, positions and movements of the enemy. All spies, "contrabands," deserters, refugees and prisoners of war, coming into our lines from the front, were to be carefully examined by me, and their statements taken in writing.[14]

Pinkerton also noted that identifying, investigating, and arresting enemy spies was also a part of his job.[15] So, while the general purpose of his employment, as stated in the above quotation, was common amongst many other pieces of intelligence, the information regarding enemy spies, which is known as counterintelligence, was unique to agencies such as this one.

At the end of 1861, the Pinkerton Detective Agency had a mere 24 people under its employment including Allan Pinkerton himself.[16] The names of nearly all of these operatives are unknown as Pinkerton had everyone, including himself, operating under multiple aliases in order to both protect themselves and to prevent any bias so that they could conduct their operations anonymously. In doing so they were able to conduct operations and investigations and gain honest information from the individuals and more closely identify potential enemy spies. By conducting the interviews of individuals who crossed the front lines under aliases they protected

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[13] Fishel, *Secret War for the Union*, 53.
[14] Pinkerton, *The Spy of the Rebellion,* 245.
[15] Pinkerton, *The Spy of the Rebellion*, 247.
[16] Fishel, *Secret War for the Union,* 113

the mission now and going forward because it ensured more honest investigations and interactions. This also prevented the individuals from leaking the operatives' identities or reporting them to Confederate sympathizers. This was especially important in his spy-chasing endeavors and this also ensured the safety of his operatives and potentially their families as well.

When interviewing the various individuals that came across the front lines, Pinkerton's operatives asked all manner of questions regarding the Confederates' strength, positions, fortifications, provisions, security, the economy, and whatever else was deemed relevant.[17] This information, regardless of who it came from or what it was, was compiled into a report and sent to McClellan. The information in these reports was not condensed or checked in any way, meaning that they contained conflicting, false, and repetitive information as well as good material. Due to the number of interviews and the lack of condensation, McClellan received about fifty or more pages of information a week which he would have to make sense of himself.[18] This is problematic in a number of ways. He was flooded with so much information that simply sifting through it would take up a large chunk of his time that could have been spent doing something else. This also meant that useful information might not get used or even identified, and that time sensitive information might not be realized until after its relevance had passed. So, while this method of collecting intelligence was effective the next step to make it actually useful and actionable was not taken. The interrogators simply asked questions, recorded information, made some minor judgement calls regarding reliability or veracity and then sent it to McClellan. This effectively flooded the general with so much information that the relevant and useful pieces were buried in a sea of irrelevant information. This also meant that McClellan was often given false information as well.

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[17] Fishel, *Secret War for the Union*, 113.
[18] Fishel, *Secret War for the Union,* 114.

While the interrogations and their reports were not the most effective or successful in the long run, the opposite can be said about the spy-chasing and investigating aspect of the agency. The most publicized and widely known success was the capture of the Confederate spy Rose O'Neal Greenhow. The investigation into whether or not someone is a spy usually began with some form of suspicion. This could have been suspicious activity that had been reported or known Confederate sympathies, among other things.[19] Often times it was a combination of these factors and others that would prompt a closer look and investigation into an individual. For the most part the investigation was simply observing the actions and activities of the individual for a period of time, making further notes of anything suspicious or of any evidence that they were, or could be, a spy. After a period of time, a decision would be made on what to do. If the detectives had found some evidence or suspicious happenings, they would move in to arrest the individual and search their home and person for further evidence of espionage or other traitorous acts. In the case of Rose Greenhow, after Pinkerton observed her for a number of days, he had determined that she was a spy based on her interactions with others. On August 23, 1861, late in the evening as she was returning home, Pinkerton and another of his operatives approached and arrested her.[20] They took her inside her house where an immediate and extensive search of all of her papers and writings took place. More detectives showed up as they went through her entire house and all of her belongings, gathering further evidence of her espionage work.[21] They also detained and interrogated anyone that stopped by her house over the next couple of days to determine whether or not they were involved in her spy work. The extreme thoroughness and the execution of the observation and arrest of Greenhow allowed the authorities and Union

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[19] Pinkerton, *The Spy of the Rebellion*, 252-253.

[20] Rose O'Neal Greenhow, *My Imprisonment and the First Year of Abolition Rule at Washington* (London: Richard Bentley, 1863), 52 & 54.

[21] Greenhow, *My Imprisonment*, 56

government to successfully arrest and imprison her for being a spy as well as gaining information on some of her possible accomplices. This success and others were extremely beneficial to the overall intelligence functions of the war. In the Midwest similar detective agencies also investigated civilians in local towns and surrounding areas in order to identify spies, locate deserters and enemy sympathizers, and identify possible uprisings or hostile groups.[22] These counterintelligence operations were almost solely carried out by detective agencies and were all conducted very similarly to the investigation of Greenhow. As a whole, they were quite significant and successful in regard to the history of intelligence and in gathering relevant information on spies and their operations.

As a whole, the role of detective agencies in the broad picture of intelligence during the Civil War was important, but their effectiveness during the war and in regard to military operations, was minimal. They were quite successful in gathering information but the lack of assessment of the information led to an overabundance, rendering it mostly useless and ineffective to the general that employed them. Their counterintelligence operations, on the other hand, were quite successful. Being organized and methodical in their investigation, search and arrest allowed for the successful capture of spies and informants among other things.

Reconnaissance

A staple of the military even before the Civil War was the cavalry. The cavalry was often made up of mounted units, though not necessarily or always, who were in charge of locating and keeping track of the enemy forces and movements. They would gather information and report it back to their commander so it could be used in battle plans or movement decisions. Keeping up to date on the whereabouts and movements of the enemy was crucial so as to avoid a surprise

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[22] Stephen E. Towne, *Surveillance and Spies in the Civil War: Exposing Confederate Conspiracies in America's Heartland* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2015), 95.

attack or merely to make smart battlefield and tactical decisions. This was often the goal and purpose of most intelligence operations, but, as a part of the army itself, all of this intelligence gathering was done by uniformed soldiers and collected on or around fields of battle. This also means that the effectiveness of the cavalry was very important and in some cases the cavalry was relied upon heavily for information, unlike many other forms of intelligence at this time. The cavalry gained its information in two different ways.

Some of this information was gathered from members of the unit themselves who were on patrol.[23] These would be direct observations of the enemy regarding their whereabouts, size, and movements. These observations would then be reported to their commander who then determined whether or not to send it along to the general. This group also includes a number of engineers who were a part of the cavalry and conducted their own type of reconnaissance that allowed them to make maps of the terrain. These maps would then be used to determine some of the effects that the terrain might have on their movements or battle plans.[24] While these maps did not directly pertain to information regarding the enemy, they were still a form of intelligence. The gathering of this information and consequent use of it was crucial to understanding and developing one's own battle plans and tactics as well as giving insight into what the enemy might do. This terrain information combined with the observations also allowed the general to speculate about the enemy's plans.

The majority of their information though came from a number of cavalry scouts. Cavalry scouts were individuals who operated as a part of the cavalry and the army, but functioned, in many ways, like spies. They were "trained in observation and experienced in operating behind

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[23] William A Tidwell, James O. Hall, and David Winfred Gaddy, *Come Retribution: The Confederate Secret Service and the Assassination of Lincoln* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 109.
[24] Tidwell, Hall, Gaddy, *Come Retribution*, 110.

enemy lines."[25] These scouts would secretly go behind enemy lines in order to gain closer, more reliable, and accurate information regarding the size, location, and movement of the enemy. Since they functioned as individuals and not in large groups, they were able to employ stealth and secrecy to gather more relevant and significant intelligence than the patrols and the cavalry at large. While they operated alone, their operations were not random or self-selected. The scouts would be sent on specific missions with specific purposes and once they gathered that relevant information they would return to their commander and report their information. For the most part these scouts were used so as to keep the general up to date regarding information for the whole of the battlefield.[26] The information attained by these scouts was incredibly useful and often played a major role in the general's tactical decisions. The higher level of reliability and accuracy of the information attained by these scouts certainly strengthened its usefulness and hence the general's reliance on this intelligence.

Signal Corps

Before the outset of the Civil War the Signal Corps did not exist, much less had it been field tested or used in battle. This corps was first instituted in the Confederacy and was eventually incorporated into the Union army as well. The system used by the corps was invented in the late 1850s by an army surgeon, Major Albert Myer, and was adopted by the Confederacy so readily because his assistants became Southern officers when the war broke out.[27] This invention was a significant addition to and advancement in the field of military intelligence and battlefield communications.

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[25] Tidwell, Hall, Gaddy, *Come Retribution,* 110.
[26] Tidwell, *April '65*, 54.
[27] Fishel, *Secret War for the Union,* 10.

The Signal Corps was a part of the army that was responsible for conducting communications across the battlefield and the army as a whole. This was executed through the signaling of a message via a flag and/or torch, observing these signals, interpreting them, and sending the information on to the commander or general. Once both sides had developed a Signal Corps, they would also attempt to intercept enemy signals on the battlefield, and they would also generally observe the happenings on the battlefield via a telescope.[28] This addition to the military was quite significant. It greatly improved battlefield communications and their efficiency as well as their secrecy. Because the messages were in code it made them harder to intercept. The simplicity of the system also meant that it was easily transportable and could be conducted at night or during the day or even in an impromptu manner if necessary. Even when not directly communicating or observing the signals, the members of the corps could gather information on the enemies' movements and actions on the battlefield with their telescopes, and then relay said information to the general. Each of these pieces demonstrate how the Signal Corps functioned as a new branch of intelligence gathering within the military during the Civil War as well as how this corps increased the amount of knowledge and information that was and could be communicated across the battlefield.

Spies

Spies are probably the most popular and written about topic regarding intelligence during the Civil War. There are memoirs from individuals who were spies and various recountings and analyses of spy work are readily available. Although because of its popularity and the public fascination with spies, one has to lend a skeptical eye toward the stories and details recounted in spy memoirs. Despite this obvious possibility of possible bias or even false claims and

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[28] Tidwell, Hall, Gaddy, *Come Retribution,* 83.

information, spy memoirs and accounts are still widely relevant to the examination of

intelligence during the Civil War. While the stories themselves could have problems, the basis

and foundation of how spies conducted their operations, gathered intelligence, and sent said

intelligence to generals or officials is more reliable and since it is the basic methodology, it is

less likely to have been exaggerated or lied about in memoirs. The reason that exaggeration or

lies could be found in memoirs is because spies themselves were weaving their own compelling

story. They could underemphasize a role of one person and overemphasize the importance of

another all for the purpose of their story. This can be found in various types of spy memoirs, and

even the later analysis often adopted such exaggerations and some even began to romanticize the

role of female Confederate spies.[29] Being aware of this is relevant when examining the memoirs

of spies, but when looking at how they operated the likelihood of romanticization or

exaggeration decreases.

In general, spies functioned in both the Union and Confederacy mainly on the East coast

in or around Richmond, Virginia and Washington, D.C. There were, of course, spies elsewhere

throughout the United States, but a majority of the information regarding spies focuses on this

specific geographic area. The accounts not located around the capitals are, for the most part, still

located in and around the opposing armies. Although due to the military's use of this information

the majority of spy work was being done around the capitals of the Confederacy and the Union,

because that is where the most information could be gathered, and it was more easily accessible

by citizens and not just members of the military.

Since there were many spies functioning in varying levels of capacity and secrecy

throughout the United States during the Civil War, this also means that there were countless

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[29] Fishel, *Secret War for the Union,* 3.

methods that these spies used and employed in their work. The extent of the work and methods used by these spies will never fully be known, since the work of some spies was never recorded, or the records have long since been lost or destroyed. Some spies operated based on their instinct and prior knowledge rather than any prior training or methodology, while others functioned with a purpose, within a system or organization. Even still, there were some spies who took up this work voluntarily without being prompted by an outside person or source, and there were others who were recruited because of their connections or were asked to be spies by their commanding officer. While the situations, functions, and levels of experience varied greatly among spies, all of their work is considered a form of intelligence.

However they became spies, their methods varied greatly depending on their situation, purpose, and background. Some spies operated under aliases and used disguises while others simply maintained their normal lives but passed along pertinent information to the army or government.[30] In some cases, the spies used ciphers to encode their messages and secretly sent them through a series of loyal citizens to their respective contact. For example Rose O'Neal Greenhow destroyed her cipher when she was captured.[31] Other spies never recorded their information; they simply gathered all the information they could about the enemy, before returning to the army or agency they worked for. This illuminates two types of spies: long-term and temporary. The long-term spies would stay in a location and blend into society. They were often located in the capitals, and then devised ways of secretly sending their messages to the relevant people. Short term, or temporary, spies went behind enemy lines for a certain amount of

[30] Lewis H. Bond, *The Capture and Trial of a Confederate Spy sent to Ohio by Jefferson Davis* (Cincinnati, OH: H. C. Sherick & Co. 1887), 4. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t15m6mj92&view=1up&seq=3
[31] Greenhow, *My Imprisonment,* 61

time in order to gain specific information regarding the enemy status, before returning back home. These spies often were a part of the military or some agency.

Most spies operated on enemy soil and were located somewhere either near the capitals or the army and fortifications. However, there were some Union spies whose purpose was to spy on Union citizens. These spies were sent by a government bureau or hired agency to locate Confederate sympathizers and identify potential insurrections.[32] These spies used the same or at least very similar methodologies to that of 'normal' spies, but these spies were not gathering intelligence on military plans or operations and they were not spying on the enemy. They were spying on their own citizens. In many cases they would be sent to a town or area under an alias with a background story in order to interact with suspected locals. In doing this they could, in some cases, identify those harboring defectors and, in others, locate those planning an insurrection or some other form of conspiracy.[33] This in itself is significant because it demonstrates the discovery of a need for a different type of intelligence as well as a diverge from strictly military intelligence.

Another unique consideration regarding spies was the danger they faced. The spies operating in enemy territory constantly faced the possibility of being caught and the consequences that came with it. In most cases if they were caught and the enemy had physical proof of their spying, they would immediately be executed without further consideration. This also means that consequently many of these killings were not officially recorded, so we do not really know how many spies were caught and executed. In instances without solid physical proof, the suspected spy would be detained and interrogated briefly. Sometimes this resulted in the spy being actually arrested, but most of the times they were let go. In the case of Spencer

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[32] Towne, *Surveillance and Spies,* 9 & 95.
[33] Towne, *Surveillance and Spies*, 5.

Kellogg Brown, a Union soldier who briefly spied for the military, he was arrested by Confederate soldiers under suspicion of being a spy but after a brief questioning by a commander in which Brown lied about where he was headed, he was released.[34] Not all spies that were caught were killed, many women spies who were found guilty of spying were merely arrested and imprisoned before being discharged. Some spies were arrested and put on trial and sentenced to death, but that sentence was never carried out and after the end of the war they were merely released from prison. Nonetheless, spies faced a unique danger in comparison to other forms of intelligence gathering and so the need for secrecy and stealth was even more pressing.

Civilians and Contrabands

The most random and unorganized intelligence was obtained from civilians, slaves, contrabands, deserters, and captured enemy soldiers. They delivered information on enemy troop movements and conditions, the state of the local roads and terrain, and in some cases the size, location and plans of the enemy troops.[35] Some of this would be surrendered willingly, specifically by civilians and escaped slaves, and would be communicated to any passing officer or soldier they saw. In his letters, Brigadier General Alfred Pleasanton discusses information he had obtained about the enemy from a Union Quaker and an escaped slave that day.[36] One constant concern with this information that was not necessarily addressed or considered then was the reliability and accuracy. Witness statements can be faulty for any number of reasons and so

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[34] Spencer Kellogg Brown, *Spencer Kellogg Brown: His Life in Kansas and his Death as a Spy, 1842-1863* (New York: D. Appleton and Co. 1903), edited and compiled by George Gardner Smith, 239-243. – this volume was supposedly compiled from his diary entries by a family friend many years after his death so overall reliability is uncertain. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=yale.39002053508280&view=1up&seq=11

[35] Feis, *Grant's Secret Service,* 15.

[36] *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Ser. 1, Vol. 19, pt. 2* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1887), 110. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=coo.31924080772233&view=1up&seq=3&q1=%22captured%20a%20spy%22

while information could be gained from these sources, it was not always the most reliable or the most accurate because of the fault of memory and observations. There was also a constant concern that such informants were feeding the soldiers false information or were gathering their own intelligence for the opposing side. Because of this and other factors, many soldiers and generals would often be wary of the information attained from civilians even though it could be accurate.[37]

Information that could be attained from deserters and captured soldiers required a bit more work and was not necessarily surrendered voluntarily or even at all. These individuals would usually have to be interrogated and, even then, might would not reveal information. The most important information to be obtained from these sources would be regarding the plans and battle tactics of the enemy.[38] These would be especially useful to a general planning an attack or a defensive operation, although once again there was the problem of reliability. Some soldiers inflated their knowledge and made up information in the hope of better treatment.

A third source of this type of unorganized information was newspapers and telegraph wires. Both of these were not directly conveyed by people unlike the last two discussed. Often times the enemy obtained newspapers from the other side in order to get some form of insight or update on where they were or what their plans were. Of course, with this there is a delay, but reliable and relevant information could still be attained from them, especially since so much of what was happening was being reported in the major newspapers. Newspapers and other documents quickly became an important form of contraband, or smuggled good, during the war.[39]

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[37] Feis, *Grant's Secret Service,* 16.
[38] Feis, *Grant's Secret Service,* 15.
[39] Fishel, *Secret War for the Union*, 10

Sometimes telegraph wires would be secretly tapped into by members of the army in order to intercept telegraphs, in the hope that they will reveal some form of significant information regarding the enemy. This was not done very often, however, because it was incredibly difficult to do without being noticed and the likelihood of actually getting relevant information was quite low.[40] Despite its overall lack of use and general difficulty, this method of intelligence gathering is still quite significant. This was the beginning of wiretapping and intercepting enemy transmissions. So, while it was not practical during the Civil War, the first, though admittedly brief, use of it during this conflict, opened up the potential for other possibilities later on.

While there were many types of unorganized sources of intelligence and information, more often than not this information was not used. Army commanders never relied completely upon such sources. Each of these sources and the information they carried were entirely random and the possibility for incorrect or inaccurate information was much higher than from other intelligence sources. Despite these flaws, this unorganized intelligence was still a source of intelligence during the Civil War, and it did aid both the Union and the Confederacy in certain instances. While not everything was accurate there was some information that was still used and employed by the commanders and at times it afforded them some general knowledge on the actions of the enemy, but as a whole its general unreliability and spontaneity meant that the majority of the information was disregarded.

Organized Bureaus

Despite the various sources and types of intelligence during the Civil War, there were no organized and/or centralized intelligence bureaus whose sole or main purpose was intelligence.

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[40] Fishel, *Secret War for the Union*, 4-5.

There were various government bodies or agencies that conducted some form of intelligence in tandem with their operations, but they were by no means intelligence bureaus. That would be like saying that the military itself was an intelligence bureau because it conducted a lot of intelligence operations.

Although, while there were no bureaus that existed with this purpose, the Confederacy had plans for one. Just before the war ended a bill passed that would lead to and allow for the creation of a Special and Secret Service Bureau. This bill was passed in March of 1865 and there is no proof that this bureau was ever actually created since the war ended mere weeks after this was passed.[41] This bureau, according to the bill, was to have two main purposes. The first was to identify and create new and strong patents or inventions for weapons or other militarily relevant products. The other purpose though, was to maintain the secret service of the Confederacy. They could employ spies, use and maintain a budget for secret service activities, and coordinate with other agencies who conducted operations in this manner.[42] Essentially, they would be in charge of intelligence operations for the Confederacy, and could coordinate with other agencies conducting intelligence operations and lend aid to them if needed. Even though this was never actualized the fact that this bill was passed demonstrates the importance of intelligence during the war and how the need for such a bureau was seen by the leaders of the Confederacy. The ideas and foundation of an intelligence bureau with the semblance of modern ones was formulated during the Civil War, but due to the war's end it was never actualized.

It would not be until World War II that the United States actually established an intelligence bureau.[43] Part of this is because after the war ended there was no longer a need for

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[41] Tidwell, *April '65*, 213.
[42] Tidwell, *April '65*, 214-217.
[43] Tidwell, Hall, Gaddy, *Come Retribution,* 220.

one and it would not be until WWII that the need would present itself again. Also, since this was a bill passed by the Confederacy, which was dissolved after the war, there was no longer any means to establish such a bureau and the Union had not identified a need for one.

Conclusion

Over the course of the Civil War there were many types of intelligence operations and functions with various methodologies. New techniques and forms of gathering information were devised. While not all of the sources of intelligence were reliable or even useful in the long run, they were all very important and significant. The examination of all of these pieces demonstrates how pervasive the use and gathering of intelligence was during the Civil War as well as its significance in the history of intelligence. While detective agencies, the cavalry, spies, and unorganized intelligence were all forms practiced before the Civil War there were also many new things contributed. The Signal Corps was devised, counterintelligence was practiced, wiretapping was developed, and plans for an organized intelligence bureau were laid out. Each of these new contributions are quite significant even if their use was minimal at the time. These new techniques and the vast use of intelligence during the Civil War demonstrate that despite the lack of official recognition in the historical record, intelligence was in fact practiced before the World Wars in the United States. Not only that but the foundations of our modern intelligence system are rooted in the vast intelligence practices of the Civil War. So, while the official history of intelligence currently begins with the World Wars this examination of intelligence during the Civil War has demonstrated that understanding the origins of intelligence in United States history should begin with the country's major conflict of the nineteenth century.

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