

Marianne Is Watching: Intelligence, Counterintelligence, and the Origins of the French Surveillance State

Deborah Bauer (University of Nebraska Press, 2021), 360 pages, photos, illustrations, appendix, index.

Reviewed by John Ehrman

Pop quiz: Which country invented the modern, professional intelligence service? Was it Germany, with its highly developed military staff system and master bureaucrats? Russia, needing information to thwart anti-czarist revolutionaries? Or Britain, fumbling around as usual and coming up with a workable solution by accident?

The answer is none of the above. It was France that after its disastrous defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71) realized that collection of accurate information about potential adversaries in general, and Germany in particular, would be critical to national security and military success. How the French created their service, the problems they ran into, and their long-term consequences are the subject of historian Deborah Bauer’s *Marianne Is Watching*.

Bauer starts with a review of the origins of French intelligence. Beginning with the ancien regime and Napoleonic eras, she traces the emergence of French intelligence as an internal police function. In the 1830s, when France took over Algeria, the military confronted the need to “understand and classify both the land and its population.” (31) The French saw the usefulness of such information and were beginning to develop a basic peacetime military intelligence system and spy networks under Napoleon III but, alas, did not have it in place before the 1870 war.

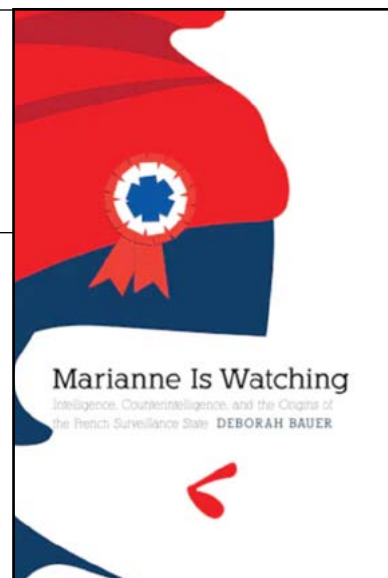
As part of its reorganization after the defeat and founding of the Third Republic, the French army staff established what proved to be the first of the professional intelligence services we know today—that is, one on a permanent bureaucratic footing, staffed by professionals, and collecting and archiving information for long-term use. It took several years and additional reorganizations, but by the mid-1870s the army’s Deuxieme Bureau had emerged, with responsibility for conducting intelligence collection and analysis (*renseignement*) essentially as we understand it today. Its role, writes Bauer, was to “analyze, synthesize, and disseminate information collected ...

through a number of avenues: from military sources like officers on mission, military attaches, agents ... as well as from nonmilitary sources” that included the foreign press and exchanges with other countries’ attachés. (53) Bauer’s

descriptions of the bureau’s organization, staff, and operations—and especially those of the Statistical Section, which ran agents and later expanded into counterintelligence and counterespionage—also show it to have been a sophisticated outfit, instantly recognizable in form and function to any 21st century intelligence officer.

It is not surprising, then, that the French ran into some familiar problems. The Deuxieme Bureau had to work with civilian police agencies, which had intelligence roles of their own, and the Foreign Ministry, which was especially strong on cryptanalysis. Things did not always go smoothly. Bauer recounts how, despite their codebreaking successes, the services did not cooperate on cryptanalysis, “thus hampering [France’s] ability to take advantage of technical breakthroughs,” while politicians leaked information from decryptions and “further thwarted cryptanalytical effectiveness.” (82)

Gradually, however, the Deuxieme Bureau emerged as the leading agency in the nascent French intelligence community and began taking over internal security roles. This was especially so in counterespionage, which traditionally had belonged to the civilian police. The Bureau and Statistical Section became increasingly powerful and autonomous, with direct and unsupervised access to top government ministers. Catastrophe followed, says Bauer, as “it was this privileged relationship, as well as the lack of checks and balances on a service that itself was never



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actually defined by any written code” that led to the Dreyfus Affair. (91) Nor are these problems completely in the past. Bauer concludes by noting that French intelligence remains dominated by a military culture that downplays analysis in favor of confirming policymakers’ preconceived ideas.

Turf battles and legal ambiguities are not the only aspects of intelligence work that readers will recognize. French intelligence collection had to respond to consumer requirements. Bauer’s description suggests they did this well, but unfortunately, reports mixed speculation with facts to provide readers what they wanted to hear and then cited the secrecy of the information as validation. This was especially the case regarding Germany, as reporting consistently overstated the scope and effectiveness of German espionage against France and stoked anti-German paranoia. (109) On a more positive note, however, the French made effective use of liaison relationships, engaging in intelligence diplomacy to help solidify overt diplomatic alliances. France, for example, passed information on Paris-based revolutionaries to Russia and also worked with the Russians to break German codes.

So far, so familiar. *Marianne is Watching* is most interesting in its discussion of the social and cultural impact of the development of French intelligence before World War I. A new law in 1886 defined espionage for the first time and enabled military intelligence to expand into the nonmilitary world and prosecute suspected civilian spies. The Deuxieme Bureau and Statistical Section began compiling lists of suspicious foreigners and French citizens to be arrested on the outbreak of war and developed extensive informer networks to identify such people. Not only did this lead to extensive surveillance of innocent people, French and foreign, but the law’s vague definitions of what constituted espionage and who qualified as a spy left it to judges and other officials to decide. Journalists became a particular target of the War Ministry, which undertook numerous actions to suppress reporting that was unfavorable or perceived (on flimsy grounds) as compromising sensitive information. The government also brought cases against amateur photographers and people who sold postcards judged—again, on the weakest of pretexts—to contain sensitive images.

Given the atmosphere of fear, in which war with Germany was viewed as inevitable, spy mania was bound to break out. The new and growing genre of spy novels, says Bauer, portrayed intelligence work and counterespionage no longer as grubby and sleazy but as noble, patriotic callings. At the same time, the press warned of spy threats and described how certain types of people—notably foreigners, Jews, and women who had stepped out of their traditional roles—were especially threatening. Egged on by the press and novels, ordinary people began denouncing neighbors and acquaintances; French archives still contain denunciation letters, both anonymous and signed, based on nothing more than gossip and personal grudges. In this heated atmosphere, what’s amazing is not that the Dreyfus Affair took place, but that it did not happen earlier.^a

Bauer, who teaches French and intelligence history at Purdue University Fort Wayne, presents all of this in clear and well-organized prose. Perhaps like anyone who writes French history, she occasionally drifts into academic jargon and citations of Michel Foucault, but the references are mercifully brief. Overall, *Marianne Is Watching* is an informative and thought-provoking book that addresses the intersections of intelligence and social history.

Bauer also speaks to the present. Her narrative of the expanding bureaucratic power of the Deuxieme Bureau and Statistical Section, and the fanning of flames of paranoia in the context of a growing external military and economic threat, bring to mind our current concerns with China. France certainly had good reason to fear Germany, but the Deuxieme Bureau’s slanted reporting and the popular fear of German espionage ratcheted up the anxiety. Most of the information on France that the Germans gathered, Bauer points out, came from such open sources as the army’s own journals and politically motivated leaks from within the government. As important as vigilance against espionage is, moreover, Bauer shows how easily watchfulness can drift into fantasies and petty score-settling.

Is Bauer suggesting that the same is happening now in the United States? She never makes an explicit link, but her points still raise uncomfortable questions. Is the consensus that China poses an existential threat to the

a. A similar phenomenon took place in the United Kingdom before World War I. See Dr. Christopher R. Moran and Dr. Robert Johnson, “Of Novels, Intelligence and Policymaking: In the Service of Empire: Imperialism and the British Spy Thriller 1901–1914” in *Studies in Intelligence* 54, no. 2 (June 2010).

United States warping intelligence collection and analysis? Are the frequent press reports and investigations of Chinese espionage and influence operations creating a spy fever? To what degree are our fears justified and in what

proportion are they exaggerated? The French experience leaves one with the uneasy feeling that for all our technical wizardry and analytic prowess, we might not be much more advanced than the French 150 years ago.



The reviewer: John Ehrman is a retired CIA analyst.