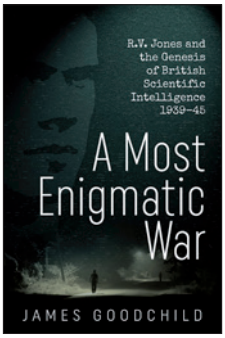
Book Reviews



A MOST ENIGMATIC WAR: R.V. JONES AND THE GENESIS OF BRITISH SCIENTIFIC INTELLIGENCE 1939-45

BY JAMES GOODCHILD

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REVIEWED BY FLIGHT LIEUTENANT LILIE WEAVER

Biography: Flight Lieutenant Lilie Weaver is serving as a pilot on XIII Squadron, having previous experience in Joint Helicopter Command and teaching cadets at the 'Thunder Lab' flight school, Kabul. Having completed an MSci in Natural Sciences at the University of Cambridge and working for EADS Astrium before joining the RAF, she combines a background in science and technology with a strong interest in air power and history.

INTRODUCTION

A Most Enigmatic War: R.V. Jones and the Genesis of British Scientific Intelligence 1939-45 is the first full length publication from James Goodchild, and based on his PhD thesis. The book is predominantly structured on the wartime memoirs of Reginald Victor Jones (*Most Secret War*, published 1978), a Scientific Officer who formed the basis (indeed at times constituted the entire department) of the Assistant Directorate of Intelligence (ADI) (Science), a branch of Intelligence established within the Air Ministry during World War Two. Primarily as a result of his many post-war media appearances and publication of his memoirs, Jones attained fame as, among other scientific achievements, the man who "bent the beams" during the Blitz. Goodchild is clearly fascinated by his main protagonist but seeks to place Jones and ADI (Science) within the larger context of the war (and broader scientific and technical intelligence pursuits) as well as redressing a perceived historiographic imbalance due to over-reliance on Jones' memoirs as the definitive version of the events it narrates. Goodchild's book is best read in conjunction with *Most Secret War*, (a much lighter read) which is much referenced throughout.

A Most Enigmatic War is an academic text, and not always an easy read; however, it does provide a fascinating insight into the defensive application of science in war – trying to understand the enemy's technological and scientific capability, and how to counter this capability when applied to weapons of war. This may seem second nature to RAF personnel today, who are well-briefed on foreign powers' radar, surface-to-air missile (SAM) and other capabilities. However, at the time this approach was completely novel and encountered many objections within Whitehall, not least because if British scientists had yet to make a certain technological advancement, it was often assumed to be "impossible". This was particularly evident in the early assessment of the state of German rocketry.

Goodchild seeks to expand on the stories told by Jones by examining the accuracy of his recall and contextualisation of events as well as contributing many additional primary and secondary sources, background evidence and analysis to expand the scope of the history of scientific intelligence. In particular, Goodchild covers the "Battle of the Beams", *Luftwaffe* night fighter defences (including ground-controlled interception (GCI) organisation) and the *Vergeltungswaffen* "Vengeance" weapons. In critiquing Jones' version of events, the author highlights that many other agencies were deeply involved in much of the work that Jones takes unique credit for, and he gives interesting overviews of the functions of the Y-section (signals intercept), A1(k) (POW interrogation) and the Telecommunications Research Establishment (TRE), as well as confirming the well-known role of ULTRA decodes in this as in so many other areas of wartime intelligence. The author seems in two minds about his main protagonist, at times taking great pains to discredit Jones and his 'egotistical' and 'magnificently boastful' personality, whilst at other times acknowledging the important contribution that he made to the field.

The book undoubtedly achieves its aim of providing a long overdue robust historical analysis on a fascinating subject. However, by covering only issues which directly involved Jones the author draws rather narrow conclusions, focussing on his task of 'rebalancing' the history, and contending that Jones vastly overblew his own contribution to Allied success in World War Two. More broadly, Goodchild does contend that scientific intelligence remains an important field, having grown exponentially during the technologically driven Cold War, and now permeates RAF consciousness. The author also largely concurs with Jones in suggesting that scientific intelligence should be at the heart of the intelligence community and not relegated to individual Services. While Goodchild does not explicitly suggest how any lessons learnt during this period should be applied today, we can certainly take from the various narratives the importance of not only having a good understanding of the enemy's technological understanding, but of being able to place this within a wider picture. In particular, understanding how it relates to the enemy's organisation, how technology is applied and operated, and what countermeasures would therefore be effective. Nowhere is this better illustrated than the extent to which ADI (Science) became experts on German

radar defences, their night fighter distribution and organisation and their GCI system for countering Allied bomber raids. It may be a pertinent reminder in this era of ever-increasing reliance on technological superiority that it is not just science or technology which can win a conflict, but understanding and application.