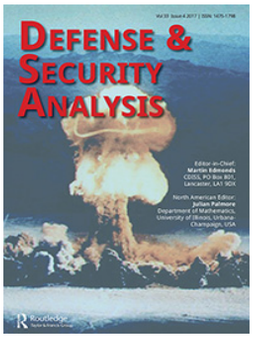

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The art of meddling: a theoretical, strategic and historical analysis of non-official covers for clandestine Humint

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ABSTRACT

The building of reliable covers has always been of the utmost importance for clandestine Humint. Using both primary and secondary sources, this study seeks to examine how classical authors and modern scholars have dealt with this topic, and which kind of covers have been the most used throughout history in different sociopolitical contexts, and what are the new perspectives for today's challenges. Findings suggest that a careful reading of the political milieu in which intelligence officers are required to work, and a certain degree of creativity, are the essential premises for the construction of a plausible cover; that some apparently outdated disguises such as merchants, itinerant monks and philosophers should be understood more broadly today to include business people, humanitarian NGOs and academics; that undercover practices have been theoretically and historically recognized as necessary and convenient by a great number of societies, often with scant regard for ethical considerations.

KEYWORDS

Non-official covers; undercover; Humint; intelligence; clandestine operations

Introduction

Fake identities and covers lie at the very core of clandestine Humint, yet their study is still neglected in the fields of defense and strategic studies. Contributions on this topic mainly deal with specific episodes and actors from different historical periods, with a special preference for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that is to say, the Great Game, the two world conflicts and the Cold War. Nevertheless, a more comprehensive approach to this argument – both theoretical and empirical – is still missing. This article aims to bridge the gap, using primary and secondary sources from different fields (strategic studies, history, international relations and even psychology) and different works (classics of strategic thought, books, papers, essays and newspaper articles) to build a framework with which to understand the logic behind the creation of covers and deepen the study of fake identities for political, military and economic purposes.

From this point of view, this study seeks to be a starting point for future research on human intelligence and counterintelligence. Indeed, nowadays the Humint branch still retains a high value for strategic, operational and tactical intelligence. As stressed by Loch Johnson, despite their being promising, open source intelligence (Osint) and

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geospatial intelligence (Geoint) are not sufficient. Humint is still necessary to track the enemy's plans in the offices of the Kremlin, in the Presidential palace of an African country, in a luxurious hotel of Dubai or in an underground hideout somewhere in Afghanistan.[1] In addition, Humint is a cheap and efficient solution if compared to more sophisticated means, even though it requires much time and resources to function properly. For instance, case officers must be trained for several years before being dispatched, for they are required to master foreign languages, improve their recruiting and tradecraft skills, learn the use of weapons and handle communication equipment.[2]

In the literature on intelligence, a distinction is made between official (OCs) and non-official covers (NOCs). The former concerns diplomatic agents and intelligence officers sent abroad as part of the diplomatic personnel, whereas the latter include a wide and multifaceted range of actors who, despite not being entitled to diplomatic immunity, are much less showy than ambassadors or military attachés. For example, investment bankers in Cairo, PhD candidates in Sub-Saharan Africa and oil riggers in Saudi Arabia fall under this category.[3] Yet, as rightly pointed out by Warner, the line between covert action and diplomacy is not always clear.[4] Starting from this distinction, this study will focus only on NOCs, since they represent a major challenge for counterintelligence agencies, whose features, given the shifting nature of the concept, change in time and space. In addition, both case officers and agents undercover are included in the analysis to widen the framework and observe all the nuances surrounding this topic.

NOCs in strategic thought

"It is true that behind one mask there can be another: there is nothing to prevent an actor wearing a second mask under his first."[5] Usually, any discussion on strategy and intelligence starts with a review of the 13th chapter of Sun Tzu's masterpiece *The Art of* War; yet the Chinese general is silent when dealing with covers. On the other side, this subject is highly considered by another classical thinker from ancient India, Kautilya, who in his *Arthashastra* delves into detail when pondering on the relevance of covers and disguises for clandestine operations. For this author, statecraft should heavily rely on espionage: he mentions fake identities and cover activities so many times to give the impression that virtually every man or woman can be a spy. Under this perspective, Kautilya proves to be very meticulous in determining that each situation requires an appropriate cover and in listing the extraordinary range of possibilities from which the leader can choose.

The agents could disguise themselves as: ordinary citizens; holy men (including ascetics, *pashandas* and their assistants); merchants; doctors; teachers; entertainers (such as brothel keepers, actors, singers, story tellers, acrobats and conjurers); household attendants (cooks, bath attendants, shampooers, bed makers, barbers and waterbearers); caterers (vintners, bakers and sellers of vegetarian and non-vegetarian food); astrologers, soothsayers, readers of omens, intuitionists, reciters of *puranas* and their attendants; artisans and craftsmen; cowherds and elephant handlers; foresters, hunters, snake catchers and tribals; and even as thieves and robbers. Women agents could adopt the disguises of a nun, a rich widow, an actress, a musician or an expert in love affairs.[6]

The process of camouflage concerns both intelligence officers and operative agents, with the former solicited to disguise as a monk, a householder or a merchant (i.e.

mostly itinerant figures), and the latter required to endorse their chiefs' covers with a pertinent role. For instance, if the intelligence officer disguises as a monk or a holy man, acting as a pious and discreet person, some of his agents must play the role of disciples devoted to him, and others of merchants astounded by his wisdom, who in addition produce rumors on his talent.[7] Kautilya even contemplates the hypothesis that the monk makes a prophecy and his agents work secretly to let it become a reality. Then, the building of a cover requires a mutual effort and is aimed at depicting the presence of certain individuals in one's country as plausible and convincing.[8]

Perhaps even more importantly, once disguised, intelligence officers must start a reliable and profitable activity in the place in which they are requested to spy, in order to provide "food, clothing and shelter" to their agents. This means that their cover occupation should not be a mere smoke-and-mirrors job, but a remunerative work with which to fund the intelligence network: to say it another way, sometimes the NOC is the key to create a self-sufficient spy nest in the enemy country.[9] Moreover, intelligence operations are entirely dependent on covers regardless of any ethical reserves. Kautilya feels free to recommend the (mis)use of doctors to deceive treacherous officers and poison them without raising any suspicions; of thieves to spy on other thugs; of traders to sell poisoned food and wine to enemy troops; of cooks and other servants to drive a wedge between the ruler and his officers. Many of the covers he mentions are outdated or strictly related to the historical and geographical context in which the author lived, as is the case with the soothsayers, the palmists, the snake charmers and the fools, who were roving actors of ancient India. For example, snake charmers were able to sneak into crowded places and gather information while performing their shows.[10] Similarly, court jesters represent a relic of the past, but with a few bizarre exceptions in the most recent times.[11]

It follows that the creative flair behind the building of a cover begins with a careful examination of the environment in which the intelligence officers and agents are required to work. Since India had (and has today) a highly spiritual culture, Kautilya was almost obsessed by the idea of using holy men and monks for clandestine operations in that specific context. Indeed, those actors went unnoticed despite being itinerant, enjoyed freedom of movement and were fully respected by other members of the society.[12] Moreover, Kautilya's recommendations mostly pertain to an offensive form of statecraft, but scholars may examine them also from a counterintelligence perspective. This is evident when one reads that the ruler must arrange for his roving and non-roving spies to adopt the same covers of the enemy's agents, in order to detect them.[13]

Interestingly, many other contributions on strategy, belonging to different periods, share common traits with the *Arthashastra* on the use of fake identities for espionage. It seems that, regardless of the political contexts and actors involved from age to age, strategists have always regarded camouflage as an inescapable necessity. Then, Clausewitz's suggestive idea that war is "a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case"[14] is more than appropriate here, since rulers have always had to sharpen their wits to find the best way to slip through the enemy borders, or cloak their presence in their own dominion, and gather intelligence. In a lesser-known classic of espionage, the Japanese *Shoninki*, written in 1681 by Natori Masatake, great emphasis is put on covers and disguises. Far from current movie representations, ninjas represented first and foremost a pool of spies who lived in towns among ordinary people, working – just to mention a few – as peasants, merchants, hairdressers or monkey trainers.[15]

In his work, Masatake first recommends reading the conditions of the place in which the agent is required to travel, and then adopt the best disguise, pretending to be a common person. Examining the sociopolitical context in which he lived, the author argues that pilgrims, monks, merchants and wandering entertainers were the best fitted to conduct clandestine operations. For instance, an agent disguised as a pilgrim could easily have access to Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples, which were true information networks at that time, mingling with other pilgrims while assimilating the local culture and dialects. On the other side, the *Shoninki* classifies monks in various categories, each with his key strengths. *Yamabushi* mountain priests, for example, were a good cover both for men and women because they could carry a katana or a *wakizashi* (short sword) without raising suspicions, whereas the *Komuso* enjoyed freedom of movement and were authorized to dress in a large basket hat that totally concealed their identity. In any case, Masatake is quite explicit in warning to choose a fake identity that suits well with the specific personality of the spy, so that he might feel comfortable in performing his new role.[16]

In addition, differently from other strategic works, the *Shoninki* expressly postulates that not to be discovered is the main principle of a *shinobi* (i.e. the secret agent). Starting with this assumption, the manuscript recommends a few more expedients for a spy to disguise himself, such as the extensive use of common outfits with ordinary colors (brown, black, dark red or navy blue), raincoats, fake beards, special inks, skin pigments and different hairstyles. The undercover agents should also carry as few tools as possible to avoid being unmasked, and even their acting and improvisation skills should be constantly improved, to the point that they can

> talk about a province they have never been to, tell a strange story about a place they don't know, pretend to be friends with a stranger, buy things with gold or silver they don't have, eat food nobody gives, get drunk and go on a drunken spree without drinking alcohol […],

performing all this without looking nervous.[17]

Masatake's early reference to outfits is a very interesting point. Indeed, some recent contributions in the field of social psychology have demonstrated that dress (a category that includes "clothing, accessories, cosmetics, hair styling, facial hair, tattooing, and other types of additions"[18]) strongly affects behavioral responses. The first reaction to a stranger, preceding their words, is influenced by the impression given by his or her dress.[19] Clothing can facilitate the tasks of approaching people or keeping them outside one's personal space; for instance, a man dressed as a high-status individual is likely to be treated with great respect by the others.[20] When these considerations are applied to intelligence, it emerges that the agents intentionally use clothing signals to bolster their cover and convince their interlocutors.

The necessity for deceptive shapeshifting seems to be universal, allergic to any ethical considerations: counterintelligence services should be constantly aware of that. Some Byzantine treatises recognize the problem of merchants as spies who hide a dagger behind a smile. They are necessary to obtain supplies and benefit from mutual trade, but their intentions are unclear. A military treatise known as *On Strategy*, attributed to Syrianus Magister, hints that spies may get in touch by disguising as merchants and pretending to conduct a deal in a public market, where contacts between natives and

foreigners are the norm.[21] Likewise, Emperor Nikephoros II Phokas's work *On Skirmishing* stresses that generals should employ some businessmen to cross the enemy's borders and spy on the number and quality of his troops, also obtaining information on the commanders' plans.[22] It is unlikely that the Persian scholar and vizier Nizam al-Mulk, who lived in the eleventh century, had ever read these treatises, yet in his *Siyasatnama* he echoes their basic idea: spies should be dispatched in unknown or enemy territories in the guise of merchants, travelers, Sufis (mystical practitioners) and mendicants.[23]

Again, it is interesting to note that beggars – whose camouflage tradition goes back to the figure of Ulysses who, in the 17th book of the *Odyssey*, sneaks into his own palace in the guise of a mendicant[24] – are an outdated cover: indeed, nowadays strategic intelligence and clandestine operations demand businessmen ("merchants"), prelates and cardinals ("Sufis") or even tourists ("travelers") as scholars may infer from the 2010 assassination of Mahmoud al-Mabhouh in Dubai, allegedly arranged by the Mossad.[25] Also, the seventeenth-century Italian general Raimondo Montecuccoli emphasizes the role of businessmen and traders for covert operations; yet, in line with Kautilya's position, he maintains that secret agents need to build a cover activity to justify their stay in a certain country. Therefore, the two authors' perspective lies at the basis of a more systematic and long-lasting intelligence collection.[26] It should be evident that classical texts share a high degree of optimism in regard to fake identities, as also shown by the Roman author Frontinus, who praises the use of disguises for intelligence and diplomatic purposes by mentioning the successful missions of Fabius Caeso, on behalf of the Romans, and Hamilcar Rhodinus, dispatched by the Carthaginians.[27]

While not denying the basic relevance of covers for international politics, recently other works have discussed this topic more methodically. Some authors have stressed that to know the enemy's secrets is a very specialized task: it requires an agent to put himself in the enemy's shoes and to think with a different frame of mind. Since the opponent will always test the agent before trusting him, a fake identity must be reliable and, if put under pressure with questions, capable to answer with ease. Then, the cover should not be too broad, but neither too tight, in order to allow a minimum degree of improvisation or an easy way out. It follows that the training should be aimed at teaching the spy how to dress his new identity with spontaneity.[28] Practically, undercover agents are requested to master both their verbal and non-verbal communication skills, to keep a cool head and to act with no hesitation.

However, it is worth noting that these prerequisites come at a high price. After spending much time in disguise, agents may totally identify themselves with the environment in which they work, gravitating towards the members of their new group or even protecting them. An identity crisis and the possibility that two or more undercover agents are unaware of being on the same target at the same time are problems that also should not be underestimated.[29] From a different perspective, it has been convincingly argued that the most recent political and military challenges require more NOCs than OCs, since the main threats now come from criminal networks, terrorists and other transnational actors. Indeed, the diplomatic cover is too showy to be considered as useful when dealing with these kinds of organizations, and not too many supporters of terrorists are likely to "attend embassy cocktail parties."[30]

In line with Kautilya's blunt statements, intelligence services are recommended to get their hands dirty, pulling ethical considerations apart as far as possible, and show a

preference for the use of NOCs against terrorist networks. In addition, NOCs display a high level of secrecy, provide a means of deniability and, quite unexpectedly, guarantee a very good connection to foreign intelligence services. Diplomatically isolated governments may also use this kind of cover to gather intelligence in other countries that do not host their embassies or consulates.[31]

Even more interesting for the problems it raises, the appearance of social networks forces intelligence services to build a double cover simultaneously, one physical and the other virtual, for their officers. The virtual identity should be as reliable as the traditional one and must corroborate it, since today non-state organizations and criminal networks are able to unmask enemy agents simply using a laptop or a cell phone to find any discrepancies on the Internet, as Hezbollah regularly does.[32] Moreover, any person involved in clandestine operations is likely to leave a digital footprint due to online payments, bank operations, cameras and so on. Therefore, a new approach to undercover practices should "sterilize" the virtual identity of an officer as much as possible, and might include believable fake identities on Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn. This would force intelligence agencies to work hard on two fronts, but Jonathan Lord is skeptical and on this point, fatalistically believing that "eventually, the power of analytics may overwhelm and eclipse anyone's ability to mask oneself. When that time comes, cover identity, and perhaps most clandestinity, will become relics of a past era in intelligence collection."[33] Given the changing nature of this topic, more research is needed.

NOCs in history

"A man can endlessly change form, and then look different from what he is, infinite times. Nothing can confuse the opponent more than not recognizing the true face of the one who is in front of him."[34] From an historical perspective, it should be noted that covers have always been shaped by the nature of the context in which governments had to move. The creation of new disguises has been dictated by the necessity to exploit, or emulate, the prerogatives of some of the most roving actors who enjoyed free access to foreign countries due to their activities. Sometimes the access was granted on the basis that these figures, while seen with suspicion, were beneficial or necessary to the counterparts. Merchants and businessmen, for instance, have always fallen within this category: generally, they were the most welcome both in times of peace and war because the ruling élites could not do without their goods.[35] Their business put them in the conditions to stay in close contact with a wide range of individuals from different social classes, thus ensuring them a substantial flow of information and rumors that were instrumental to strategic intelligence. This has led some scholars to speculate that mercantile states such as Venice and Ragusa, if compared to mainland or military states, enjoyed a greater flow of intelligence due to their commercial bases in the Mediterranean. This system might have been even more successful because the state-sponsored merchants, sharing common interests with the central government, spontaneously shared intelligence too. Therefore, when the citizens activated their information networks abroad for their business purposes, the central government was kept informed too.[36]

Given these premises, it is not surprising that secret services have been eager to use the commercial cover since the most ancient of times. Over time, this pattern has raised

suspicion in the local populations. In the fifth century BC, the Roman corn buyers, when dealing with the Italian tribes or the Sicilians, were often regarded as spies. In particular, the Carthaginians were extremely cautious, probably because they used the same cover to gather intelligence on the Romans.[37] Huns and Vikings inherited this tradition some centuries later, demanding that they could erect markets at the borders of the settled lands. They understood that the flow of information went hand in hand with the flow of goods, and decided to exploit this opportunity as a prelude to new raids and invasions. Under this perspective, the border markets were more intelligence bases than areas of trade.[38] Moreover, given the tight relationship between trade and tradecraft, it is worth noting that (differently from other disguises) this kind of cover seems to be common to many societies throughout history. Byzantines, Arabs, Mongols and the populations along the Silk Road are likely to have used it extensively, both tapping their commercial networks or camouflaging their spies as merchants to enter foreign countries.[39] Even if the practical aspects of the cover have changed today, the logic is always the same, as shown by a report of the US Joint Economic Committee that recommends:

> […] Case officers must be assigned to non-official cover positions, mostly in commercial entities. When our case officers are hidden among thousands of U.S. businessmen, it will be almost impossible for local counterintelligence officers to uncover them, and hence, their personal and operational security will be greatly enhanced.[40]

Albeit versatile, businesspeople were just one of the many identities undercover agents could assume to gather intelligence abroad. Depending on the internal and external sociopolitical contexts, information was collected under one or another pretext. In classical Greece, for instance, it was commonplace that philosophers roved until they were employed as teachers and advisers by the local rulers. This made them potential intelligence officers, as with Aristotle, who obtained political and military information by the students whom he sent in different *poleis* (city-states), under the formal pretext of studying their history and constitutions.[41] Likewise, in recent times it has been argued that Chinese students represent a pool of spies from which the Chinese intelligence services can draw to gather pieces of economic, technological, political and military secrets. A modern Aristotle was, for instance, former professor John Reece Roth (University of Tennessee), who in 2011 was sentenced to four years in prison for having exported confidential USAF data on plasma technologies for unmanned aerial vehicles (i.e. drones), giving them to two graduate students of Chinese and Iranian nationalities.[42]

Unlike the "scholar cover," some disguises are strictly related to a particular milieu. Pirates were efficient maritime informers in the ancient and modern age, as Strabo reminds us with regard to Cilician pirates, who established an informal intelligence network in the Mediterranean using several port city taverns as bases.[43] Although today these activities are restricted to a few areas of the world, one should not exclude the possibility that some countries infiltrate their agents under the guise of pirates to gather intelligence in some of the most dangerous areas of Africa, such as Somalia and the Gulf of Guinea. In classical Greece, fake identities might be inspired by the most roving actors of that period, namely doctors, cooks, artists and entertainers.[44] Likewise, in Venice, barber shops, shops and inns were little but functioning intelligence networks. An innkeeper who offered his services to the Council of Ten is reported to have said once "as

a tavern-keeper I have the true way of hearing, dealing, and reporting … because every quality of people come to my place, and I can make them familiarize with me."[45]

Here it is evident that some jobs are more suitable than others for the creation of an intelligence network. In the Roman Empire, for example, Hadrian exploited an existing profession characterized by high mobility, the *frumentarius* (military wheat collector), to create an embryonic secret service that could act under the formal cover of "wheat collector" to keep the ruler well informed on the conditions of the provinces.[46] It had to be a really good device, considering that even a defeated emperor such as Macrinus used it to escape.[47] During the modern age, the art of meddling changed again. In the Mediterranean Sea, other professionals were found themselves in the condition of gathering intelligence on foreign countries under the pretext of ransoming slaves. Since slavery was common, and both Christians and Muslims took prisoners at the end of the battles, ransom agents were regularly employed by the wealthiest families to bargain their release. If compared to merchants and ordinary businessmen, they had the advantage of dealing directly with the political and military élites. This allowed them to get in touch with the enemy officers without raising suspicion. For instance, the Viceroy of Sicily sent a certain Scipion Ansalon to Tripoli with the task of persuading some prominent Ottoman officers to defect.[48]

A few centuries later, with the end of slavery, new opportunities for fake identities emerged. The technological and financial developments of the nineteenth century made engineers and bankers the new protagonists of clandestine operations. This was particularly evident, for example, in the maneuvers of the Western powers in Asia. John Fisher stresses that "an ideal cover" was that of Oscar Bertoja, an Italian electrical engineer who worked for the British in the Caspian region. In 1906, he lived in Tashkent, where he oversaw the electrical lighting of the Russian offices, including the military departments responsible for the printing of documents.[49]

Finally, among NOCs, particular attention should be paid to religious covers. Here the matter gets complicated for the ethical and political repercussions surrounding the misuse of the sacred. It has already been noted that the classical strategic thought does not exclude the use of clergymen for intelligence purposes. The Indian *Arthashastra* and the Japanese *Shoninki*, for instance, are unscrupulous in recommending it,[50] but also the Byzantine classical text *On Strategy* underlines that the envoys "should be men who have the reputation of being religious […]."[51] While this observation is still quite general, Byzantine politics proved to be ruthless, thus showing that the misuse of the sacred for clandestine Humint was not restricted to the Asian world. The rulers of Constantinople were intimately linked to the Orthodox Church. Its international "soft power," boosted by the prestige of its members, the magnificence of its churches and the holiness of its relics, was instrumental to the throne. In addition, the Orthodox missionaries were in the right position to gather intelligence on the neighboring populations while converting them to the Christian faith.[52]

Several episodes show that the Orthodox Church was one of the main intelligence sources for the Byzantine emperors. Probably one of the best-known anecdotes is that of the two Nestorian monks who offered to smuggle the silkworms from China to introduce sericulture to the Byzantine Empire, and hence, circumvent Sassanid Persia as a commercial intermediary between the West and the East.[53] Al-Asmari, in turn, mentions the episode of a Byzantine priest who pretended to convert himself to Islam to build a mosque

in Medina, thus creating a reliable base from which he could manage a spy ring. Yet, in the end, the agents of the Prophet Muhammad thwarted his plans.[54] Likewise, in the eighth century, Salim of Damascus exiled the Patriarch of Antioch under the charge of espionage,[55] and in the treatise *De Administrando Imperio*, authored by Constantine Porphyrogenitus, one may read of the monk Agapios, who acted as a secret messenger between the patrician Kiskasis and the Emperor.[56]

This kind of deceit has crossed the centuries, impermeable to any ethical considerations. In the fourteenth century, governments feared those who were involved in intelligence activities "under the cloak of international religious orders."[57] In line with the theoretical contributions of social psychology, sometimes it was not even necessary that the secret agent was a real priest. It was enough that he dressed and behaved like one. During the modern age, both Christians and Muslims camouflaged as clergymen to travel freely and take advantage of their religious confidentiality to perform their duties,[58] and the same is true for the pundits used by the British in the second half of the nineteenth century to explore and map the Tibetan territories. These well-trained agents often disguised themselves as Buddhist monks on a pilgrimage, and were equipped with some typical Buddhist tools that had been previously modified for intelligence purposes. For instance, their rosaries had 100 beads instead of 108 to better measure the distances covered and their prayer wheels were suited to conceal route notes or other information.[59] Likewise, in Japan, from the beginning of the seventeenth century to the second half of the nineteenth century, we find the *Komuso*, roving Zen monks who were regularly employed by the central government for "expeditions of an investigatory nature," namely to act as spies.

To this purpose, they were granted several privileges, such as unlimited freedom of travel throughout the country, the right to carry weapons, exemptions from toll fees or boat fares, and free entry into different places. In addition, they were not accountable for their actions to local jurisdictions, but only to the shogunate.[60] Even more interesting, the *Komuso* were authorized to wear a basket hat that completely concealed their identity. This choice was driven by religious motivations (distance oneself from one's own ego), but it was also instrumental to espionage. Moreover, their beliefs required them to talk as little as possible. For instance, if asked where they were going, they would answer with formulas like "there is no place wherein to dwell" or "whatever direction or quarter." Again, it is worth noting that these religious-philosophical guidelines could be exploited for ulterior motives.[61]

State-sponsored religious groups involved in clandestine operations are common in history. The temptation to hide a spy monk among thousands of pilgrims and clergymen has always been too strong for the political and military leaderships. This unethical feature equates different geopolitical systems. In Europe, the Habsburg authorities often encouraged the Catholic monks to go on a pilgrimage to the Ottoman territories in order to gather strategic intelligence on their archenemy, but also the Sultans misused the sacred to spy on the European kingdoms. For instance, one Mehmed Bey, a Spanish preacher who worked for both the Viceroy of Naples and the Ottomans, was involved in a plot to assassinate the Viceroy of Sicily.[62] In addition, it was not unusual to use monasteries as covert bases or safe lodgings, especially in the most dangerous regions, and even the sacrament of confession was often misused to obtain secret information, as also the Romanian Orthodox Church did in the Soviet era when cooperating with the Securitate.[63]

Likewise, between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, in East Asia the Russians, the British and the Japanese employed Buddhist monks (or disguised their agents as such) for clandestine activities. Sometimes the Buddhist monks were even willing to side with the ruling power. Just before the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war, for instance, the Japanese military reached an agreement with the abbot of the Nishi Honganji sect to use the Honganji missions based in China, Siberia and Mongolia for intelligence purposes.[64] Yet, occasionally the undercover officers underwent a crisis of identity or felt a discrepancy between the political misuse of the sacred and a more intimate dimension, as showed by the case of Zerempil. A Buddhist monk trained in tradecraft by the Russians, Zerempil was sent on a mission several times, frequently changing cover during his career. Firstly, disguised as an employee of a Chinese firm of tea merchants, later he became a Mongolian merchant travelling from Urga to Lhasa, and then a devout Lama who sneaked in Siningfu unnoticed by the Chinese authorities. Siding with the Bolshevik cause in the final phase of his career, Zerempil felt a contradiction between the ideals of the Soviet regime and his identity of a Buddhist monk. Indeed, how could he follow an ideology that labeled religion as the opium of the people? Concluding that politics and religion were incompatible, he chose to abandon his career as an intelligence officer and retired to a small Mongolian monastery.[65]

Conclusions and new perspectives

Building a reliable NOC requires a careful reading of the sociopolitical milieu in which intelligence officers are sent, but also more creativity. Under this perspective, today political analysts, anthropologists and area experts can make a great contribution. A theoretical and historical examination of clandestine Humint shows that covers have undergone significant changes during the centuries. Some disguises such as jesters, pirates and street entertainers have become outdated, while others have transformed. Yesterday's merchants are today's front companies and joint ventures. In Sub-Saharan Africa, many shadowy and consummate businessmen equipped with diplomatic passports and titles of honorary consul, sold by countries like Liberia, Sierra Leone or Guinea-Bissau, enjoy freedom of movement and might be eligible to work with the intelligence agencies.[66] Likewise, yesterday's roving philosophers and teachers are today's professors, researchers and PhD students. The Russian intelligence services, for instance, are past masters at using academic figures, journalists and businesspeople for their clandestine operations,[67] whereas the Chinese focus on bankers, scientists and media agencies. In addition, state-sponsored activities like the Confucius Institutes "sometimes host China's foreign intelligence and propaganda activities" under the pretext of teaching the Chinese language and culture to foreigners.[68] This opens the possibility that intelligence services also exploit international cultural exchanges for clandestine activities abroad.

Depending on the context, other actors may be involved as well. Here again, creativity is a valuable skill. Intelligence agencies might train members of the Diasporas, for example, and send them back to their country of origin, where it would be difficult for ordinary undercover agents to reside and collect information, or where major powers simply lack human intelligence on the ground. This idea seems promising. As stressed by Ismail Warsame about Somalia,

> a huge spy network of Ethiopia and Western countries took deep roots in Somalia. They now use highly-trained personnel of Somali origin from the Diaspora, on the top of well-placed locals. Do not get surprised if you find spies posing as camel herders in Somalia's countryside today.[69]

As an alternative, peacekeeping and disaster relief personnel could serve the purpose, as also advocacy groups and NGOs might do, since they all perform activities in which the collection and analysis of information are prominent. Moreover, NGOs possess wide intelligence networks composed of journalists, academic and personnel of other NGOs, and often work using techniques that are very similar to those employed by the ordinary intelligence agencies, albeit for different purposes.[70]

Lastly, even if the figure of the itinerant monk is obsolete, nowadays scholars may expand the category to include religious congregations, humanitarian NGOs and missionary groups in the cover. Indeed, both the authorities and the police forces still treat religious organizations with great respect and deference. To say it with the words of Gvosdev,

> By virtue of their offices, clergymen often enjoy a position of respect and trust in society. Missionaries and aid workers usually have the ability to travel into areas off-limits to others. Religious institutions sometimes enjoy a privileged position excepting them from direct government scrutiny, especially from law-enforcement organs.[71]

Counterintelligence agencies are well aware of the threat represented by these actors. In recent times, for example, Chinese intelligence services have attempted to infiltrate some of his agents, disguised as Buddhist monks, in the border monasteries between India and two of his neighbors, Bhutan and Nepal.[72] More in detail, "an unusual growth of Buddhist monasteries along the Indo-Bhutan border" has been reported in the last years. Since this increase is not proportional to the growth of the Buddhist population in the region, this would suggest that the Chinese might be involved in both intelligence gathering and propaganda activities.[73] Religious covers might even have access to some of the most inaccessible countries of the world. Allegedly, the Pentagon has recently used a Christian NGO to conduct clandestine operations in North Korea, since the authorities had previously granted access to the personnel of the organization to receive humanitarian assistance.[74] Likewise, in 2013, the Equatoguinean authorities expelled a prominent Spanish Adventist pastor, Manuel Garcia Caceres, accusing him of being a threat to national security (i.e. of being involved in intelligence activities), after that he was found in possession of equipment for satellite communications that could elude detection by the country's security services.[75]

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