Book Review

Jensen, Kurt F. 2009. *Cautious Beginnings: Canadian Foreign Intelligence 1939-51*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

230 pp, Paperback, \$34.95 (CAN). ISBN: 978-077748-1483-6

Kevin Walby

SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellow, Centre of Criminology, University of Toronto, Canada. walbyswresearch@gmail.com

Cautious Beginnings is about the small role played by Canadians in foreign intelligence gathering during the Second World War, as well as the emergence of an 'intelligence architecture' (17) in Canada during the postwar years. Based on analysis of declassified documents and archival material, Jensen's book aims to dispel 'popular misconceptions' (2) concerning the function of Canada in foreign intelligence gathering during the war, including the access that Canada had to foreign intelligence produced by government agencies in Britain and the United States.

Jensen begins by differentiating between foreign intelligence, military intelligence and security intelligence. Foreign intelligence is defined as 'information relating to the capabilities, intentions or activities of foreign states, person, corporations or organizations' (2). The difference between foreign intelligence and military intelligence for Jensen is that the latter regards 'information on hostile or potentially hostile armed forces' (3). Security intelligence, however, concerns both external and internal threats to security. Jensen indicates that his book is primarily about foreign intelligence. However, there are further distinctions. For instance, signals intelligence, or SIGNIT, refers to intelligence collected and compiled through the interception of communications. During the Second World War, SIGNIT involved the intercepting of telegraph messages and airwave communications. There is also human intelligence, or HUMINT, referring to intelligence derived from a human source through spying, infiltration, or interrogation (which may or may not involve torture).

One of Jensen's key arguments in *Cautious Beginnings* is that Canadian officials were risk-averse, reluctant to become involved in collecting HUMINT during the mid-twentieth century. However, Canada was called on to engage in SIGNIT projects during and after the Second World War.

In 1939, Canada's agency responsible for foreign intelligence, the Department of External Affairs (DEA), had a small staff. When attacks by German U-boats began threatening allied trans-Atlantic shipping routes, the DEA was prompted by British counterparts to create a special intelligence centre, divided into a Discrimination Unit and an Examination Unit. The former collected signals intelligence, while the latter evaluated it. Other government agencies were involved. For instance, the Department of National Defence (DND) operated a radio signals intercept unit as part of the Discrimination Unit. The Examination Unit was integrated with the National Research Council (NRC). For some time, the DEA intelligence centre was housed next door to Prime Minister Mackenzie King's place of residence on Laurier Avenue in Ottawa, the capital city of Canada.

Based on analysis of internal and external briefing reports as well as correspondence between officials, Jensen discusses the kinds of personnel and technology it took to create an operational signals intelligence centre in Canada. Equipment was needed that could handle weak and fading signals on all frequencies. People with remarkable language skills, who knew Morse code, and who could work long hours at a high pace were required. Deciphering Japanese codes entailed a different set of skills than doing the same with German encryption. Intelligence work was not glamorous. Attempting to debunk popular misconceptions

about intelligence, Jensen argues that the primary information intercepted by intelligence officers was weather reports from Japan and Europe. A key task of intelligence officers was to eliminate duplication of intercepts before forwarding information up the chain of command.

As Canada's intelligence architecture slowly developed, officials gained more access to intelligence produced by agencies based in other countries. Canada's DEA eventually became accepted as an intelligence partner by the United States and Britain, but Jensen argues that Canada never gained full access. Even though the DEA intelligence centre was established, for most of the war 'a Canadian foreign intelligence program was not a Canadian policy priority' (36). Canadian officials remained cautious about how many resources to expend on intelligence. As Jensen puts it, 'neither side was quite certain how much intelligence to provide the other, nor at what cost' (57). Though 'Canada was not a first-tier ally' (71), Canada's DEA was looked to for help concerning interception of signals intelligence, especially after Canadian intelligence officers contributed information leading to the detection and sinking of Germany's battleship *Bismark*. By 1943, 'Canada had served its intelligence apprenticeship' (101) and was permitted more international access.

Although Canada was not a full partner in intelligence efforts, the country did play host to a British intelligence training school near Oshawa, Ontario, referred to as Camp X. Over 500 students were trained at Camp X for every theatre of war, including covert operations agents and psychological warfare experts. Though the DEA was primarily focused on SIGNIT collection, Canada did become involved in HUMINT collection through reviewing all letters sent by prisoners of war. Canada held almost 40,000 German prisoners of war (POWs), reviewing tens of thousands of their letters each month, which fed into the production of intelligence reports. Incoming mail was also reviewed. Jensen contends that Canada was weary of how much a full-on foreign intelligence operation based on HUMINT would cost, and so did not interview POWs themselves.

After the war, the Soviet Union became the main target of foreign intelligence agencies in the United States, Britain and Canada. The Canadian Joint Intelligence Staff report of 1946, for instance, commented on the probability of Soviet air attacks. For the next few decades, the threat of Soviet nuclear bombing became the focal point of intelligence operations. Canada moved into the realm of foreign intelligence cautiously, argues Jensen, even though pressure from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the United States compelled Canada to do more. While the DEA did not have a fully qualified staff and was not in the same 'intelligence league' as the United States and Britain (178), Canada's intelligence architecture became more formalized in the postwar period, especially after the Commonwealth SIGNIT Organization Agreement of 1947 and the Canadian-United States Intelligence Agreement on SIGNIT signed into effect in 1949.

One of Jensen's most significant arguments is that, in the intelligence world, knowing more leads to awareness of gaps in knowledge, which drives the intelligence architecture toward expansion. Canada's intelligence agencies kept evolving because 'Canada's intelligence allies were unlikely to continue a flow of intelligence without a corresponding Canadian contribution' (155). *Cautious Beginnings* thus raises numerous fascinating questions about intelligence networks that formed between Canada, the United States and Britain between 1939 and 1951. Jensen's emphasis on Canada's risk-averse approach to foreign intelligence goes a long way toward explaining why Canada does not have an agency similar to the CIA in the United States or the MI6 in Britain. Jensen also dispels the idea that Britain, the United States and Canada were fully networked and open with intelligence sharing. The intelligence alliances between these three countries were far more fragile.

One matter that could have been explored further by Jensen concerns methodology. Jensen relied in part on access to information (ATI) requests to produce his sample of historical and declassified documents. He mentions how difficult it is for historians and other social scientists to use ATI, although there is no further elaboration. Given the depth of documentation Jensen was able to access using such requests, a note on method would have been useful for other scholars interested in this means of producing a textual trail concerning intelligence, surveillance and security agencies. While the book exhibits magnificent depth as it regards access to policy briefs and personal correspondence between government officials, I was waiting for a full chapter on the work and routines of intelligence collection and evaluation. *Cautious Beginnings* operates at a level of analysis that usefully describes changes in the policy context, but does not drill down to examine the everyday working lives of those in Canada's special intelligence centre during the war and in the postwar period. Such a focus on the concrete practice of intelligence work, the

day-to-day doing of intelligence collection and evaluation, would have offered possibilities for creating a stronger dialogue between related sub-disciplines such as surveillance studies, as well as the sociologies of work and of knowledge.

Another issue with the book is a lack of overarching theoretical framework. *Cautious Beginnings* is wonderfully woven together with a descriptive prose, but does not engage with contemporary theoretical debates related to intelligence, surveillance and the politics of information. For instance, Jensen does not put his claims into conversation with literature in sociology and political science on surveillance as a means of administrative power reflecting historical trends toward bureaucratization (see especially Dandeker, 1990; Giddens 1987). Nor does Jensen comment on the idea of intelligence failures during the Second World War or after. The idea of intelligence failures is especially topical today given the recent faulty CIA claims about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq as well as the blunders of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service of Canada (CSIS), the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), and related agencies in the cases of Maher Arar, Abdullah Almalki and others. Engaging with contemporary theoretical debates and providing a postscript making connections to the contemporary period would have enriched the discussion.

Nevertheless, *Cautious Beginnings* will interest political scientists, historians and sociologists conducting research as it regards intelligence, surveillance, security and war.

References

- Dandeker, Christopher. 1990. *Surveillance, Power & Modernity: Bureaucracy and Discipline from 1700 to the Present Day*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1987. *The Nation-State and Violence: Volume Two of a Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.