

Defence Intelligence

As you wander down Whitehall from Westminster to Trafalgar square, you pass through the beating heart of government here in the UK. The Foreign office, Department for Health, Ministry of Defence, Cabinet Office, Scottish Office, Welsh Office, and Downing Street of course. Up until 2016 one of the other grand edifices you would have passed was the Old War Office. An Edwardian Baroque exterior made from Portland stone, with huge window covered with 1960's thick net curtains, many stained yellow from the decades of cigarette and pipe smoke. Behind those net curtains though, was the home of the Defence Intelligence. While this history laden building is currently behind scaffolding and anonymous white hoardings awaiting transformation into the 5-star Raffles OWO hotel, the story of DI lives on...and it is quite an interesting one.

Defence Intelligence can trace its history back to 1873 with the formation of the Intelligence Branch of the British War Office, which, in 1888, became the Directorate of Military Intelligence (MI). During the First World War, MI departments, such as MI1, the secretariat of the Director of Military Intelligence (now GCHQ), were responsible for various intelligence gathering functions. Many of the original MI departments, such as MI4 (Aerial Photography) were renamed or eventually subsumed into Defence Intelligence. Only MI5 and MI6 survive today using the same designations and separate remits from DI.

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Today DI is part of the MOD's Strategic Command with the primary role to inform decision makers in the Ministry of Defence and UK government by providing 'all source' intelligence products and assessments. This discipline draws information from a variety of overt and covert sources to provide the intelligence needed to support military operations, contingency planning, and to inform defence policy and procurement decisions. Pretty critical stuff.

Since 2022 DI has been led by the Chief of Defence Intelligence, Adrian Bird. He is supported by two deputies, one civilian and one military. The civilian Deputy Chief of Defence Intelligence (DCDI) is responsible for Defence Intelligence analysis and production. The other is the military Director of Cyber Intelligence and Information Integration (DCI3) and is responsible for intelligence collection and capability. DI has around 5,000 staff in total, based mainly at locations in London, Chicksands in Bedfordshire, RAF Wyton in Cambridgeshire and RAF Digby in Lincolnshire. They also have a sizable presence in Cyprus, working alongside GCHQ they conduct electronic and signals intelligence gathering activities across the Middle East and Levant.

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Finally, there is the Joint Services Signals Organisation (JSSO), these folks are about 1600 in strength and again come from all three branches of the UK military. They conduct research into new communications systems and techniques in order to provide operational support to forces deployed all over the world. As you would expect, they work really closely with GCHQ.



Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Defence Intelligence took the rather radical step of going public with many of their assessments and reports. There is now a daily intelligence briefing that goes out via X (formerly known as twitter). There are two types of updates, once a day a map will be released showing Russian attack and troop locations, those areas of Ukraine under Russian control or being contested, as well as likely axes of advance of both sides' military forces. In addition, since February 2022, there have been between one and three daily intelligence updates, each containing bullet-pointed information and analysis.

Traditionally, intelligence released into the public domain has tended to be infrequent, indirectly attributed or deliberately obscured. While these briefings are sometimes a little light on details, the unprecedented nature of these tweets has led to a great deal of commentary and praise. The motive for their release is primarily about promoting a pro-Ukraine narrative from the UK government but it also serves as a very public forum to embarrass the Russian military and those in the Kremlin and is part of the wider strategic operations against Russian aggression.

So, if you're ever in Whitehall and have the chance to dwell in the magnificent lobby of the new Raffles Hotel that is due to open in September 2023, or perhaps sip a cocktail in one of the many fine bars, do take a second to look around and imagine the hustle and bustle of civil servants and military personal pouring over maps and black and white satellite photography, doing their bit to support front line troops and keep our country that little bit safer.

DI is a bit of an intelligence trailblazer too.