Review of *Propaganda and Intelligence in the Cold War: The NATO Information Service*


In her analysis of propaganda during the Cold War, Linda Risso argues that the NATO Information Service (NATIS) conducted a robust propaganda campaign despite member states’ conflicting interests. According to Riso, NATIS and Western intelligence services formed a symbiotic relationship; the spy agencies provided intelligence to aid the propaganda campaign and NATIS returned the favor by furnishing information. To back this thesis, the author examined documents from the NATO archives and conducted interviews with key policymakers. Overall, Risso’s analysis is a solid contribution to the literature on multilateral cooperation and propaganda, although the policy implications are less explicit.

The book is separated into two sections with the first half examining the formation of NATIS at the beginning of the Cold War. Throughout this section, Risso pays particular attention to how outside events affected NATO’s propaganda campaign. For example, she details how Josef Stalin’s death and the conflict in Korea led to an expansion of NATIS’ propaganda efforts. These details help the reader understand how NATO’s propaganda efforts developed while at the same time filling a gap in the intelligence literature on how propaganda agencies worked together during the Cold War. The proceeding chapters detail how the turbulence of the 1960s led to a greater emphasis on targeting propaganda campaigns towards younger generations and how the relationship between NATIS and the media evolved during the 1980s.

Readers will notice immediately that *Propaganda and Intelligence in the Cold War* is remarkable in its attention to detail. Risso does an excellent job providing context while keeping the focus on NATIS. Students of NATO history and propaganda will also be satisfied with the attention to detail and primary source material. However, those looking for a more explicit tie to contemporary policy might leave with some unanswered questions. For example, given NATIS’ history what are the implications for current propaganda agencies? Would the lessons of NATIS hold true for similar international organizations not engaged in propaganda operations? These policy-relevant questions are not addressed except for a few paragraphs in the introductory and concluding chapters.

Another area that would have been interesting to draw out further is the author’s most interesting claim: the reciprocal relationship between intelligence and propaganda efforts. Although there is a description of how NATIS worked with intelligence agencies broadly, Risso spends little time explicitly exploring the relationship beyond the discussion in Chapter 2. A longer explanation would have been interesting given the importance of this claim, not only for the book, but for the broader intelligence studies literature.

doi: 10.18278/gsis.1.2.7
The second half of this book is a description of the various policies used by NATIS to influence public opinion. These include NATO films and exhibitions, engagement with opinion leaders in the intelligentsia, and work with voluntary organizations. This is a clear contribution to the literature on Cold War propaganda because it suggests that over time the scope of NATIS’ efforts broadened to include a wider portion of the public. Still, it would be interesting to learn more about the effectiveness of these activities, but this is a difficult, if not impossible task as the author notes (pp. 253–254).

While this book is light on policy recommendations implications, it is a solid contribution to the literature. Historians will be pleased with the author’s attention to historical detail and use of previously unexplored NATO documents and those interested in international cooperation will find an excellent example of how states can work together in peace and crises.

Stephen Coulthart

National Security Studies Institute, University of Texas, El Paso, Texas