

Book Review

Human Intelligence: Supporting Composite Warfare Operations in Africa

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Endorsing this outstanding book, Dr Thys van den Berg calls it a ‘seminal and groundbreaking work on the practices and theory of military intelligence tradecraft’ in a blurb on the cover of the book. While supporting this stance, I would argue that the book has relevance to all intelligence and indeed security agencies. Chapters, such as ‘Understanding and the Language of Tradecraft’, ‘Agent Cultivation and Recruitment’, and ‘Surveillance and Counter-Surveillance’, have relevance to all security agencies. The profound observations the author shares with readers – often from his own vast personal experiences – are equally relevant. Indeed, I cannot imagine a better author to have written this book. Barlow has served as a sapper commander with 101 Task Force, as second-in-command of 32 Battalion’s Reconnaissance Wing, as agent handler for South Africa’s Military Intelligence Division, and thereafter, as region commander of the covert Civil Cooperation Bureau (CCB) of the South African Special Forces. Upon leaving the defence force, he went on to become founder and chairperson of Executive Outcomes, arguably the most successful private military company in contemporary times. Barlow has also served as a major general in several African armed forces and as the Honorary Consul of Sao Tome and Principe to South Africa between 2019 and 2022.

The theoretical aspects of the book provide the veritable glue for the book laying the foundations for the later empirical chapters. The underlying theoretical structure also lends the book an inherent logic, and the chapters follow logically on each other, from understanding the importance and role of intelligence in human intelligence operations in Africa to intelligence tradecraft, and finally to composite intelligence in support of composite warfare operations. This volume builds on Barlow’s previous book, *Composite Warfare: The Conduct of Successful Ground Operations in Africa*, and examines how African security agencies can structure and deploy their human intelligence resources more efficiently, and secure African state at a time when they face unprecedented internal and external challenges. Consider just two challenges here. The author notes that large foreign mining companies have their own security and intelligence structures to ensure the safety of their operations against criminal elements and anti-government forces. This intelligence-gathering capability can however be accessed easily by the intelligence services of the home countries of such mining companies. Similarly, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has renewed geostrategic power shifts between East and West. As rival blocs vie for influence in Africa, their intelligence footprint will expand on this blighted continent.

The centrality of intelligence is made clear by Barlow at the very start of the book. He writes, '[i]ntelligence drives strategy. Without it, failure waits.'⁵⁶¹ These two pithily symbolise vintage Barlow – erudite, succinct, and powerful. Intelligence, the author emphasises, is essential for pre-emptive action. The author powerfully demonstrates how African armed forces suffer as a result of a deficit of actionable intelligence to make strategic adjustments to high-tempo manoeuvre operations as well as low-intensity operations aimed at countering armed anti-government forces. Most critically, perhaps, is the time-lag – due to cumbersome bureaucracy – between the collection of intelligence and its verification and interpretation, and then giving an actionable intelligence report to political decision-makers. This time lag, Barlow argues, enables anti-government forces and other adversaries and challengers to plan and execute operations against governments, gain the initiative, and propagate their successes, thereby undermining public confidence in the government.

To increase the quality of intelligence products and to overcome the time lag, Barlow potently argues for a restructuring of intelligence structures, taking into account how they are postured and how they can become more forward-looking, pre-emptive and action-oriented with a deep operational reach. In Chapter 5, Barlow examines what such a revised African intelligence structure might look like in the form of the focussed activities division (FAD). This would be an independent, highly classified, self-sustainable, deniable, and low-visibility structure. Such a structure would be responsible for the conduct of specialist offensive intelligence activities and operations of immediate concern to the commander-in-chief and/or the chief of intelligence. Its core function would be to collect intelligence covertly and act independently on critical intelligence information that poses an imminent and significant threat to the state and its citizens.

As all conflicts and wars are fought across the information domain, the impact and power of perception should never be underestimated. The effect on altering and shaping public opinion is considerable. For this reason, Barlow argues for the creation of a perception modification group (PMG) within the FAD. Barlow goes on to argue, that the PMG of the FAD would be responsible for specialist informational warfare, influence, and propaganda operations aimed at altering, influencing, shaping, and entrenching perceptions through the judicious application of white, grey and black propaganda, disinformation, and other forms of perception modification. Although frequently referred to as “strategic messaging”, such propaganda and disinformation are aimed at either the strengthening or the erosion of the support of a government or an organisation.

It is clear from the foregoing that the envisaged FAD would be an exceptionally powerful organisation. Whilst operationally appealing, the independence of such a division should come with some qualifiers. I believe that Barlow should also have added legislative oversight here, considering exactly how independent such a division should be, given the historic political abuse of such clandestine institutions on the African continent. In fairness to Barlow, he is quite aware of such abuse and cogently opines:

Some governments, however, exploit their military and other intelligence collection agencies for their personal benefit and interest, creating an intelligence shortfall when faced with hostile challengers or threats. This misguided approach to intelligence impacts negatively on their domestic and foreign interests and their stability.⁵⁶²

This is all the more reason for complete clarity on the proposed independence of the division and issues of political oversight.

In an age of notable strides in technology, Big Data and Artificial Intelligence, Barlow refreshingly emphasises the role of humans as collectors of intelligence information. Whilst signals, imagery, or geospatial intelligence may provide evidence of a military build-up, only human intelligence assets can unveil the intentions and motivations of such a military build-up.

Perhaps, the most important aspect of this book is its focus on Africa. Most intelligence structures follow either the European or Soviet model. Barlow provides his deep insights on what makes the African operational environment unique, and on the way intelligence structures could adapt to this fast-changing environment. Here his chapter on 50 basic Africa rules is most insightful.

Erudite and incisive, the book gives evidence of the author's scholarship and deep command of his subject matter gleaned out of decades of operational experience. This book should be prescribed reading for any module in Intelligence Studies.

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ENDNOTES

⁵⁶¹ E Barlow, *Human Intelligence: Supporting Composite Warfare Operations in Africa* (Pinetown: 30 Degrees South, 2023), 1.

⁵⁶² Barlow, *Human Intelligence*, 22.

