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Review of Tarling, N. (2017) The British and the Vietnam War: their way with LBJ

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Mahar's book bears some parallels with Edward Gazur's *Alexander Orlov: The FBI's KGB General*.² Both authors are Western counterintelligence officers who handled sometimes difficult Soviet defectors. But unlike Gazur, who is an apologist for Orlov (born Lev Lazerevich Feldbin), Mahar does not hesitate to reveal Brik's darker characteristics – his alcoholism, philandering, and outright laziness. Brik himself admits to indiscretions during his career, and much of Mahar's information about Brik's early life comes from direct interviews with Brik, who died in 2011.

Although much of the information in Mahar's book is already available elsewhere, his insertion of personal insights into the Brik case provides a worthwhile addition to literature about Cold War intelligence.

Kevin Riehle
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Tarling, Nicholas: *The British and the Vietnam War: Their Way with LBJ* (Singapore, 2017), 392 pp., ISBN 978-981-472-223-0.

The late Nicholas Tarling's book on British policy towards the Vietnam War during the Johnson presidency, published just a month before its author passed away, is the definitive statement on its subject. Running to nearly 400 closely written pages, it provides near-encyclopedic coverage of the British foreign policy establishment's views on America's slide to war in Southeast Asia.

The book argues that while London often disagreed with escalation in the war, believing the United States could do little more than forestall eventual defeat, British ministers and civil servants often found discretion to be the better part of valor. Whitehall was unconvinced of the strategic importance of Southeast Asia for British interests, but was unwilling to cut against the Americans too strongly lest the "special relationship" be damaged. This meant recognizing, as one civil servant put it, that "[t]he war in Vietnam is an all American show and unsolicited advice from us would not be welcome" (p. 39). Having only gloomy things to say, successive British governments found it easier to say nothing at all (p. 108). While Tarling concludes that Britain was unlikely to have been able to influence the Johnson administration to act any differently, it should have tried (p. 392).

The volume mostly relies on British archival sources, with documents from other governments limited to those published in edited collections such as

2 Alexander Orlov, *The FBI's KGB General* (New York, 2001).

The Foreign Relations of the United States series. Its exhaustive coverage of British archival sources accounts for a lot of the volume's value. But it would also have been instructive to examine US archives to explore how the British side was viewed in Washington. The book's discussion of internal deliberations in the Foreign Office often have an ethereal nature, detached from the very American policy process which they centered on and were ultimately aimed at influencing. Similarly, the book only very infrequently comments on matters such as personalities, ideas, domestic politics and all the myriad factors that help us contextualize what one clerk said to another. A wider source base would have helped.

For the same reason, students and scholars of military history will find little here about the dynamics of the conflict in Vietnam. Insofar as the book might be useful to military historians, it is as a case study in alliance dynamics and how commitment to a military venture can affect the capacity to rationally analyze it. The book is full of examples of highly perceptive British policy documents that foresaw the futility of the American war and showed a clearer understanding of the politics of East Asia than one finds in the US archives. The Americans, unable to back down once their credibility was on the line, rarely stepped back to consider the big picture in such a fruitful way. Yet given their junior position in the alliance, the British never felt comfortable pressing their case. And, of course, London suffered from the delusions that have always attended the special relationship, such as that Britain was vital to the defense of Southeast Asia even if Washington did not realize it (p. 43).

Overall, and despite not attempting wider contextualization, this book provides excellent coverage of official British thinking and policy on the evolution of the Vietnam War under the Johnson presidency. On those terms, it is hard to imagine it being bettered.

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Hugemark, Bo: *Den stora invasionen. Svenskt operativt tänkande under det kalla kriget* (Stockholm, 2017), 296 pp., Ill., bibl., ISBN 978-9-1732-9138-5.

The Large Invasion: Swedish Operational Thinking during the Cold War

For nearly fifteen years, researchers associated to the National Defence University (NDU), Stockholm University and the Royal Academy of Military