



HARRY HINSLEY

## Francis Harry Hinsley 1918–1998

SIR HARRY HINSLEY, who died in Cambridge on 16 February 1998, was a cryptanalyst, an historian, and an effective university administrator. He was recruited to Bletchley Park in 1939 as a cryptanalyst and remained there for the duration of the war. Following his wartime service, Hinsley returned to St John's College, Cambridge, where he had been elected a research fellow in 1944. He became a university lecturer in history in 1949, Reader in the History of International Relations in 1965, and Professor of the History of International Relations in 1969. He also served as President (1975–9) then Master (1979–89) of St John's College, and as Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University (1981–3). He was made OBE for his work at Bletchley in 1946 and knighted in 1985. He was born on 26 November 1918 at 28 Rowland Street, Walsall, the son of Thomas Henry Hinsley, ironworks wagoner, and his wife Emma, née Adey. He went to the local elementary school and then to Queen Mary's Grammar School, Walsall, and in 1937 won a scholarship to St John's College, Cambridge.

This steady rise up the academic ladder was rudely interrupted by the onset of the Second World War in Europe. When the war broke out, he had taken a First Class in Part I of the Cambridge Historical Tripos but had not completed a first degree and was never to do so. During the summer vacation of 1939 Hinsley made a typical student's trip to Europe and particularly Germany. He saved resources by hitch hiking and liked to recall how he had succeeded in getting a lift up to Berchtesgaden in an official limousine. There he found himself in a small crowd and in

touching distance of Hitler as he emerged to leave. At the last possible moment, even a little beyond it, he returned to England safely by train and went back to Cambridge for his second year. There he discovered that his intellect had attracted the attention of two Cambridge dons, Martin Charlesworth of St John's and F. E. Adcock of King's. They had been asked to find suitably able candidates for the Government Code and Cypher School at Bletchley Park and Hinsley was enlisted to the unit. There he joined the Naval Section and worked for the Admiralty's Operational Intelligence Centre.

Congregated at Bletchley was a group of young, highly accomplished men and women, living a completely secret life in conditions somewhat resembling a physically uncomfortable University Senior Common Room. 'It was a lovely life', he later recalled. 'Bletchley Park was like a University. We lived the anarchic lives of students. There was a tremendous social life, parties, amateur dramatics, lots of young ladies and lots of young men.' Young as he was, Hinsley became the leading expert on the decryption and analysis of German wireless traffic. Hinsley's interpretative skills became highly significant after May 1941, when, acting on his instinct that German trawlers stationed off Iceland were carrying Enigma code machines, the OIC arranged to capture one. Together with cryptanalytical material secured from the U-boat 110 and a second trawler captured in June 1941, the information gained enabled Bletchley Park to read the German naval enigma traffic. This achievement played a vital role in supplying the Admiralty with crucial intelligence analysis derived from Admiral Doenitz's signals—information which helped to win the battle against U-boats in the Atlantic. 'I knew Doenitz best of all', he later said. 'He ran the U-boats like a prep school. There was a time when I could tell you whether Doenitz was personally on duty. I could tell from the way he planned it. He was good. Mind you, he had a fairly rigid mind.' Hinsley's powers as an interpreter of decrypts was unrivalled and was based on an ability to sense that something unusual was afoot from the tiniest clues. He was not always believed, particularly in early days. His warning, for example, that something was happening in the Baltic just before the German invasion of Norway went unheeded. He knew the British naval mind, too. Young as he was, his insights came to be respected—they called him the Cardinal—and he made several extended visits to Admiral Tovey's flagship at Scapa Flow, on one occasion organising an attempt to bring the German battleship *Tirpitz* within range, which only narrowly failed. His description of his role in the sinking of the *Bismarck* was later to become a famous Hinslaic set piece once it became possible to deliver it.

The secrecy of Bletchley Park was scrupulously observed both during the war and for thirty years after it. The result was an inevitable lack of assessment of the role of intelligence in the streams of books recounting the history of the war. Only after 1979, with the publication of the first of his five monumental volumes on the history of *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, was it possible for Hinsley to discuss the significance of what he and others had achieved during the war at Bletchley Park. He said that the long period of enforced silence was made easier because he could at least discuss it with his wife, Hilary Brett Brett-Smith (the daughter of Herbert Francis Brett Brett-Smith), whom he married on 6 April 1946, and who had been there too. The official history dealt with both successes and failures, such as Montgomery's decision to ignore warnings about Hitler's intention to hold the Scheldt which led to the Arnhem debacle, and set out to be dispassionate in every way. It was thought to be heavy going and dry, but Hinsley, who had wrestled with every kind of sensitivity during the writing of the histories—internal and those of foreign governments—simply responded that 'it was meant to be bloodless'. Sir Maurice Oldfield, former Director-General of MI6, complained that it was 'remarkable in that there are hardly any names in it. You get the impression that the intelligence war was won by committees in Whitehall.' When all was over, however, he supplied a highly entertaining version, edited with Alan Stripp, of Bletchley Park memoirs under the title *Codebreakers: The inside story of Bletchley Park* (1993) which served to add the flesh and blood excluded from the official account. Perhaps most interesting of all was Hinsley's personal assessment of the ultimate result of the intelligence effort. It had not been a 'war winner' but was a 'war-shortener'. He thought that the war might have been as much as two years longer without it, certainly one year. 'Without it', he often said, 'Rommel would have got to Alexandria. The U-boats would not have done us in. But they would have got us into serious shortages and put another year on the war.'

The desperately important and occasionally highly dramatic contribution to the British Second World War intelligence effort that was made by the specially recruited group of scholars at Bletchley Park has been well documented in recent years. Harry Hinsley's significant role within that remarkable effort has also been very widely acknowledged since it became possible to discuss it at all.<sup>1</sup> His achievement in bringing

<sup>1</sup> Donal J. Sexton, *Signals intelligence in World War II: a research guide* (Westport, CT, 1996). Since 1996, see Michael Smith, *Station X: the codebreakers of Bletchley Park* (London,

the official histories to completion should not be underestimated. He demonstrated qualities of persistence and patience which triumphed over what at times were serious efforts to persuade him to abandon the project altogether. He could occasionally be testy with those who failed to comprehend the hard realities in any situation—a fairly common occurrence in academic life, but that never affected the way in which he conducted business or thought about intellectual problems. It might be guessed that it was the results of both his historical output and his patience that eventually led to the offer of a knighthood which he felt he could accept.

Hinsley's second public career was carved out in academic life. Here there was a remarkable progression of apparent improbabilities: he became a Fellow of St John's College when he had no degree, not even a first degree, he fathered one of the most significant research schools of the twentieth century in international and diplomatic history without himself conducting basic research or proceeding to a Ph.D., and eventually he was to be elected Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge when he had not yet actually been admitted to the Mastership of his College—an unheard of event, at least in modern times. The last of these was both a genuine improbability and a very wise move: Hinsley was always a highly competent, conservative in the true sense—occasionally parsimonious, and common-sensical administrator. It was probably as well for Cambridge that he was Vice-Chancellor during a particularly difficult period of straitened finances coming near the beginning of the long squeeze imposed by successive Cabinets on British universities during the last quarter of the twentieth century. He had some success in reducing costs within the University, but did not foresee how much worse the situation was going to become and that the University urgently needed to begin to raise funds from private sources.

The first two unlikelyhoods, however, were the consequences of the war and the post-war educational emergency that arose as universities tried to cope with the arrival of a massive backlog of delayed student entry. A very large number of Hinsley's junior members of St John's College, Cambridge stretching from the 1940s to the 1970s are able to testify to the extraordinary personal relationship which they enjoyed with him either as undergraduate or graduate students or because he was their

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1998). David Syrett (ed.), *The Battle of the Atlantic and Signals Intelligence: U-boats and trends, 1941–1945* (Aldershot, 1998). David Alvarez (ed.), *Allied and Axis Signals Intelligence in World War II* (London, 1999). See also the novel *Enigma* by Robert Harris (London, 1995).

tutor. He had an amazing memory for personal histories and in addition gave to each student his complete attention while they were at Cambridge. He never forgot any student he had taught or been tutor to and they never forgot their exposure to the way he thought about things and the often striking language and style of delivery he used to describe what he thought. They also never forgot the risk of personal annihilation which visiting him entailed. The threat came from showers of books which could and did fall from hopelessly overstressed and ancient shelves, themselves in evident danger of falling. He had the gift of total concentration on the person he was dealing with, whatever the circumstances, and was perfectly capable of forgetting that there were often other people waiting in his room during tutorial consultations. No one in more contemporary, privacy protecting, conditions would be likely to hear a fellow student asked, with evident interest and the usual slightly odd Hinslaic emphases, 'and what happened, my boy, *after* you set fire to the factory . . . ?' In short, he brought tremendous vigour and enthusiasm to every aspect of being a Cambridge don in his own time.

One important consequence of his vigour was the creation of the Centre for International Studies. Cambridge had never generated the kind of department of politics and/or international relations which became common in universities during the second half of the twentieth century. This meant that both teachers and students from several disciplines whose interests were essentially in the field of international relations broadly interpreted had no common place to pursue projects and exchange ideas. The connections between international history, international relations and international law would particularly benefit if some kind of common roof could be created. Hinsley, together with the eminent lawyer, Clive Parry, tried to arrange for this in a small way. They had no idea at the outset what was going to happen. The Centre was formed in 1975, existing under the wing of the History Faculty, and began to act as a central point for graduate students, interested dons and visiting fellows to exchange ideas and, a little later, to provide a home for a very small number of students taking a new one year M.Phil. degree in International Relations. Shortly afterwards the Chancellor of the University, Prince Philip, began to suggest that more work should be done in strategic studies, ideally by means of a separate Tripos. This suggestion was modified into a successful proposal that teaching in strategic studies should be funded by the Ministry of Defence and that a small cohort of talented senior officers should come to Cambridge each year to take the M.Phil. degree. This arrangement began in 1978 and at the same time, the

unusual character of the degree, compared with the more familiar courses offered elsewhere based on international relations theory, attracted students from all over the world, particularly North America but including the foreign ministries of Japan and Mexico, as well as others. The numbers rose rapidly and despite opposition within the history faculty as well as great stress on a small number of teachers, Hinsley found that he had been the godfather of a major enterprise within both the British and international academic community. Over time the Directorship of the Centre became a full time post (1987), initially funded by St John's College and the University took over responsibility for providing all the teaching and, eventually, separate and congenial physical accommodation for the Centre.

While Hinsley did all these things with enthusiasm, he did them not because they were primary interests or ambitions, but because they came with the job. The job itself was an intellectual enterprise. It is certainly arguable that it was in his writings and his supervision of graduate students that Hinsley made his most significant long term impact. Two published tributes exist to his role as leader of a major research school of international and diplomatic historians. The first is *British Foreign Policy under Sir Edward Grey* (CUP, 1977) which he edited. It was the cumulative result of the work of many of his students who had seized on the opportunities offered as the 1960s saw the archives of the immediately pre-war years opened under the then fifty-year rule. Serious investigation of the archival records of the immediate antecedents of the First World War could and did begin. The causes of the 1914 war were a major topic of interest for Hinsley, partly because he so strongly rejected the idea that wars occur accidentally and partly because he was suspicious of the widely believed notion that all could be explained by reference to the playing out of the Final Crisis itself. The book could have stood as a first *festschrift* for him, had he not been its editor and it certainly gives a good picture of the product of his first wave of research students. It has remained and is likely to continue to be, a generally accepted standard work.

The second tribute came in the form of a deliberate *festschrift* dealing with a later period and essentially bringing together the work of a second wave of Hinsley's students who had been able, following the introduction of a thirty-year rule by Harold Wilson's first Cabinet, to concentrate on the Second World War and its antecedents. This, too, was a serious interest of Hinsley's, as it would have been to any significant participant, like himself, and also because of the profound disagreement he had with

A. J. P. Taylor's interpretation of both the background to and the conduct of Hitler's policies.<sup>2</sup> *Diplomacy and Intelligence during the Second World War* (CUP, 1985) dealt with some of these issues and others and proved unusually successful for a collected work, having to be reprinted in 1987. Even these two works do not by themselves fully convey the power of the Hinsley network. Because his research students were international in origin and because his establishment of a research seminar attracted many other interested scholars, his way of thinking about international history and current international political issues spread to the United States, throughout the Commonwealth and to other countries as well. Nor can they convey the extraordinary atmosphere of the seminar itself. It was thus described in the introduction to the 1985 *Festschrift*

The seminar became famous. Gently and often amusingly directed from behind clouds of pipe smoke, current research students could try out their latest interpretations of their material, describe what archives they had found, visitors from abroad—an increasingly common phenomenon—could be cajoled into presenting their own latest topics and existing teaching historians could from time to time be induced to talk to the seminar about their own research. The sessions could often be exhilarating and provided at once a sense of companionship and a sense of the broad scope which international relations offers and which was represented by the broad scope of subjects being studied under Harry Hinsley's direction. This breadth did not provide any apparent difficulties for Harry Hinsley himself, nor any constraints upon the life of the seminar. The reason . . . (has been) . . . touched on by Jonathan Steinberg.<sup>3</sup> . . . He comments on the fact that Harry Hinsley did not, because of the war, come into academic life possessing the usual research experience in terms of method, but he did come with a formidable experience in analysis. This was reflected in the way he reacted to the work of his pupils, or to the papers presented at the seminar. He did not primarily react to archival problems, or to the methodological problems, though both could and did engage his careful attention, he reacted to the wider implications of what had been discovered or reassessed; and he would comment rapidly, almost electrically, on the true significance of what he had

<sup>2</sup> His review of Taylor's *Origins of the Second World War* (London, 1961), was reprinted as chapter 15 of *Power and the Pursuit of Peace*. It contains one powerful passage which is worth quoting for its strong taste of vintage Hinsley. 'It is to be regretted that Mr. Taylor's analysis of these crises is insulated not only from all regard for the policy of the man who almost wholly caused them on one level but also, as was established earlier, from all recollection of the extreme international unbalance that was the chief cause for them on the other. It is only when crises are studied in this, their proper, context that it emerges to what a large extent Hitler was responsible, and to what a small extent the conditions or the conduct of other men, for the outbreak of the second world war.' p. 332.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Steinberg, 'F. H. Hinsley, an essay in bibliography', in *Diplomacy and Intelligence during the Second World War*, ed. Richard Langhorne (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 12–21.



just heard or read. It was these flashes of illumination which made supervision by him or attendance at his seminar so memorable and so valuable.<sup>4</sup>

Hinsley's own writings gain part of their power from the remarkable consistency of approach that he employed. Whereas many scholars deploy their expertise on an unfolding topic as revealed by the results of their basic research and thus define their intellectual role, Hinsley, who did not have or subsequently gain the experience of doing basic research, defined himself by the adoption of a particular starting point. This point was in many ways reminiscent of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, his treatment of Kant, Vattel, and Rousseau in *Power and the Pursuit of Peace* (CUP, 1963) is particularly comprehensive and sympathetic. It led to a persistently rational approach to the discussion of human behaviour, always most marked when he discussed decisions made about foreign policy and particularly peace and war. Politicians, even Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, made their decisions based on rational calculations of advantage and disadvantage. They might get those calculations wrong, but that assessments of relative advantage were made, he had no doubt. This was the principal basis of his epic disagreement with Alan Taylor. When politicians calculated, they based themselves on assessments of contemporary conditions, on an all-round view of the international and internal context in which they found themselves. This was for Hinsley a permanent fact about human affairs: human beings always belonged to a political society of some sort and always conducted themselves in relation to it in fundamentally similar ways, regardless of geography, culture, or historical period. These conditions meant that there were no barriers to describing, elucidating, and comparing aspects of human behaviour at very widely spaced intervals of time; nor, equally, any reason not to make assessments of the surrounding conditions in which very different human societies found themselves.<sup>5</sup> This explains the simultaneous existence of works on British Naval History, Hitler's Strategy, Sovereignty, Nationalism, and the official history of British Intelligence during the Second World War.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Langhorne, 'Introduction' in *Diplomacy and Intelligence*, pp. 6–7.

<sup>5</sup> In order to learn what he needed to know about distant periods, Hinsley relentlessly mined the available skill resources in Cambridge. When *Sovereignty* was under construction in the mid-1960s, and the Ancient World had already been conquered, two of his students observed that Dr Walter Ullmann, a medievalist of world renown, had been invited over from Trinity College for dinner. The following day they enquired how the conversation had gone: 'that' came back the deliberately ambiguous reply 'has finished off the Middle Ages'.

But mainly what fascinated him was the progression of peace and war since states had become the most common form of political organisation among human societies and their near universality had induced the creation of an international system among them. Here are to be found the main thrusts of his three core books: *Power and the Pursuit of Peace* (CUP, 1963), *Sovereignty* (Watts, 1966), and *Nationalism and the International System* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1973). Of these, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace* is the most substantial, *Sovereignty* the most important and original of his writings, while *Nationalism* represents a further working out of a very important theme from *Power and the Pursuit of Peace*. All of them demonstrate two preoccupations: the first is the evolution and function of the state, the relationships that develop between states and the effect that this part of the general context of the age had on the actions of politicians and rulers. The second is to show how taking a reasonably long view an essentially rational interpretation of history revealed a record of progress in the conduct of affairs. This was not necessarily steady progress, nor progress derived from the application of good intentions, but inevitable progress, as predicted by Kant, whom Hinsley believed to have been ahead of his time rather than hopelessly idealist in the context of his own.<sup>6</sup>

All three books naturally carry the distinctive marks of Hinsley's method and style. The method depends on the construction of argument. Information is there, but it is there to support the argument not the other way round,<sup>7</sup> and it is usually there in the form of recording what human beings have thought about their own conditions in order to explain their responses to them. There is therefore a constant tension between condition and response and it can show in Hinsley's written style. Highly complex sentences may follow each other where the interplay between each element requires that the reader possess either the mental reflexes of a steeple chase jockey or the willingness to reread and

<sup>6</sup> 'The Rise and Fall of the Modern International System', the Martin Wight Memorial Lecture, *Review of International Studies*, 8, i (1982), p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> The occasionally subordinate role of information, and arguments about the nature of specific information, in Hinsley's writing sometimes led him to cut straight through a thicket of dispute. The significance of imperialism in the later nineteenth century was a hot topic when he was writing *Power and the Pursuit of Peace* in the early 1960s, but he did not allow it to delay his progress. 'Whatever further elaboration may be needed for its complete analysis, these developments were the sufficient cause of the increase in imperialist activity and sentiment which marked the last fifteen or twenty years of the century.' 'These developments' had been covered in one paragraph. *Power and the Pursuit of Peace*, pp. 264–5.

think again. In *Power and the Pursuit of Peace*, Hinsley discusses efforts to achieve peaceful international relations both by philosophers and philanthropists, a unique account which takes up the first half of the book, and by the actual behaviour of governments up to and beyond the creation of the United Nations, which constitutes the second half. This is a book on a large scale, and it contains some of Hinsley's best writing: in particular the chapter on Kant in Part I, and the discussion of the causes of the Second World War in Part III. Partly because this structure enabled Hinsley to avoid complicated juxtapositions within single chapters, and partly because it contained straightforwardly useful information, students used to find the account of modern international relations in Parts II and III to be the most approachable, but parts of it have inevitably now become outdated. It is the discussion of international thought in the first half that has stood the test of time. Over and above that achievement, the book had another significance. The power of the interconnections that Hinsley created between the philosophical effort and the realities as they unfolded in international politics changed the way in which the subject of international relations in general was studied. It did not produce agreement about it—far from it—but it altered the intellectual basis of the discussion. It may be that his persistent refusal to acknowledge or use the quantitative techniques and methodological theories of political science limited the impact of his work, particularly overseas. But few scholars achieve such turning-points and Hinsley was one of them.

Hinsley's near passion for discussing the evolution of states, then the states' system, and his belief in the contemporary centrality of the state over the great issues of peace or war, or, as it became in his time, potential annihilation, can give the impression that he could only conceive of a state-centric world. He did so in the sense that what he observed about the world as he saw it and as it had been since the eighteenth century convinced him that it was indeed state dominated and controlled. He did not do so, however, as a general intellectual conviction. His most elegantly argued book, though also one of his more difficult discussions, *Sovereignty*, demonstrates this. Out of a finely wrought structure of tightly organised sentences the message clearly emerges that the man who wrote so powerfully about the significance of the fully sovereign state in modern international relations did not believe that sovereignty was inextricably bound up with the state, still less that it conferred upon states or the rulers of states special and overwhelming powers. It followed from the fact that 'for all men at all times, there has been no choice but to belong

to a political community'<sup>8</sup> and that 'men will often in history have debated and quarrelled about who should rule and by what right.'<sup>9</sup> How they resolved that problem was subject to contemporary conditions and those conditions might produce the institutions of the state at some point and in fact did so, climaxing in the first half of the twentieth century. Even so, there were always limitations:

At no time, in no society, has its identification with, or control over, the society been complete. Even under the regime of the state, the most powerful and effective of all the political institutions which societies have so far developed, and even under the rule of the most powerful of states, other institutions exist alongside it, men still speak of 'we' and 'they', and it is not uncommon for the society to limit the state by laying down fundamental rules by which it may or may not undertake certain tasks. . . . For while all societies, however, primitive, possess political institutions—we cannot say that every society must develop the state. Nor has every society yet developed it. We inhabit a world in which there still exist both stateless political societies and societies which are ruled by states. The distinction between the state and other political institutions is as decisive as is the distinction between a society and its political system.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly with nationalism: Hinsley is generally approving of the idea that nationalism is a state of mind in which

political loyalty is felt to be owed to the nation [because i]t does not assume that when nationalism comes to exist where it did not exist before, it does so because men have discovered a political loyalty which they previously lacked. On the contrary, it implies that men have transferred to the nation the political loyalty which they previously gave to some other structure—that what has changed is not the quality of this loyalty but the object on which it is showered or the vehicle through which it is expressed.<sup>11</sup>

Here again, it is the machinery of change that has engaged Hinsley's attention rather than any one position in time.

It is worth drawing attention to these aspects of Hinsley's manner of thinking because they emphasise the way in which the consistency of his point of view allows his work to escape from any time-specific, issue-specific restriction. Except for the last chapters of *Power and the Pursuit of Peace*, which have been overtaken by events in specific instances, his work remains and will remain useful for building assessments of the very different conditions which are developing in the contemporary world.

<sup>8</sup> *Nationalism and the International System* (London, 1973), p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> *Sovereignty*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 1986), p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> *Sovereignty*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>11</sup> *Nationalism*, p. 11.

Hinsley would have been perfectly able to write about the consequences of the decline in the authority of the nation state wrought by the onset of economic globalisation. In discussion in his last years he would point cheerfully to the way in which his prescriptions explained, for example, the transfer of political authority in certain circumstances to humanitarian organisations working in areas where the institutions of a state had ceased to function. He would with reason have claimed to have foreseen the contemporary state of affairs at the United Nations. Moreover, given his deliberately wicked tendency to make improbable predictions for the amusement of others—most of which naturally did not then occur—the concluding observations of his 1982 Martin Wight Memorial Lecture about the future of the international system have a genuinely prophetic ring: ‘Such are the grounds for suggesting that we are now witnessing the formation of an international system which will be even more different from the modern system than that system was from all its precursors, and which will be so because its leading states will abstain from war with each other.’<sup>12</sup>

It is a tribute to the complexity of Hinsley’s approach to international relations that idealists might have claimed him for his optimism, while rejecting entirely the basis for it, and realists have felt comfortable with his techniques while being entirely unable to accept his conclusions. This was not a case of being all things to all men, for he was wholly his own man, even a phenomenon of nature. It was more that he dug out a great quarry and the stones from it have provided and will yet provide material for others to build their own structures—perhaps the best kind of epitaph.

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Wight Memorial Lecture (1982), p. 8.

