



In Focus

The UK Government's Official History Programme

The Government's official history series is intended to provide: "authoritative histories in their own right; a reliable secondary source for historians until all the records are available in the National Archives; and a 'fund of experience' for future government use".¹ Work on official histories began under the auspices of the Committee of Imperial Defence which established a Historical Branch in 1908 with responsibility for "compiling the naval and military history of the nation". The Historical Branch later moved to the Cabinet Office, and after 1945 its main task became the preparation and publication of an official history of the Second World War. In 1966, Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced that the range of official history was to be "extended to include selected periods or episodes of peacetime history, on the basis that, although works of this kind would not necessarily be suitable for publication before the expiry of the 'closed' period, they would enable important periods in our history to be recorded in comprehensive and authoritative narratives".²

Cabinet Office material from 2007 explains that topics for inclusion in the programme were selected by the Official Cabinet Committee on Official Histories and then considered by a cross-party group of Privy Counsellors—at that time Lord Healey, Lord Howe and Lord Rodgers of Quarry Bank.³ Eminent historians were appointed by the Prime Minister and given access to all relevant material in government archives; any issues relating to the use of sensitive information would be addressed before publication. The author would usually be paid a fee by the Cabinet Office and would not receive royalties from sales.

Pilling and Hamilton Reviews

In 2008, the Government commissioned Sir Joe Pilling, a retired civil servant, to review whether and in what form the programme should continue, and Bill Hamilton, a literary agent, to review the publishing arrangements. Sir Joe Pilling recommended that the programme should continue, but under the title 'The Public History Programme', and that a fresh statement of the purpose of the programme should be developed, agreed and made known.⁴ The reviews also proposed changes to raise the profile and relevance of the programme, including an increase in the involvement of sponsor departments and outside bodies, a revamping of the publishing arrangements and an enhancement to its governance procedures.⁵

Current Status of the Programme

In 2011, Lord Taylor of Holbeach, then Government Spokesperson for the Cabinet Office, said that in light of the advice in the Pilling and Hamilton reviews, it had been decided to continue with the existing programme of official histories, but "in view of public spending constraints, not to commission any new histories until the existing programme is nearing completion".⁶ Lord McNally, then Minister of State at the Ministry for Justice, said in 2012 that he hoped "we can review future work in happier economic circumstances" as "it would be a tragedy if we were to allow them to wither on the vine after 2013".⁷

Speaking in 2013, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, then Lords' Whip for the Ministry of Justice, said that "given the current economic constraints", the Government did not plan to implement the changes proposed by the Pilling and Hamilton reviews "at the current time".⁸ However, he explained that the Government was "moving forward with the completion of the existing programme", which would conclude with the publication of *The Official History of the Joint Intelligence Committee: Volume 2* in 2016. He hoped that work on this volume would be completed by the end of 2015, after which point "the recommendations will be revisited". Volume 1 of *The Official History of the Joint Intelligence Committee* was published in hardback in June 2014 and in paperback in June 2015.

Commentary

In a House of Lords debate in 2013, Lord Rodgers of Quarry Bank (LD) questioned who had taken the decision that there should be a hiatus in commissioning new titles, and whether stopping official histories because of the "challenging economic climate" was "really justified".⁹ Lord Hennessy of Nympsfield (CB), a historian, said he "profoundly hope[d] that the current austerity will not dam the flow of official histories for the foreseeable future".¹⁰ Lord Butler of Brockwell (CB), a former Cabinet Secretary, noted the importance of official histories for the relevance to current decision-making, observing: "When the Government make decisions when they are not fully aware of the history of the subjects they are discussing, they are like a driver who goes out into the traffic without having taken the trouble to check in his rear mirror".¹¹ Lord Bew (CB), another historian, warned that the move from a 30-year rule to a 20-year rule (the time after which official historical records are transferred to the National Archive) might be used as an argument not to continue with the official histories programme.¹²

Professor Rodney Lowe, author of the official history of the Civil Service, acknowledges that "official" history typically provokes one of two reactions from professional historians. The first is contempt on the grounds that it is mere propaganda—"official but not history" [...] The second is a guarded interest [because] its purpose is to make policy 'better through an understanding of history' and it has the potential, as a by-product, to deepen mutual understanding between historians and policy-makers".¹³ Dr Michael Goodman, author of the most recently published official history, agreed that "historically speaking, academics have treated officialdom with some scepticism", but concluded that he "could not agree more" with the words of the historian DC Watt almost fifty years previously that "the [official] historian is, among things, the custodian of the national memory".¹⁴

¹ Cabinet Office, '[The UK Government's Official Histories Programme](#)', 27 September 2007 (archived content).

² HC Hansard, 9 March 1966, [col 563W](#).

³ Cabinet Office, '[The UK Government's Official Histories Programme](#)', 27 September 2007 (archived content).

⁴ Sir Joe Pilling and Bill Hamilton, *Reports on Future Plans for the Government's Official History Programme*, 2009.

⁵ HL Hansard, 10 July 2013, [col 348](#).

⁶ HL Hansard, 17 January 2011, [col WA10](#).

⁷ HL Hansard, 17 January 2012, [col 547](#).

⁸ HL Hansard, 10 July 2013, [col 348](#).

⁹ *ibid*, [col 337](#).

¹⁰ *ibid*, [col 341](#).

¹¹ *ibid*, [col 342](#).

¹² *ibid*, [col 344](#).

¹³ Professor Rodney Lowe, '[Official History](#)', Making History website, 2008.

¹⁴ Dr Michael Goodman, '[Writing the Official History of the Joint Intelligence Committee](#)', Partnership for Conflict, Crime and Security Research Blog, 2014.

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