

Arthur Tange: Last of the Mandarins

Peter Edwards

Reviewed by Neil James

It is a difficult task to write a formal biography of a figure from the recent past, particularly one who generated deeply polarised views in his time and left legacies that remain controversial to the present day. It is perhaps additionally difficult when the subject, at least until his death in May 2001, co-operated with the biographer in the exploration of the life of a man that Professor Peter Edwards rightly describes as having the 'unusual distinction of being a principal architect of two major departments of state'.

The first four chapters efficiently recount Sir Arthur Tange's antecedents, childhood, young adulthood, university studies, employment with the Bank of NSW and his brilliant career as a Public Servant during the latter half of World War II. Tange's nine months part-time service as a private with the territorial battalion of the Fiji Defence Force in 1941, and his nominal service as a direct-entry 2nd AIF staff officer trainee in July-August 1945, are covered in a sentence and a page respectively.

The next six chapters comprehensively cover his diplomatic career with the middle four disposing of his time as head of the Department of External (now Foreign) Affairs 1954-1965, including his relationships, for better and worse, with Prime-Minister Menzies and various Ministers for External Affairs and heads of the Department of Defence.

The four chapters on Tange as Secretary of the Department of Defence from March 1970 to August 1979, however, suffer from the author's generally dismissive approach to contemporary and enduring criticisms of Tange's methods and legacies. A final chapter covering Tange in retirement, is followed by an at times uncritical epilogue which seeks to summarise his contribution to the development of Australia's foreign and defence postures. A well-argued, rumour-killing, appendix discussing Tange's actual and purported roles in the various political, diplomatic and strategic crises of 1975 balances these particular accounts.

There is no doubt that the pre-1974, five-department structure in Defence institutionalised unnecessary administrative duplication and irrational obstacles to integrated strategic policy and defence capability development. But much of the book reflects a Tange view too uncritically by implying that this was mainly due to inter-Service rivalry and outmoded or stereotyped thinking and lack of intellectual leadership among ADF officers. It is also disappointing to see the incorrect and tendentious term 'civilian control of the military' used in place of the correct usage 'civil control of the military'.

Left largely unmentioned are the contributions of ministerial rivalry and the overall straitened budgetary situation which was almost designed to make the Services fight each other for the funds they needed to maintain a modicum of operational effectiveness. Also not covered at all well is the divide-and-rule approach of some mandarins – and their subjective resentment of the direct command and control relationship between responsible Ministers and

their Service Chiefs. More generally, the longstanding opposition and delay of effective 'jointery' (because joint command of the ADF threatened the claimed 'neutral arbiter' role enjoyed by public servant powerbrokers) is similarly not discussed. The telling fact that Australia, *alone in the Western world*, amalgamated the Service departments (in 1974) long *before* constituting an effective joint-Service, strategic-level command structure (in 1989) is simply not mentioned.

Tange's predecessor at Defence, Sir Henry Bland, came to the job without much experience in foreign affairs and defence issues but with an open mind. Bland placed great emphasis on joint-Service staff processes and he generally respected the importance of professional military judgement and a direct politico-military structure. If Tange had further refined, rather than rejected this approach, then it is highly likely we would not have had the parade of largely unsuccessful structural reviews of Defence every 2-3 years since Tange retired.

Instead, Tange used the opportunity of the impatient Whitlam Government, and the anti-military atmosphere after the Vietnam War, to force through without due process the abolition of the statutory Service (and Supply) Boards – and the direct Minister to Service Chief (and vice versa) strategic, financial and moral accountability (and mutual knowledge) this entailed. It is worth noting, as the latest of many examples, that the recent creation of the Department of Supply's modern equivalent, the Defence Materiel Organisation, as a prescribed agency with an Advisory Board is a strong (and long delayed) reform more along the lines of the Bland rather than the Tange approach.

Last of the Mandarins provides useful background to one viewpoint on why the Department of Defence is now the way it is. Readers seeking a more complete modern discussion would need to supplement their research with Professor David Horner's excellent recent biographies of Sir Frederick Shedden and Sir John Wilton, and the late Associate Professor Eric Andrews' superbly balanced volume, *The Department of Defence*, in the 2000 *Centenary History of Defence* series (a volume, incidentally, that senior officials in Defence attempted to censor).

Peter Edwards correctly notes that the age of the tenured Public Service mandarins has passed and that the new managers now temporarily appointed as departmental secretaries have a quite different relationship to their Ministers, to the Government in office as a whole and to the concept of apolitical public service in the long-term national interest. Ironically this would probably be deplored by both Sir Arthur Tange and his contemporary critics. ♦

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