

Review of David Kahn's *Hitler's Spies: German Military Intelligence
in World War II* and Wayne Nelson's *A Spy's Diary of World War II:
Inside the OSS with an American Agent in Europe*
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Spy History of World War II
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Searching for a source text to give a course in Spies of World War II the voice of the opposing side, I came across David Kahn's work on the German intelligence community of World War II. *Hitler's Spies* is a broad work that reviews the entirety of German information gathering. It came highly recommended by reviewers and would serve the purpose of giving the counter to British and American intelligence, on which my study is based. As Sun Tzu recommends, know the enemy and yourself to ensure victory (Tzu, 716). Of course, my purpose holds a much less sinister reason: aiding the authenticity of my final project in the MALS program, an adaptation of my novel *OP-DEC: Operation Deceit*. In addition, I hope to augment what I have learned during the research period for the novel with closer scrutiny of the female agent in the allied services through Russell Braddon's [Nancy Wake: SOE's Greatest Heroine](#), Judith L. Pearson's [The Wolves at the Door: The True Story of America's Greatest Female Spy](#). During the research period for my manuscript, I read Wayne Nelson's [A Spy's Diary of World War II: Inside the OSS with an American Agent in Europe](#). The reason for doing this was to layer the spy's process, much like it would be with a real double agent, because the training a spy receives will always hint at his or her origins. The work is a memoir of Wayne Nelson's service to the United States in the OSS (Office of Strategic Services) circa 1943, and gives an excellent example of the attitudes of Americans and resistance fighters which starkly differed from the German attitudes, especially toward spies.

To start, Kahn's book is an excellent resource, though it may be overwhelming weighing in at over seven-hundred pages. The author goes into great detail with many examples, arguably too many, but as a research source to add realism to a work such as mine, it can be invaluable. For example, there are descriptions of German officials, like Albrecht Focke (Abwehr) and his assistant (Kahn, 90-91). In taking the time to give a visual description of these men, Kahn's book

provides an author or screenwriter with an effective tool. The book also includes vehicle specs, maps, documents, outline of office reporting structures, Canaris's signature, etc., via inserts throughout the narrative. These are superfluous items to the common student, but for those who seek immersion, the inserts are tiny insights that remind the reader these were real human beings, and the war did in fact happen.

More importantly, Kahn provides the reader with context for the tonnage of information thrown at the reader, including a brief history of the spy profession (27-41). Context is another invaluable key to truly understanding what went on. Germany did not exist in a vacuum, or suddenly pop into being. There is a long history which shaped the German world view. For instance, Kahn explains that "The first world war shaped German military intelligence in the second," helping to guide the reader toward considering the depth of the information presented to them (41, 418-421).

The text goes on to consider all theaters of the war fought by German forces and the use of intelligence gathering in each. It would not do well to skip the sections that don't pertain to the theater that appears to be inconsequential. As an example, *OP-DEC* is primarily concerned with the Western European theater of War and the Atlantic. To ignore the shape of intelligence in Russia and North Africa would ignore that experiences had by these groups would influence the action of other groups. Likewise, ignoring the opposition to a nation's spy ring, such as the British Special Operations Executive (SOE), gives a slanted, if not truncated look at the history and function of such a group.

The difficulty with studying German intelligence is in the several offices and branches given the task of gaining intelligence, dispersing information broadly through the German echelon, but keeping the collective details out of the hands of those who might use it to their

advantage other than Hitler (42-63). The focus of my book remained on the Abwehr under Focke and the SD (Sicherheitsdienst), despite the numerous other points of intelligence gathering in the regime (56, 90, 116, 191-193, 223-250, 322). Eventually, these two houses were combined into one, something I alluded to when Carsten was recruited to the SD by a former superior (91). As mentioned above, the truth is that they did not interact, at least not willingly or well. There was a great deal of infighting, promotion grabbing and obtuseness (42-63).

Kahn touches on the structure of both the Abwehr and SD, but I found that it was essentially a brief telling (403-415). Although Kahn's book is extensive, a separate resource would be needed to get clear detail of their intelligence structures, which may or may not be available, depending on the classification of such material at the time of research. Kahn cannot be faulted for this, and his sources and appendices upholds what I see as his effort to be completely forthcoming as possible in the space and source material granted.

Throughout the book, Kahn evaluates the effectiveness of German intelligence against allied services, especially British, in the chapter titled *The Ultimate Failure* (479-520). He also attributes the best deception of the war to the British double agent named Cato (516). Cato was effective in fooling the German echelon into believing he worked for them, intending to do so the entire time. This sort of deception was not rare. A great number of supposed spies merely pretended to be spies in order to collect the pay (295-301). Kahn asserts that this was easy for men like Cato to accomplish because the German hierarchy was easily snowed by flash and glam tactics used to spruce up reports of falsified information (369). As such, it was no wonder officials and military officers held a disparaging attitude toward spies, a holdover from World War I, in which spies were seen as lazy and the profession full of dissidents (236, 363-370, 400, 402). The agents mentioned, ironically back up the prejudice (367, 278-279, 516). Nelson's diary

held a different sentiment toward the men and women who comprised their ranks. In the American quarter there was reverence toward the actual military personnel who served with him, but also respect and a understanding of a spy's indispensable service to aid them in their missions (Nelson, 2532). Some of the soldiers encountered could be described as awed.

Kahn also examined the recruitment, training and insertion of intelligence workers (275-301). It can be interpreted from Kahn's writing that the German officers in charge were easily dazzled by appearances, as mentioned above. The importance of mentioning it in Kahn's book is to understand the entire collapse of the system. In addition, the look of a spy is invaluable to a project such as mine, aiding to make the spymaster as realistic as possible. So, to know that there were women (106, 274, 334, 345, 359), Jewish spies (312), Russian defectors (359), and independent workers from foreign nations (368), helps to flesh out the population with whom the spymaster worked, while questioning the *black and white*, clear cut ideas of who was good and who was bad, creating an organic tension in the narrative that reads *no one is to be trusted*.

The examples of female spies in Kahn's work were few, and gave me very little example to compare to the two allied agents I will be examining in the upcoming study. The examples remained brief, such as the mention of the salacious Mata Hari, the most notable spy of the Second World War (36), and the sexist mentioning of the ubiquitous "beautiful Nordic Blonde" (353). The most desired for spy work were young Aryan men, some teenagers, but it is unclear that this was an issue on the historical level with the Germans or that the author was uninterested in the contributions of female spies (363). History indicates that the issue lies more with the Germans.

Running counter to this, Nelson's *Diary* explains the process by which he was selected for service in the OSS, including his rejection by the United States Navy and difficulty in serving

in the war at all (Nelson, 52). Nelson includes a picture of the individuals included in his spy cell, reminiscing on their appearance and how doubtful he was until he saw them work, including a disparaging comment for his own looks (Nelson, 709, 1924). In addition, Nelson and his fellow allied agents, worked openly with women spies/resistance fighters, and his writing displays a far more respectful attitude, gratitude for their participation, and genuine concern for what could happen to them, but this language might be cleaned up by editors and the family (1248, 1256).

Kahn and Nelson bare a fascinating contrast, considering that both authors are American, and the differences between the two highlight attitudes symptomatic of their time. For Nelson, women were able to work alongside men in World War II because of necessity, and following the Cold War, for Kahn, women were expected to relegate themselves to lower status of importance, a long held conditioning of gender roles that persist to today. It will be interesting to see if this attitude exists in the other readings for the course, as one author is male and the other female.

In both works, the gathering of intelligence is shown to be done in a number of ways, explaining why the various groups charged with their retrieval may have felt territorial. For example, priceless aerial reconnaissance was obtained from the Luftwaffe, and the men in charge wanted to be sure that the Führer was aware of that and favored them (Kahn, 134-135). Other sources of intelligence were derived from the press, newspaper and other news reports from foreign media (160), and also the wire tap, electronic devices used for listening in to phone calls of diplomats and military officials in the field (172-188). Radio was yet another form of intelligence gathering, as it was a primary means of forwarding plans and orders by the military of all participants in the war. An exciting moment for me was when I found the field radio intelligence units likely responsible for the take down of my protagonist in *OP-DEC*, lending

further to the authenticity of my work (54). The lowliest source of information was the interrogation of prisoners of war, which produced suspect details from techniques that varied from manipulation to torture, echoing issues that have risen around the detainment of suspected terrorists in current time (Kahn, 136-151, esp. 150). Kahn stated that “the most solid...form of intelligence is a captured enemy document,” which is inarguable and a main reason for the existence of an agent and why he or she would be sent into enemy territory (152).

Information that the Germans sought were the usual troop numbers and movements in the various theaters of war to pending offenses. They also looked at the economy of their enemies, citing industrial power as an indicator of what troops and supplies they could expect to see put forth in the field (Kahn, 87, 373-379). However, such information required interpretation, which was fertile ground for improvisations and blunders. It also provided a point of control for the Axis powers. If they gained the markets, resources, goods and services of a nation, they could influence the outcome of the war in their favor. I used this factor in my book, making the catalyst of the action, Carroll Healy, an industrial tycoon without specifying what he makes in his factories, but making it of especial interest to the Germans who secure his loyalty. What he makes is merely a McGuffin, but no less important in generating ideas about him and the situation the book illustrates.

Nelson’s diary confirms that the same was done on the allied side. Many of the entries describe listening in to radio transmissions, inserting agents with radios and sending messages via radio (Nelson, 36, 209, 334, 429). Much like the German spy machine, the OSS (Office of Strategic Services) objective in Italy was to watch shipping/naval convoys (429, 450), gain German dispatches (930) and seize documents (977). The dangers facing the agents in obtaining such material included the booby-trapped bodies of fallen German soldiers (Nelson, 240).

German prisoners, however, were not treated in the same way as the Germans treated their prisoners, as described by Nelson (2244). There was a very real fear of capture, as they knew they faced torture and death in such a situation (27, 240).

Another aspect of my book was the use of U-Boats to insert Germany's agents into the United States (Kahn, 213-222). Kahn immediately counters the nationalistic teachings that no enemy has been on U.S. soil from the early nineteenth century through the terrorist attacks of September, 11. The book opens with a U-Boat insertion of two German agents into Maine, and the subsequent loss of them by law enforcement until they were rediscovered sometime later in New York City. Kahn describes other agents who ranged from New York City to Maryland and places beyond (3-26). This is a fact, as the war falls to distant history, that is becoming more widely acknowledged despite revisionist attempts to alter history for nationalistic purposes.

Kahn's comparison to other spy machines remained mostly on the British counter intelligence, touching from time to time on American efforts, and almost completely ignoring the resistance of France and other nations, despite an exhaustive examination that stretched the width of the war. These other groups seemed incidental to him. In comparison, Nelson's diary goes into far greater detail of the Italian resistance and the French Maquis (Nelson, 328, 726, 929, 2192), offering a truer sense of their involvement regardless of the small stretch of time he covers. This is probably due to the fact that Nelson goes to the trouble of writing their physical descriptions and making them people (2134), while covering real missions and listing their numbers (2139, 2245). Thusly, Kahn's work lacks good context for the failure of German spy efforts and leaves the reader, at least this one, scratching their head. Did egoism really destroy the German spy efforts and hence put the victory in allied hands? Hitler's paranoia is well documented by many sources, but Kahn suggests nothing to explain it, except as a mental illness the leader suffered

which caused him to lash out at his own staff and make a gamut of mistakes that undermined his strategy (480, 539-543). This fails to take into account all the incidents that may have occurred and are known to have occurred and affected his actions. Instead, Kahn provides an epilogue in which he reviews via his interpretation of the information he has presented what made the agencies fail (523-543). The explanation is indeed that egoism and bumbling because of egoism prevented the effective use intelligence agents and the material gathered (379, 390, 414,456-461). Sadly, Kahn also fell into the trap of using racist terms, which only serve take away from the authority of his work, alienating his reader (285).

Overall, despite shortcomings from either work, they are quite useful material for a researcher seeking material for non-fiction and fiction works. I would recommend them to anyone undergoing a similar project to my own, the Kahn work as an overview of spying and intelligence on the German side, and Nelson as a close up view of life as an OSS agent. It is my hope that the Braddon and Pearson works will accomplish as much.

Works Cited:

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