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Military Intelligence

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BOOK REVIEW

Military Intelligence

David Stafford

F.H Hinsley and C.A.G. Simkins. *British Intelligence in the Second World War. Volume 4: Security and Counter-Intelligence.* London: HMSO, 1990.

Michael Howard. *British Intelligence in the Second World War. Volume 5: Strategic Deception.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Years ago, as a novice in the British diplomatic service, I learned what material to enter, and what not to enter, in the official files. One series that regularly crossed my desk consisted of reports on the state of morale in what was then still referred to as the Soviet Zone of Germany. The files included reports from various governmental sources - and one day it occurred to me to add what I thought was an insightful report from a journalist that I had recently read in the press. I duly had the article clipped and marked for entry. But before it reached the registry my superior made it clear that I had breached some unwritten rule. The files, he indicated, should consist solely of our *own* material. So out went the journalist, along with his independent and unofficial eye.

I always try to remember this incident when working in government archives. It's only too easy to forget that the official files are themselves selections, created by human hand, and that the "truths" they contain are partial, incomplete, and subjective. So they rarely, if ever, tell the whole story, and that which they do relate, while essential to know, is inevitably weighted. If historians had helped create the files in the first place they would know how arbitrary and fictional their contents can be!

This, as you will see, is relevant to what I have to say below. But first, a thrilling tale of wartime daring do.

Sometime during the winter of 1943 a young Venezuelan working as a German double agent arrived in Ottawa. Before the year was out he was sending regular letters using secret ink to his *Abwehr* masters. Late the next year his communications link improved dramatically with the arrival of a wireless transmitter. This was brought to him by another *Abwehr* agent, "Fred," a Gibraltese. "Fred" was an interesting case. Forcibly evacuated from the Rock along with the rest of the civilian population, he had ended up as a waiter in Soho. Then, mobilized by the Ministry of Labour, he toiled at various menial NAAFT jobs along the south coast of England. Increasingly disgruntled, he had got in touch with the *Abwehr* and reported generously on various preparations for Operation "Overlord." His big coup came in June 1944. On the eve of the Normandy landings he passed a vital piece of information. Just three days before, he reported, the Third Canadian Division had been issued cold rations and vomit bags. Now, it was rumoured, it had already embarked across the Channel. It was a message that, had it arrived early enough, could have alerted the Germans before the first Allied troops hit the beaches. But because of a slip-up by the *Abwehr* it was not received until two hours after the invasion force had actually landed. Still, the report enhanced "Fred's" reliability, and soon he smuggled himself on board a merchant ship bound for Canada. Once here, he linked up with the Venezuelan, and the two men maintained

wireless contact with the *Abwehr* until mid-April 1945. In the last of its messages the Hamburg station instructed its agents to divide the remaining money in its funds between themselves and take all precautions for their own safety. Undoubtedly, we can surmise, it also wished them good luck.

The adventures of "Fred" and the Venezuelan have remained obstinately unknown in Canada, but then that's hardly surprising. For neither man actually existed in real life, and there never was a transmitter reporting from Ottawa to Hamburg. The men, their network, and their operations were imaginary creations dreamed up by British counter-intelligence to help smoke out any real *Abwehr* operations on this side of the Atlantic. The Venezuelan was known to his MI5 controllers by the codename Moonbeam, while "Fred" the Gibraltese was referred to as Chamillus. Both were national agents of the equally national network of double agents operated by the Spaniard, Juan Pujol Garcia, whom we now know as Garbo - the most remarkable and creative of all double agents run during the Second World War. The Moonbeam operation was the only successful double cross operation run in Canada. Two other, non-fictitious (ie. involving real people) attempts failed. The first involved Watchdog, a German spy who landed on the Gaspé peninsula and was immediately captured by the RCMP. Early in 1941, after MI5 sent an officer from Britain to supervise the operation, Watchdog was used as a double agent. But after eight months the operation was closed down. A similar operation transmitting from Toronto was terminated at about the same time for the same reasons.

These Canadian episodes are essentially footnotes in the much larger story that emerges from the final two volumes of the official history of British Intelligence in the Second World War.¹ But in telling ways they illustrate both the strengths and weaknesses not just of these particular volumes but also of the series as a whole.

Successful deception could only be built on the foundation of good intelligence and good security. The former enabled British planners to enter the mind of the enemy and to monitor

the success of their efforts. The cracking of the *Abwehr* hand cipher, in December 1940, then of its Enigma machine cipher a year later, made all this possible. Good security guaranteed concealment and ensured that no word of deception, double cross, or regular military operations leaked to the enemy. It is an impressive story and these volumes provide a mass of evidence that all students of the war will need to consult in the future.

Yet, after reading them, I return to my own experience with the files. Both volumes have their limits. Many historians have complained that the series is too dry, that names are not mentioned, that credit is not given where credit is due. That's true, but other aspects of these official histories are more important. Take Howard's volume, for example. It is written with his customary grace and clarity, but for a decade was held back from publication at the whim of Mrs. Thatcher. The result is that it neither integrates nor refers to the considerable work done by historians on deception in the later 1970s and throughout the 1980s. Inevitably, therefore, much of it already seems familiar. And Howard readily admits this himself when he notes that his volume should not be taken to be the last word. It's not clear whether the Hinsley/Simkins volume suffered likewise. But it too covers ground that independent historians have covered elsewhere. The imaginary operations in Canada illustrate the point. Both volumes refer extensively to Garbo and his network. Yet it was from neither that I learned that agent "Fred's" codename was Chamillus. That comes from Garbo's own postwar account, published in 1985, which contains much detailed information that can only have come from access to the operations files.² Garbo also makes an important claim for the Chamillus/Moonbeam operation - namely that the *Abwehr* provided it with a new high-grade cipher, a copy of which was delivered straight to CCHQ at Bletchley. Yet neither official volume refers to this, nor does the Hinsley/Simkins volume refer to Garbo's own book at all. This is particularly odd given that in the early chapters of the volume there are many footnoted references to scholarly books and articles that appeared up to the later

1980s. As the volume proceeds, however, such references disappear altogether. Did the authors grow tired perhaps, or was there nothing of interest in the scholarly literature that referred to the material in the later chapters? Or was it that the volumes were hurriedly put to bed (as its abrupt and inconclusive ending would seem to indicate)? The omission is odd, but certainly not as odd as the most glaring of all. For a volume devoted to British security and counter-intelligence it can only be an incomplete and highly weighted account that fails once to mention Anthony Blunt, Guy Burgess or Kim Philby, significant wartime employees of MI5 and MI6 respectively. But then, undetected as they were during the war, there must be no wartime files on them. And if they're not in the files, they can't be important, can they?

Notes

1. *British Intelligence in the Second World War*. Volume 4, *Security and Counter-Intelligence*, by F.H. Hinsley and C.A.G. Simkins (London: HMSO, 1990); Volume 5, *Strategic Deception*, by Michael Howard (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
2. Juan Pujol, with Nigel West. *Garbo*. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985).


David Stafford's books include *Britain and European Resistance 1940-45* and *Camp X: Canada's School for Secret Agents*. He was Executive Director of the Canadian Federation of International Affairs until the summer of 1992. He is currently at the University of Edinburgh. Dr. Stafford is a Contributing Editor for *CMH* and will also write a regular book column.

FALL '92 HIGHLIGHTS

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