H-Diplo Review Essay 453, Hudson review of Boghardt, Covert Legions

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What makes institutional history, which often deals with sprawling, complicated bureaucracies, so important at a time when so much history seems so individual and idiosyncratic? When institutional histories are done right, they become standard references. They are, quite literally, a record for posterity. And when they are very good, institutional histories report clearly, meaningfully, and as truthfully as possible, avoiding agendas and anachronistic ax-grinding. They avoid easy condemnation and dubious praise.

Covert Legions is a very good institutional history with broad appeal. Thomas Boghardt, who holds a history Ph.D. from Oxford University (and held prior employment at Washington D.C.’s Spy Museum) delivers an important, well written, and entertaining book. It helps to complete the already extensive literature of the postwar occupation by filling a very important gap—the detailed institutional story of US Army intelligence during the period. Boghardt lays the early postwar history of US Army intelligence in Germany out in full. At the same time, he provides the broader context of the transition from World War to Cold War, from great power alliance to superpower antagonism. Of course, institutional histories, especially military ones, need very good visual aids. Here Covert Legions also delivers. It is superbly illustrated with copious maps, detailed organizational charts, and a plethora of photos. It is the kind of quality product the US Army Center of Military History is renowned for, and that, quite frankly, standard academic or commercial presses cannot match.

What makes institutional history even more difficult to pull off well is that it tends to lack the emotional core that a particular figure or a sympathetic group provides. It can come across as
faceless and impersonal, as it slogs through the years. There is no danger of this in *Covert Legions*. A lot of this has to do with material on hand: there is plenty for any number of spy thrillers. Essentially, postwar Germany was the blueprint for most modern cloak and dagger escapades and conspiratorial fever dreams, offering vast plunder discovered in deep German caverns; ex-SS and Gestapo agents rat-lined under pseudonyms to the jungles of South America; and Western intelligence operatives chloroformed by Soviet agents in phone booths. These stories and many others are here in *Covert Legions*, and U.S. Army intelligence in Germany, from the war’s final act in 1944-45 to the end of the occupation in 1949, was at the center of it all.

The spy tales are fascinating, but they are not simply compelling anecdotes in Boghardt’s book. Such stories occur in a larger institutional context. To pull off espionage on a superpower scale is a gigantic undertaking. It is much less the story of sole, fearless agents, and much more one of a massive, sometimes pretty clumsy, sometimes fairly adept organization. As Boghardt notes, the Army’s intelligence effort constituted a “system of multiple interlocking cycles” (page citation), all of which had to operate systematically and on significant, even unprecedented scale. What was required was the size, heft, and interconnectivity to process and interrogate hundreds of individuals, to sift through millions of captured German documents, and as the Cold War escalated, to evaluate and interpret an innumerable array of Soviet signals.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part deals with Army intelligence efforts in Germany during the last years of the Second World War. The second then sets forth the structure of military intelligence during the occupation years. The final part discusses the operations and activities of Army intelligence during that occupation. This tripartite division is revealing. The structural apparatus of Army intelligence was one of the crucial institutional hinges that turned the missions from war to occupation, from hunting down Nazis to gathering information on Soviets and their sympathizers. The effort was huge, complex, and often highly controversial.

Military intelligence started out on a low rung within the Army. The requirements of war and the recognition of competence changed that. By the end of the war, able intelligence officers such as the First Army’s Colonel Benjamin “Monk” Dickson, the Third Army’s Colonel Oscar Koch, and the Twelfth Army Group’s Brigadier General Edwin Sibert, were noted for their abilities both in and outside the Army. Sibert came to be the predominant figure in postwar Army intelligence.

And as the war progressed, the ever-growing recognition of the need for skilled intelligence personnel led to more comprehensive training. Boghardt details, for instance, how an entire mock German town was set up in Camp Ritchie, Maryland where nearly 20,000 “Ritchie Boys” were trained to serve as counterintelligence specialists, interrogators, aerial photographers and any number of other intelligence jobs. They included a range of recruits ranging from the author J.D. Salinger to the most distinguished Ritchie Boy, Henry Kissinger, who served in both wartime and in postwar Germany.

The Ritchie Boys were only one of the most famous examples of the enterprise’s vastness. By war’s end, Boghardt points out that there were roughly half a dozen intelligence field agencies operating in Germany with thousands of personnel, in units and agencies ranging from counterintelligence units to interrogation centers, from schools to censor boards. The sheer volume of work displays the industrial-level effort of Army espionage. By the end of 1945, Army counterintelligence had...
apprehended 120,000 individuals who were accused of war crimes. It had processed nearly 280 tons of German documents that were shipped and processed for detailed examination. And as the postwar period turned into the Cold War, the huge demand continued: during only the first three months of 1948, for example, Army censors monitored over 13,000 telephone calls.

Skillful institutional history does not simply relay how an enterprise expands, but how it interacts with other organizations that may have competing requirements and agendas. Boghardt ably demonstrates how Army intelligence interacted—and often clashed—with other intelligence outfits. The Office for Strategic Services (OSS), and its successor organization, the CIA, especially did not particularly gel with Army intelligence. Despite the glamorous sheen given to it over the years, the OSS’s reputation was somewhat inflated. It really did not produce that much consistent, high-value intelligence. And in the case of Allen Dulles, the OSS operative in Switzerland, it actually may have contributed significantly to one of the great falsehoods of the end of war period—that Germany had created a “national redoubt” in the Alps that would serve as the center of postwar resistance. Overall, it appears that Army intelligence and OSS (and later, CIA) agents seemed to have come from different worlds. To the Army officer corps, the product of middle America, the “well-bred Ivy Leaguers” who made up the OSS and CIA often seemed presumptuous and self-important. That said, this hardly stopped the CIA from recruiting the most talented Army intelligence officers for its fledgling ranks.

This cultural clash was unfortunate, but there were other, even bigger problems. General Lucius Clay, who was essentially America’s viceroy in Germany throughout the occupation, has gained renown for his astuteness, rectitude, and political acumen during the occupation. According to Boghardt, however, Clay’s astuteness did not extend to intelligence matters. In fact, Boghardt notes that Clay was strangely indifferent, if not at times hostile, to much of what Army intelligence provided. Clay should have been the most important US intelligence customer during the occupation years. That he was not is a puzzle, and simply shows that all the institutional scale in the world can be impeded by the leader in charge.

Cultural disjunctions and leadership devaluations such as above were still only a small part of the Army intelligence story in postwar Germany. Boghardt repeatedly highlights that the central institutional issue that Army intelligence faced—the crux of its strategic dilemma—was the tension between two missions. One mission was to ensure that Nazi Germany was defeated and that regime perpetrators were brought to accounting. Another was to reconstitute Germany and ultimately to establish it as a bulwark against the emerging Soviet threat. Both missions competed for resources, for manpower, time, money, and for emphasis and priority.

Army intelligence found itself caught in this tension. Its personnel were responsible for vetting all sort of German government officials, scientists, and military officers. Were they former Nazis? If they were, should Nazis be permitted to serve in government if ‘no one else could make the trains run’ so to speak? Should Nazi weapon scientists be employed to help America in its technological competition with the Soviets? Should Wehrmacht officers be rehabilitated to reconstitute a western-allied German army? Boghardt penetrates within the various organizations in Army intelligence and reveals that these were matters of controversy and debate. Fierce disagreements sometimes broke out within Army ranks. Liberal “New Dealers in uniform” often clashed with more conservative Army lifers—over whether the primary job was bringing Nazis to justice or establishing law and order (or
later, countering the Soviets).

Then there was Operation RUSTY, which used former German military intelligence officers to spy on the Soviets. RUSTY eventually became a significant effort with up to three thousand staff and informants spread across Germany and Europe, which included many unvetted former Nazis and was almost totally run by former Wehrmacht intelligence officers. There was also Project PAPERCLIP (so named because of the paperclips that held together the dossiers on the scientists), which focused on getting German scientists to work to serve American interests. Boghardt’s institutional focus is very helpful here: it shines light on a lot of corners. PAPERCLIP’s original objective was to utilize the scientists in the still-active war against Japan. Later, after V-J Day made that moot, interestingly enough American leaders were nearly as concerned about the efforts of France to get some of these scientists as they were those of the USSR. Meanwhile, Soviets officials were openly cajoling, bribing and arresting German scientists in their zone. PAPERCLIP, in other words, was a wartime operation that transmuted into high-stakes postwar geopolitics.

Boghardt shows that the end result of these two efforts were a mixed bag. PAPERCLIP produced one of the key architects of the American space race, Wernher von Braun, who had developed the Nazi V-2 rocket and knowingly employed slave labor to do so. RUSTY’s payoffs were also ambiguous. While it produced voluminous information about Soviet activity, much of it was sketchy. Its size and scale made it a ripe target for Soviet infiltration. The whole effort became unwieldy, and the Army tried unsuccessfully to offload it nearly as concerned about the efforts of France to get some of these scientists as they were those of the USSR. Meanwhile, Soviets officials were openly cajoling, bribing and arresting German scientists in their zone. PAPERCLIP, in other words, was a wartime operation that transmuted into high-stakes postwar geopolitics.

Certain Army intelligence activities were less defensible, such as counterintelligence efforts that successfully allowed the notorious Nazi sadist-torturer Klaus Barbie, the “Butcher of Lyon,” to escape justice via a ratline to Bolivia in the early fifties. Barbie had been an Army counterintelligence source who collected information on the French and the Soviets, though there is no clear evidence that his recruiters knew the iniquity of his deeds. That notwithstanding, the active participation of Army intelligence officials in Barbie’s escape, after his crimes became known, is without moral justification. Boghardt details other moments of disgrace as well, such as when the antisemitic and overzealously anti-Communist Senator Joseph McCarthy went as far as to denounce prosecutions of the December 1944 Malmedy massacre that occurred during the Battle of the Bulge, when Waffen-SS soldiers summarily executed hundreds of American prisoners of war, as “unbelievable” and “incredible” (227). He lambasted Jewish Army intelligence personnel who had discovered evidence about it, and thus helped to mitigate the sentences of the perpetrators. This is painful reading.

And yet that is not the whole story, which in Boghardt’s narrative has its share of successes. While there was plenty of “subversive” activity in postwar Germany, Army intelligence accurately surmised that there was no real threat of Nazi subversion. The Werwolf insurgent movement was largely farcical. There were the “Edelweiss Pirates” who had suspicious tattoos and boasted of their German nationalism. But intelligence revealed them to be far less than they made themselves out to be. They were mostly scared, impressionable youths who were angrier over American GIs dating German women than possessed with any fervent attachment to Nazism (59-65, 207-08, and 210-12). By 1947, the rough conclusion was that there was no real threat of Nazi subversion. Cold War politics may
have played some role in that decision. But sober, sensible information gathered from various Army intelligence investigations affirmed it fully.

And, while perhaps overlooked, Army intelligence’s work had major consequences for the future of the German state. Its “White List”—which contained the names of those who had been declared to be untainted by Nazism—was utilized to bring back from political grave the anti-Nazi former mayor of Köln, Konrad Adenauer. He was soon recognized as a leader in Germany’s postwar emergent intellectual and political elite, and thus conditions were set for him to be elected the first Chancellor of the West German state. Other key vettings were done. Ludwig Erhard was vetted and returned initially as an economic counsellor in the US zone. And Willy Brandt was utilized for years as a counterintelligence operative. All three were the principal architects and successive chancellors of the postwar West German state who led its economic “miracle” and its reentry into the concert of civilized nations.

Meanwhile, the Communist party never gained any significant traction in the western zones. The western German Communist party (KPD) was likely taking much of its orders from the Soviet zone’s party (SED). Army intelligence’s reporting on the Communist Party’s capacity and on Soviet influence was basically accurate, and largely free from speculation that could have fueled paranoia. By not overplaying the anti-Communist hand, and through sober and realistic reporting, the western allies were thus able to allow the Soviet-influenced Communist party, and the Soviet Union’s own reputation, to self-destruct on their own. The brutal forced merger of the German Socialist Party (SPD) into the Communist party in the Soviet zone; the forced labor of 100,000 Germans to extract uranium for use in the USSR’s atomic project; the discovery of the Katyn Forest massacre, the mass execution of 20,000 Polish military officers and others by Soviet secret policy (and subsequent Soviet denials); Soviet leader Joseph Stalin’s disastrous Berlin blockade miscalculation—all of this and more created ample negative attraction. “We now know” (to quote the title of one of John Lewis Gaddis’s books) about the essential ruthlessness of Stalin’s Soviet regime; Cold War revisionist history no longer has the dazzle of its contrariness. Boghardt’s history does not preach. But the reasonable assessment, upon reading his book, is that US Army intelligence was part of a highly imperfect, but at the same time, relatively decent and comparatively superior system and approach to that of its rival.

Covert Legions is long and detailed. But it is worth it. Boghardt skillfully weaves together anecdotes worthy of dozens of spy thrillers with the quotidian goings-on of a massive bureaucracy. In so doing, he demonstrates that the institutional apparatus of Army intelligence was at the center of most of the major German postwar and early Cold War controversies. In sum, this is not simply a boutique history for institutional military history buffs. This is critical reading for anyone who is interested in modern German, European and Cold War history. It is also compelling reading, and highly recommended.

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Joint Forces Quarterly, American Interest, and War on the Rocks. The ideas and opinions presented in this article are his alone and not those of the Department of Defense or National Defense University.

[1] Disclosure: I served on a panel that reviewed the manuscript “Covert Legions” at the US Army Center of Military History in 2019, as is noted in the preface of Dr. Boghardt’s book.
