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U.S. admits it helped Barbie flee

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WASHINGTON — U.S. intelligence officers obstructed justice by concealing a valued informant, accused Nazi war criminal Klaus Barbie, from French prosecutors and by helping him escape to Bolivia, Justice Department investigators reported yesterday.

The investigators' 218-page report, accompanied by hundreds of documents, was the first official government admission of U.S. misconduct in shielding Barbie, a former SS and Gestapo officer known as "the butcher of Lyon."

The State Department, acting on a recommendation from Justice Department special assistant Allan A. Ryan Jr., chief investigator of the U.S.-Barbie ties, sent a formal note to France expressing "deep regret" for concealing Barbie. The French Embassy in Washington said its government had no immediate comment.

U.S. protection of Barbie, who was a paid informant for the Army Counter-Intelligence Corps (CIC) from 1947 to 1950, delayed his trial in France for 33 years, Ryan said.

Barbie, who will be 70 in October, was expelled from Bolivia in February and is in a French prison awaiting trial. He is accused of ordering the slaughter of 4,000 French Jews and the deportation of 7,500 persons to Nazi concentration camps while he was a top Nazi officer in Lyon from 1942 to 1944.

The Justice Department report expressed no opinion as to Barbie's guilt or innocence, but it condemned the actions of about half a dozen U.S. Army intelligence officers up to the rank of brigadier general for hiding Barbie's whereabouts from French authorities.

The report, however, excused the CIC for hiring Barbie after World War II as an informant who spied on the German Communist Party and on French and Soviet activities in the U.S.-controlled zone of Germany.

Although U.S. intelligence officers are "subject to valid criticism by those who find use of a Gestapo official under any circumstances reprehensible," the report said, the recruitment of Barbie "did not amount to the knowing use of a war criminal."

"The decision to use Barbie was a defensible one, made in good faith by those who believed that they were advancing legitimate and important national security interests," the report said.

France, Great Britain and the Soviet Union similarly used former Nazi officials in Germany after World War II and are in no position to criticize the United States, Ryan said.

Yesterday, in response to the report, the Soviet Union criticized the Justice Department.

"The officers of the Justice Department have drawn a conclusion which is striking in its cynicism," the official Tass news agency said. "It was recommended that the U.S. administration only express its 'regret' to the government of France."

Army intelligence officers knew before hiring Barbie that he was a former Gestapo officer and that he was wanted for murder, the report

said. Moreover, the French had filed murder, terrorism and massacre charges against him as early as 1944 with the U.N. War Crimes Commission, and Barbie was listed on the Central Registry of War Criminals and Security Suspects.

But Ryan concluded that CIC officers had no reliable information until May 1949 — two years after Barbie was first employed — that Barbie was suspected of war crimes or crimes against humanity. Until then, the U.S. intelligence officers probably thought that the murder charges grew out of Barbie's role in the deaths of French Resistance fighters, according to the Justice report.

However, the Army officers first obstructed justice in 1950, the report said, when France sought extradition of Barbie from the U.S. high commissioner for Germany. The officers decided that "Barbie should not be placed in [the] hands of [the] French."

The late Brig. Gen. Robert K. Taylor, chief of U.S. military intelligence in the U.S.-controlled zone of Germany, told the director of intelligence for the high commissioner in June 1950 that Barbie had not been employed by the CIC since 1949 and that the CIC had not been in touch with him since late April 1950, the report said.

Both statements were false, Ryan said. Actually, Army intelligence officers knew Barbie's whereabouts "at all times" from April 1947 until March 1951, when they arranged Barbie's escape to Bolivia under a false name through a form of underground railway for defectors known as the Rat Line.

Why did the U.S. officers shield Barbie? Ryan gave this explanation:

"Surrender of Barbie would embarrass CIC by revealing that it had used a former Gestapo official, and would risk the compromise of CIC procedures and information should Barbie decide to reveal what he had learned in over three years of CIC employment."

Barbie, as the manager of a Boliv-

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