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# HOW WWII GAVE LIFE TO THE CIA

*Newly declassified papers reveal  
the U.S. spy agency in its infancy*

By David Kahn

**O**N DEC. 5, 1944, an official of the Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor of the CIA, outlined a plan for setting up a spy ring in Nazi Germany.

The official, Thomas B. Wilson, had become interested in using anti-Nazi church groups in the Rhineland as a basis for such a ring. Soon the OSS found a prospective agent.

He was Hans, a private in the U.S. Army. Born in East Prussia 35 years before, and later a student of theology at several prestigious German universities, he had lived in the Rhineland for several years. In 1935 — two years after Adolf Hitler came to power — he left Germany. His background made him an excellent choice to infiltrate Germany and to contact the religious officials in the waning months of the Second World War.

The OSS code named the project the CHURMI mission and set it in motion. From Dec. 28 to Jan. 2, Hans met in Paris with another expatriate, Fritz Lieb, formerly a professor at Bonn, where Hans had studied, and at the time of their meeting a Swiss citizen teaching in Basel. Also present was the OSS' Carl Auerbach. They discussed mainly "safe houses" — places where Hans could be sheltered without fear of betrayal to the Gestapo.

On Jan. 7, Lieb returned to Switzerland to make arrangements for Hans' support after he was parachuted into Germany. Hans began spy training.

By the middle of February, this had been completed. But the OSS had not yet worked out a cover story for him nor provided the fake documents he would need to substantiate this story.

In March, 1945, Cologne, the chief city of the Rhineland, fell to the advancing Allied armies. Operation CHURMI was shelved.

This tale, admittedly rather anticlimactic but in that way true to much of life, is one of several similar ones to be found in a vast hoard of recently declassified OSS documents. They have been transferred by the Central Intelligence Agency to the National Archives, where they are now open to the inspection of scholars. Filling 109 gray archives boxes, they consist of originals, carbon copies and negative photostats of the innumerable reports of departments and subsections, of unit histories typed on large sheets of blue paper in black binders, of photographs, letters, endless memoranda, orders and mimeographed unit-strength reports, pencil sketches of organization charts crumpled into manila envelopes.

They deal with training, supplies, the endless personnel transfers, new quarters, the technicalities of radio transmission and reception, statistics — down to such details as the death in a car accident of a private. They include many names now famous: Lt. William J. Casey, then head of the Secret Intelligence Branch of the European theater, now head of the CIA; Maj. Arthur Goldberg, then head of the Labor Division, later a justice of the U.S. Supreme Court; Cmdr. John Ford, then chief of the Field Photo-

graphic Branch, later one of the great movie directors; Willi Brandt, then the Swedish contact of an anti-Nazi group, later chancellor of West Germany; Capt. Walt W. Rostow, then a liaison officer to the British Air Ministry, later President Lyndon Johnson's national security adviser. But, amidst the floods of trivia, stand out fascinating nuggets about the techniques, trials and triumphs of American espionage in its embryonic stages.

One of the first problems in spying is to find a spy. No single principle for recruiting agents was found reliable; the report of one unit stated, "In the last analysis the recruiting was done 'by ear.' In other words, [Lt. A. E.] Jolis's conviction that a man would make a good agent was the final deciding issue." The report conceded that the security check in such cases was "not too satisfactory."

Once an agent was recruited, he had to be given a cover story — his false identity. The documents tell that one OSS division began by describing the agent, determining the character of the mission, and getting the agent's ideas about what the cover story should be.

The agent had to be not only fully familiar with his cover story, but fully sold on it as well. This required "salesmanship" on the part of the person briefing the agent, noted a history of the briefing division. "This inevitably involved the ability to dominate the agent. Briefing an agent was not the sort of activity that could be done mechanically. The agent had to be given faith in his story. Confidence in himself was the first condition of success."

For the data that would make its fake documents appear authentic, the briefing division searched in captured documents, newspapers, prisoner-of-war interrogations, telephone books. "An ordinary factory not only gave its address in the telephone directory, but also the names and addresses of its directors. If the agent's cover story included having worked at a particular factory, he had to know the names of some of the officials. The telephone directory told him," said the history.

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Often the investigations of other agencies did not attain the fineness of detail that the briefing division required. For instance, various units had compiled a study that would enable an American officer to walk into the postmaster general's office in Berlin and run the German postal system. But nowhere was there information on how to mail a letter. "It was a simple point and yet one which might easily have tripped up an agent," said the report.

"Bach [an early code name of the briefing division] discovered that in order to post letters going abroad, a special form was needed from the police. Furthermore, stamps had to be stuck on by the mail official — to prevent anyone writing anything underneath — and padded envelopes were not allowed. Since agents may use the mail system to dispatch reports, the importance of this information was obvious," said the report.

Once equipped with a cover story and supporting documents, the spy had to be gotten into enemy territory. Sometimes he was parachuted in: The Air Operations Section reported on April 30, 1944, that it had made 49 sorties since April 13, of which 28 were successful. Sometimes the spy was infiltrated through the lines or a border. Both were difficult. Battle line infiltration "involved long trips to army headquarters all along the front to decide which spots were easiest." Going into Germany from neutral Switzerland via the Alps was, reports agreed, only slightly easier.

Despite the problems, a Casey memorandum of Sept. 23, 1944, reported, 16 agents and five Jedburgh (combined OSS, British and Free French) teams "were infiltrated into France" in the first half of September. One agent was dropped into Germany.

Most agents reported by radio. The OSS built Station Victor near Hurley Bottom, west of London, for these communications. They were often difficult. Victor's operational activity report for Aug. 9, 1944, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. remarked that an agent code named "Cendrillon came up but with a very weak signal buried under interference so we got just a few groups of a message from him. He does not readily change frequencies and we can't copy through the heavy interference on his weak signal. We arranged additional contact time with him for 1530 today."

Five days later, during the American breakout from Normandy, Victory received the greatest number of agent messages in any 24 hours: 32.

What did they report? Sometimes nothing either very fast or very accurate. On July 29, an agent reported that Field Marshal Erwin Rommel had been badly wounded in an Allied air attack; two days later, he was reported dead. "The speed with which these reports came through . . . gave proof of the efficiency of the German agents," a report bragged. In fact, American newspapers were gathering the injury news the same day — and Rommel did not die until Oct. 16.

But some of the material was more valuable. Shortly after the D-Day invasion, an OSS agent "was the first to identify the movements of the [Panzer] Lehr division, information considered of especial value." During the night of Sept. 7-8, an agent at Baccarat in eastern France radioed that 200 tanks were unloading. This was confirmed by other sources, and, "As a result of this, the 2nd French Armored Division was able to anticipate the counterattack of the 21st Panzer Division on 11 September and knock out 65 enemy tanks."

Taken as a whole, what do these documents show? They do not depict OSS winning the war in Europe. The agency got there too late for that. Rather, the documents illustrate the establishment by the 510 officers, 1,740 men, and 405 civilians of the OSS in the European theater — according to a strength report for June 11, 1944 — of a professional intelligence organization — the organization from which evolved the keystone of our present intelligence apparatus. //