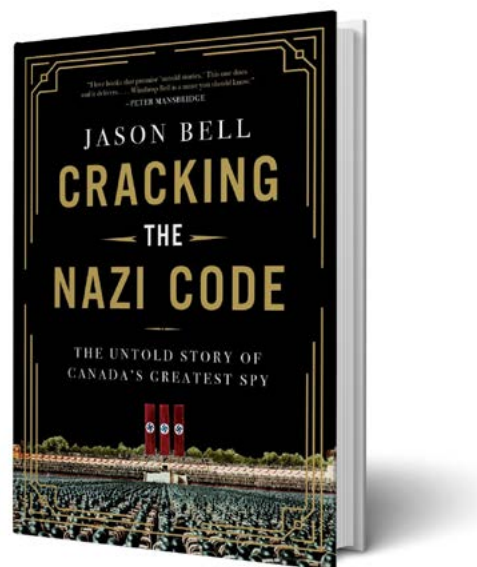


intelligence in public media

Cracking the Nazi Code: The Untold Story of Agent A12 and the Solving of the Holocaust Code

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Could reports from an intelligence agent inside Germany have saved humanity from Nazi victory and worldwide genocide? This is the premise of Jason Bell's new book on Winthrop Bell (no relation to the author), a Canadian journalist and clandestine British MI6 agent in Germany during 1919–20. W. Bell's reports not only informed policymakers of the threat posed by violent right-wing reactionary forces in the immediate aftermath of the Great War, but also warned of their plans for a future genocidal war.

The author shares more than just a surname with his subject: like W. Bell, J. Bell is an academic philosopher whose work is rooted in phenomenology. *Cracking the Nazi Code*, however, is no dry academic monograph.

Instead, it is a rousing narrative non-fiction in the vein of Ben Macintyre. J. Bell serendipitously uncovered the story of W. Bell while researching his PhD in 2008. Based largely on recently unsealed archives, J. Bell's book gives an account of W. Bell's career, primarily focused on his time undercover during the tumultuous early years of the Weimar Republic.

W. Bell, scion of a prominent Nova Scotia family, first moved to Germany to pursue a PhD under the supervision of philosopher Edmund Husserl. In 1914, W. Bell's studies were interrupted by World War I. Denied a doctorate by his university, W. Bell spent the war interned in Germany. Released after the 1918 armistice, he traveled to Britain with the intention of continuing on

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Cracking the Nazi Code:

to take up a professorship at Harvard. Instead, British and Canadian officials persuaded him to return to Germany, ostensibly as a Reuters reporter but actually in the employ of MI6.

Codenamed A12, W. Bell spent the next year reporting for Reuters and MI6 on the dire conditions in post-war Germany. His reports warned of virulently antisemitic, right-wing paramilitary forces' intentions to overthrow Germany's fragile democracy and wage a war against perceived internal and external enemies. W. Bell also cautioned against imposing severe peace terms on Germany, which he correctly assessed would create further resentment to be exploited by anti-democratic forces. Crucially, these intelligence reports may have influenced British officials to press for a less harsh settlement during the 1919 Paris Peace Conference.

W. Bell left Germany in early 1920 and returned to North America where he began his academic career, first at the University of Toronto and then at Harvard. He eventually left academia to work as an executive in his family's fishery, where he made enough money to retire in 1933 at forty-eight. Still engaged in international events, in spring 1939, W. Bell wrote a lengthy article warning that the Nazis' ultimate intention was to carry out a global genocide, an assessment he based on reading *Mein Kampf* and listening to broadcasts of Hitler's speeches in German. Viewed by many editors as overly alarmist, W. Bell had trouble finding an outlet for his piece. It was eventually published in a prominent Canadian newsweekly in late 1939.

Given J. Bell's impressive research, it is unfortunate that he gets much of the broader history wrong. For example, the author often refers to all reactionary right-wing groups active in Germany in 1919 and 1920 as "Nazis." This moniker, however, specifically denotes the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP) [National Socialist German Workers Party] and was not coined until the 1920s. More than just semantics, this leads to muddled history, such as the claim that at the end of 1919 the "Nazis' power was already astounding..." and "that they could already take over the country any day they wanted..." (200). In fact, in late 1919 the group that would become known as the Nazis was little more than a Munich beer-drinking club,

comprising a few dozen rabid anti-Semites. Consolidation of militant right-wing forces under the Nazi banner was not fully accomplished until the 1930s.

J. Bell's misuse of the term Nazis could be overlooked if it was not intertwined with the book's central historical fallacy: that World War II and the Holocaust were the culmination of a plot originally hatched by German militarists in 1915. As part of this conspiratorial argument, J. Bell claims that Nazi leaders used a young Adolf Hitler to infiltrate the Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (DAP)—soon to be renamed the NSDAP—in 1919, to provide political cover for their secret genocidal plan. While space does not permit refuting this here, it should be noted that such claims find no support in any reputable history of the period, such as Volker Ullrich's recent biography of Hitler.

The flawed historical account leads J. Bell to somewhat mischaracterize W. Bell's value as an intelligence agent. His real contribution was not to uncover a secret diabolical master plan for world domination concocted by sinister, shadowy forces—something more akin to a James Bond plot. Instead, W. Bell's intellect, personality, and native-like fluency in German allowed him to develop well-placed sources within society, while his cultural insights allowed him to correctly interpret the information they provided. As a result, he was able to send timely and accurate intelligence reports that helped shape British policy at the highest levels during the critical early post-war years. Later, as a private citizen, these same attributes allowed W. Bell to mostly correctly assess Hitler's genocidal intentions at a time when many still dismissed such claims as overblown.

Could W. Bell have saved humanity from Nazi victory and worldwide genocide, as J. Bell suggests? Almost certainly not. Regardless of W. Bell's warnings two decades earlier, the Nazis' bid for global domination would still have run up against the overwhelming obstacles of Soviet manpower and US industry. This fact, however, should not diminish W. Bell's contributions as an intelligence asset. Likewise, the flaws in *Cracking the Nazi Code* highlighted in this review should not diminish J. Bell's contributions to bringing a previously unknown, fascinating, and important true story of espionage to light. ■