

Intelligence in Public Media

The Walls Have Ears: The Greatest Intelligence Operation of World War II

Helen Fry (Yale University Press, 2019), 319 pp., notes, bibliography, index

Reviewed by J. E. Leonardson

In an age when intelligence so often is blamed when things go wrong, it is a pleasure to be reminded of what may be accomplished when someone does it right. This is the case with UK historian Helen Fry's new book, *The Walls Have Ears*, which tells the story of how British intelligence in World War II monitored and interrogated high-ranking German prisoners of war (POWs) and exploited the resulting take.

The story is straightforward. In 1939, as it became clear that war was coming, MI6 began to prepare for the arrival of prisoners and the need to extract information from them. Under the command of Maj. Thomas Kendrick, who by then had some 30 years of intelligence experience, the British set up holding and interrogation facilities first at the Tower of London and, soon after, at requisitioned estates outside London. In each, listening devices and recording systems were installed in the prisoners' living quarters on the theory that, even if they said nothing during formal interrogations, they would be relaxed and unwary in conversations among themselves.

Kendrick's system expanded quickly. Starting with the capture of a handful of prisoners—survivors of sunken U-boats and downed aircraft—in September 1939, thousands of POWs passed through his facilities. Most, especially after the numbers grew exponentially when the British began winning major victories in 1942, quickly moved on to standard POW camps. For others, especially high-ranking officers or those with specialized technical knowledge, Kendrick's facilities became their homes for the rest of the war.

The system worked brilliantly. Just as Kendrick had forecast, from the start prisoners who said nothing during questioning returned to their quarters and boasted to their comrades details of the secret information they had withheld. The British were only too happy to record, transcribe, and translate these conversations, and turn them into intelligence reports filled with details of communications and encryption systems, weapons, tactics, and politics. The information often became the foundations of subsequent interrogations, used to pry additional

information out of the POWs. Over time, as Fry documents, the reporting made significant contributions to Britain's codebreaking effort at Bletchley Park, knowledge of German weapons systems, and understandings of the Nazi regime's strategy, tactics, and internal political dynamics. In perhaps the most important example, Fry documents how loose talk among the Germans led the British to identify, and then bomb, the V-1 and V-2 facilities at Peenemünde. The Germans' conversations also provided early documentation of the Holocaust and other German war crimes.

Fry's account provides a number of lessons for anyone interested in collecting intelligence from uncooperative subjects. First, this was no amateur operation. Kendrick knew his target well, having worked on prisoner interrogation during World War I and against Germany between the wars. He carefully picked his subordinates, always for talent and ability above all else. As the growing number of prisoners overwhelmed the limited number of UK-born personnel with adequate language skills, for example, he turned to the pool of German refugees in Britain—many of them Jewish—who had been consigned to labor units and other duties that made no use of their capabilities. In addition, Kendrick never resorted to force or abused the prisoners. Instead, he and his interrogators always took a soft approach—taking German generals on outings to fine restaurants in London built rapport and also showed them that British society was not collapsing, as Nazi propaganda claimed—and waited for the POWs to become comfortable and let down their guard. Kendrick also was fortunate in his consumers, who understood that collecting intelligence was a long-term project and had the patience to wait for the tidbits to be assembled into actionable information. Such professionalism and appreciation for experience served Britain well.

Kendrick was lucky, too, in his enemies. From the start, the Germans realized that their quarters might be bugged but believed that the English were too stupid to pull off such an operation, a conclusion that was reinforced by their civilized treatment. Underestimating the opposition is as old a mistake as there is, and the

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(presumably) sophisticated German generals made it day after day as they chatted in their rooms.

As valuable as Fry's account is, however, the unfortunate fact is that the reader will learn almost all of this in the first 60 or 70 pages. Fry previously has written a biography of Kendrick and a book on British prisoner interrogations (*The London Cage*), and *The Walls Have Ears* has all the hallmarks of a collection of leftover notes and research materials quickly slapped together. Much of it is dull—reading details of the squabbles among generals after they had been locked up for three or four years starts to give a sense of the tedium they must have endured—and repetitive, a 150-page book padded and stretched

to 270. It seems that the editors may have nodded off at some point as well, thus missing the strange statement that the fall of Norway in the spring of 1940 was the start of a six-year German occupation.

Despite these flaws, much of *The Walls Have Ears* is worth a read. The first third of the book is as good a primer as any on how to set up a system for collecting intelligence from POWs, and the chapter on Peenemünde is a good case study of how such information can be exploited. The remainder can be skimmed, unless you need an extended refresher course on the need to watch what you say.



The reviewer: J. E. Leonardson is the penname of an analyst in CIA's Directorate of Analysis.