

**The London Cage: The Secret History of Britain's WWII Interrogation Centre**

Helen Fry (Yale University Press, 2017), 244 pp., photographs, notes, bibliography, index.

**Reviewed by J. R. Seeger**

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In 1929, the great powers of Europe met in Geneva to address issues related to handling both prisoners and civilians during any future war. The Geneva Convention, officially titled *The Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War*, had 97 articles addressing every aspect of the treatment of captured warfighters, as well as civilians, in areas occupied by a hostile military force. The destructive power unleashed during World War I—the first modern war—surpassed the imagination of leaders on all sides of the conflict. Still, in 1929, European and US leaders had an almost chivalrous image of how the victorious should (and would) treat prisoners of war, best characterized in Article 5 of the convention, which states,

*Every prisoner of war is required to declare, if he is interrogated on the subject, his true names and rank, or his regimental number. If he infringes this rule, he exposes himself to a restriction of privileges accorded to prisoners of his category. No pressure shall be exercised on prisoners to obtain information regarding the situation in their armed forces or their country. Prisoners who refuse to reply may not be threatened, insulted, or exposed to unpleasantness or disadvantages of any kind whatsoever . . .<sup>a</sup>*

At the beginning of World War II, all of the European nations involved in the conflict and the United States were signatories to this convention, though the Soviet Union did not ratify the agreement and was therefore not obliged to follow it. When the conflict began, theoretically, the rights of prisoners of war (POWs) as well as those of non-combatant civilians were protected under international law. What the Geneva Convention did not address (and likely the signatories could not imagine at the time) was how complete and destructive “total war” would become by 1939. Europe witnessed a prelude to total war during the Spanish Civil War with the destruction of whole cities, but it was not until the German invasion of Poland in

1939 and the 1940 German invasion of Holland, Belgium, and France that it became clear this conflict was unlike any other. It is no exaggeration to state that by the fall of 1940, the British government and people felt they were facing an existential threat from the Nazi war machine.

Further, while the full scope of the Nazi genocide against Jewish and other ethnic and religious groups in Germany proper and the areas Germany occupied were not immediately evident, it was clear by 1940 that the Nazi regime was not abiding by the Geneva Convention with regard to civilians. In July 1942, Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt issued an order instructing all Allied parachutists to be turned over immediately to the Gestapo for interrogation and subsequent execution. In October 1942, the Nazi regime underscored their noncompliance with the Geneva Convention through a formal document known as *Kommandobefehl*, or “Commando order,” issued by Adolf Hitler. This order stated categorically that any time German forces captured “commandos” (i.e., special operations forces) regardless of whether they were in uniform, they were to be summarily executed; it also specified that any intelligence agents, saboteurs, or resistance forces not in uniform who were captured by the German military were to be turned over to the German Security Service (*Sicherheitsdienst*, or SD) for interrogation and execution.

This is the historical context for Dr. Helen Fry’s book, *The London Cage*. While the word “cage” in the title may sound barbaric, “cage” was the term the British used for the 12 POW camps in Britain that controlled prisoners and conducted interrogations. In addition to these locations, which were managed by a UK Army military intelligence unit known as MI19 (eventually renamed MI119), the British Security Service (MI5) maintained a separate facility—“Camp XX”—that focused on the interrogation of German intelligence agents captured after infiltrating into Britain. Battlefield POW facilities were also known colloquially as “cages.” The London Cage was the location for interrogation of prisoners thought to have important intelligence, including captured spies and/or POWs who were noncompliant with POW regulations

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a. *Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War*. Geneva, 27 July 1929, Part II, Article 5; available online at <http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/misc/57jnws.htm>.

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in other camps. Dr. Fry states that her review of war office records reveals that, from 1940 to 1946, approximately 3,000 German prisoners passed through the London Cage for interrogation.

The London Cage was located in No. 8 and No. 9, Kensington Palace Gardens. The gardens were royal property behind Kensington Palace where late-19th century mansions were built on grounds leased by the Crown to wealthy members of the nobility. By 1940, some of these properties had been abandoned and/or run down due to the loss of family fortunes or the tragic ends of family lines due to the casualties of World War I. In October 1940, the British military assumed control of these abandoned properties and created the “London Cage.” To run the facility, the military called back to service a WWI veteran British intelligence officer, 60-year-old Lt. Col. A. P. Scotland. Scotland had served as a British Army interrogator for the military intelligence in World War I, was fluent in German, and had actually served in a reserve capacity with the German army in the German colony of SW Africa at the turn of the century. In his memoir, also entitled *The London Cage* (Evans Brothers, 1957), Scotland describes his time as a German soldier in Africa and his work in Africa as an informant for British intelligence.

Fry establishes that without Scotland’s skill and experience the London Cage would never have become a productive intelligence collection facility: Scotland was an experienced interrogator, he was fluent in German, and was thoroughly familiar with German culture—including German military culture. Scotland managed the London Cage but also served as an advisor to other facilities. He designed training courses for other interrogators—contributions that led to the creation of an industrial-scale intelligence collection program across 12 facilities in Britain, as well as numerous initial detention and interrogation facilities closer to the battlefield.

Early in the book, Fry writes,

*It was largely due to Colonel Scotland’s expertise that by the end of the Second World War, British intelligence had an impressive and adaptable interrogation policy that produced intelligence of the highest quality, unequaled in any country . . . (35)*

As an example of the types of intelligence acquired at the London Cage, Dr. Fry points to the 1942 interrogations of prisoners captured in North Africa, which detailed the German rocket research at Peenemunde and provided some of the earliest accounts of German research on

poison gas and its use in Nazi concentration camps. While intelligence reporting on tactical and operational material was certainly critical to the Allied commanders in the field, these strategic intelligence reports had significant impact both during the war as well as during the post-war trials at Nuremberg. At the end of the war, when the London Cage transitioned from intelligence collection to a focus on investigating war crimes, the skills of the interrogators—especially Scotland’s—were at their peak. From October 1945 to September 1948, interrogators at the London Cage handled 3,573 German military POWs and Nazi civilians, including commandants of the concentration camps, senior Wehrmacht commanders, Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, and the aforementioned von Rundstedt. (123) The work of these interrogators was used in 15 separate trials at Nuremberg.

But Dr. Fry raises the question, “At what cost?” In the case of the London Cage, she was able to uncover very little hard evidence that interrogators at the facility ever abused prisoners, beyond the basic manhandling that was not uncommon treatment of enlisted Allied soldiers at the time. This lack of evidence may be in part because revelatory information in the British archives is still classified, or because it was long ago lost to the elements. Yet the lack of evidence may be because cases of abuse were, in reality, simply few and far between. Dr. Fry points to Scotland’s memoirs (which were classified for years), in which he denies any significant abuse of prisoners in the London Cage. But in her search for evidence of abuse, Dr. Fry did unearth sufficient anecdotal evidence to support her own view that the London Cage interrogators did, in some cases, probably violate the Geneva Convention rules for prisoners and the War Ministry’s official guidelines. That said, her research into British Army and War Ministry investigations did not reveal any proven cases of abuse in the London Cage.

*The London Cage* is most useful in the way it details Scotland’s papers and the War Office records that reflect Scotland’s description of what it takes to be a successful interrogator—fluency in the language of the target, a first-class memory, keen observation skills, infinite patience, knowledge of psychology, and the ability to act quickly on the previous four skills. To these, Scotland added his personal knowledge of how the German military treated its own soldiers, sailors, and airmen and how officers and non-commissioned officers delivered orders and expected obedience. Fry lists multiple examples of Scotland’s turning a failing interrogation into success simply because he understood how to deliver orders in fluent German, in the

right cultural context. The book also lays out how London Cage interrogators applied Scotland's guidelines in their efforts to gain intelligence from some of the most serious Nazi war criminals and soldiers captured during World War II. While there are other major players in both Fry's book and in Scotland's memoir, it is clear that Scotland was the key to success at the London Cage. As Scotland stated in his own memoirs,

*It was not enough . . . to court the Germans, speak their language, join in their activities and study their techniques. You had to talk, think, and live like a German. You had to become one of them if you wanted to stay alive. You had to know the discipline of the soldier, and how to impose it. You had to understand the nature of the German military machine and the mental processes of the men who directed it. You had to learn how to take orders in true German fashion, and how to give them.<sup>a</sup>*

While *The London Cage* is a history of a unit whose work ended almost 70 years ago, there are points in the book that will resonate with any intelligence officer or interrogator in a post-9/11 world. For example, in the concluding chapter, Dr. Fry states,

*. . . when dealing with die-hard fanatics, whether religious or political, history has shown that no results can usefully be achieved by being soft on them. A tough approach is necessary. But that approach must be within the boundaries of the Geneva Convention, to which all civilized countries adhere. Otherwise, how can such civilized societies uphold justice and deal with future war crimes? (219)*

While Dr. Fry advocates "a tough approach" in this passage, both the *Convention of 1929*—and the subsequent *Convention of 1949*—make clear that any type of "tough approach" falls outside Convention covenants, and International Committee of the Red Cross inspectors are obliged to enforce them or report violations.

The interrogations in the London Cage took place 60 years before CIA interrogations began after 9/11, but the challenges were the same. How do interrogators make gains with prisoners who are "die-hard fanatics"? In the recent book *Enhanced Interrogation: Inside the Minds and Motives of the Islamic Terrorists Who Are Trying*

*to Destroy America* (Crown Forum, 2016),<sup>b</sup> Dr. James Mitchell and Bill Harlow argued that the CIA did take a "tough approach"—but that the approach was approved by the president of the United States as well as lawyers at the Department of Justice, and this approach had been used in training military personnel at the Department of Defense Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape program (SERE). In his book, Mitchell, too, raises the question of whether the tough approach was the right one. He states,

*. . . I decided I had a duty to use what I knew to protect American citizens and our way of life. I was told that another deadly attack could occur at any moment, possibly involving a nuclear device or chemical or biological agents. I concluded that conducting coercive interrogations on a small number of Islamic terrorists who were actively withholding information that could disrupt a potentially catastrophic attack was justified, as long as those methods were lawful, authorized, and carefully monitored.<sup>c</sup>*

Here, Mitchell is making essentially the same argument as the one with which interrogators at the London Cage, likewise, grappled. As Dr. Fry argues,

*Was what was done in the Cage justifiable? Between 1939 and 1945, as Britain was waging an existential war of possible obliteration, and democracy itself was placed at risk, what happened at the London Cage and other similar intelligence sites raise important moral questions. (219)*

Readers of *The London Cage* will have to draw their own conclusions to these important moral questions, as well as to the question of whether Colonel Scotland and his team were successful at balancing the demand for critical intelligence with the methods used to obtain that information. This is precisely the reason intelligence professionals should read *The London Cage*: it is they who will be tasked to build and run future interrogation programs, and Dr. Fry's book offers an important historical analogue for the work.

b. A review of this book appeared in the September 2017 issue of *Studies in Intelligence*; please see Erik Jens, "A Review of Enhanced Interrogation: Inside the Minds and Motives of the Islamic Terrorists Who Are Trying to Destroy America," *Studies in Intelligence* 61(3):7–17, available online at <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol-61-no-3/review-of-enhanced-interrogation.html>.

c. Mitchell and Harlow, *Enhanced Interrogation*, 49.

a. A. P. Scotland, *The London Cage* (Evans Brothers, 1957), p. 23.



