



Book Review of “Hitler’s Spies: Secret Agents and the Intelligence War in South Africa 1939–1945” Edited by Evert Kleynhans¹²

Bálint Somkuti³

It is a common joke that military intelligence is an oxymoron yet without its activities any military would be running around in complete darkness. World War 2 in Africa usually confined the German, Italian and allied manoeuvres in North Africa yet there were other theatres of operations like the Italian colonies at the Horn of Africa or even South Africa itself.

Thank God that the natives were unable to show that kind of proficiency in the area of secret services that they have presented in ground warfare. Most definitely it had to do with the lack of attractive common goal because who would have wanted to live under the *Übermensch*. Yet among the small group of white supremacists their ideas have fallen on fertile ground. There could have been probably no better place to attract similarly thinking sympathizers than deal ready highly segregated South Africa. Yet this danger was aware known to the Brits who have kept a close eye on possible Nazi prospects.

Title and author of the book deals in great detail about the thankfully successes of the German secret services tool get information and to influence the outcome of Second World War in South Africa. It is rare to read such interdisciplinary work which craft fully presents various aspects of military and intelligence issues of that era.

It has been really heart-warming to see the thoroughness of the author describing German and South African relations from the onset to the supremacist *Ossewabrandwag* (Ox-Wagon Sentinels) movement. Such balanced, and visibly well supported approach is unfortunately sorely missing from contemporary historical works. Kleynhans’ traditional method is clearly to be seen in the description Hans van Rensburg, the South African movement’s talented leader. Nowadays such a clearly negative historical, especially right-wing extremist figure are not shown in their complexity but rather as two-dimensional villains of a bad movie. In order to understand and to avoid mistakes made between the two world wars we need to have such balanced and the neutral description of clearly negative historical figures as well.

By describing the difficulties of two-way communication of the pre-digital era the readers detailed look about setting up and running an informer circle in World War 2.

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² Evert Kleynhans: *Hitler’s spies, Secret Agents and the Intelligence War in South Africa 1939–1945*. Johannesburg, Cape Town, London: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2021. ISBN: 9781776190201, pp. 271.

³ Military historian, security policy analyst of the Mathias Corvinus Collegium; Budapest, Hungary; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4053-6945>; vabonis72@gmail.com

The less known role what Portuguese and French colonies played in German Intelligence, especially after the complete occupation of France in November 1942, is also presented in detail. Another gem of is the detailed description of the Nazi avars organization which also helps to German Intelligence in World War 2 (p. 61.).

As a navy and naval warfare fan the reviewer has found the description of the *U-Boot* war around South Africa also fascinating, as Suez Canal was mostly unavailable for commercial shipping for the better part of the war until Autumn 1943. Many of the cargo ships had to take the long detour around South Africa offering a chance for the German wolfpacks operating in the area (p. 100-101).

The story of Lothar Sittig (dubbed as “the accidental spy” by the author is also tell-tale description of what was it like living in non-combatant parts of the British Empire during the years of World War 2. Sittig upon the start of hostilities was immediately arrested and sent to internment camp: “You are a German and we are at war with Germany, therefore in you go.” (p. 110). Similar stories such as the operations of spying called Felix (p. 121) introduce us to the difficulties of an intelligence organization operated by civilians, with no or little previous experience.

It shows the thoroughness of the book that British counterintelligence efforts, among the operation them of Royal Navy ‘Y’ organisation, the British naval SIGINT also known from stories about German commerce raiders and the Hunt for Bismarck, is also described in detail starting from page 165.

Though the title says until 1945 the text goes on to describe the postwar hunt for possible collaborators. In the author's words “By February 1946 the Rein Mission had been appointed [...] to assist in the gathering of documentary and oral evidence relating to treasonable acts committed by Union nationals during the war. The mission was headed by Rudolph Rein, a lawyer and the professional assistant to the attorney general of the then Transvaal.” (p. 191) The hunt is described in detail in ‘The Bloodhounds of the Empire’ chapter, only to end the story with a big surprise. “The National Party victory in the 1948 general election was a watershed moment in the country’s history. Just as Winston Churchill had been defeated in the 1945 British general election, the South African electorate decided to reject Smuts and his United Party. DF Malan and the National Party came to power, with Malan as the new prime minister and CR Swart the minister of justice. Not long after their victory, the National Party began to contemplate the release from prison of individuals convicted of politically motivated crimes.” It shows well the significantly altered post war realities, that among those to be set free [prominent *Ossewabrandwag* member] Robey Leibbrandt was also mentioned, who had by then served five years of a life sentence for treason (p. 223).

The final, concluding chapter is a profound evidence, how much the world has tuned in only a handful of years. “By the end of 1948 all traces of the Barrett Report had disappeared. The documentary evidence, and all the copies of the report, were allegedly handed to the then State archivist. Alarmingly, with the passage of time, the



so-called German Documents seem to have gone missing from the State Archives. Consequently, the entire episode surrounding the hunt for Union war criminals, and for individuals who committed treasonable acts by assisting the German war effort, has received little or no attention within the broader post-war South African historiography.”

It took almost eighty years and the determined work of Evert Kleynhans to collect the pieces and assemble the jigsaw puzzle from a myriad of smaller pieces of information into this magnificent magnum opus which deals with a very less known part of the last apocalypse. It does worth to read Evert Kleynhans’ masterpiece, not only for those who are interested in the era, or the craftsmanship of intelligence, but also for those who would like to know more about life in the non-combatant parts of the British Empire.