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U.S. May Probe Its Agents' Activities With Nazis

From Times Wire Services

WASHINGTON—The Reagan Administration may investigate allegations that U.S. intelligence officials helped Klaus Barbie and other Nazi war criminals escape justice, Justice Department sources said Friday.

Calls are also rising in Congress for an investigation of whether American officials covered up information about war criminals' whereabouts in the United States in return for information from them about the Soviet Union.

The questions about Barbie's possible links with American intelligence agencies were raised after the former Nazi Gestapo officer's expulsion from Bolivia to France last weekend. A French lawyer and a former U.S. Army intelligence officer have alleged that U.S. agents kept Barbie from the French after he was taken into American custody in Europe at the end of World War II.

The Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations, responsible for tracking down and prosecuting war criminals living secretly in the United States, has recommended to Attorney General William French Smith that he order an investigation into the charges, the sources said.

The Justice Department's inquiry, if approved by the attorney general, would try to determine what role, if any, American intelligence officials played in helping Nazi war criminals relocate in safe areas after the war.

Erhard Dabringhaus, a former U.S. counterintelligence officer said that on orders he obtained false identity papers for Barbie in 1948, and that the Nazi had already obtained elsewhere identity papers in the name of Altmann, the alias under which he escaped to Bolivia. French attorney Serge Klarsfeld said that he has a copy of an Italian document showing that in 1951, Barbie used an American transit card issued by the Allied High Commision in Munich in the name of Klaus Altmann. Klarsfeld said the transit card could have been purchased illicitly by Barbie.

Neither man asserted that the United States helped Barbie escape.

"I'm not saying there was a U.S. policy for helping German war criminals," Dabringhaus said. "I think he just walked away when he felt they (the French) were getting too close to him, which is our mistake."

U.S. intelligence agencies apparently did all they could to keep the French from getting too close. Barbie reportedly ran a network of spies for the United States until Feb. 21, 1951, when he was issued an exit visa to Genoa, Italy, where the Bolivian consulate granted him a travel visa to South America.

French lawyer Klarsfeld said he has correspondence between the French Ministry of Justice and French army officers in Germany indicating that U.S. authorities blocked at least three French requests for the return of the Gestapo chief for the Lyon region. Dabringhaus, now a professor of German history at Detroit's Wayne State University, said that on two occasions in 1948 he "played dumb" on orders from superiors when French counterintelligence inquired about Barbie's whereabouts, even though he knew the Nazi was hiding in a U.S. Army-requisitioned house.

Dabringhaus said he served as the handler of Barbie's surviving network of German spies, many of them in France, who once a week reported on Soviet military and political activities, including a Soviet uranium mine near Aue, Germany, that concerned U.S. officials because of the possibilities for atomic bombs.

The U.S. motive in keeping Barbie from the French apparently was to avoid losing that information.

"We cut the French out of everything," said Earl Lerette, an intelligence officer in Berlin after the war. "My unit had absolutely nothing to do with the French because we found that anything we gave to the French would get to the Russians before it got to the Deuxieme Bureau."

Another former counterintelligence officer, John Willms of Pittsburg, Calif., told the Associated Press that he protected an arrogant Barbie from French interrogators who wanted to kill the Gestapo chief after World War II.

Willms says he escorted "The Butcher of Lyon" to three days of interrogation by French agents in the spring of 1946. Willms said that, on orders, he stood by, armed, to prevent the French from killing the man accused of torturing and killing resistance leader Jean Moulin and thousands of other people.

"They were ready to tear him apart," Willms said.

French officers grilled Barbie to reveal who betrayed Moulin, but Barbie wouldn't break.

"I'd say the guy was taunting the French," Willms said. Safe in the custody of the U.S. Army, "he felt so secure he would give them smart answers."

Barbie was expelled Feb. 5 from Bolivia, where he had lived since the war, and was flown to France for trial on charges of crimes against humanity. He is accused of ordering 7,591 Jews deported to concentration camps and of executing 4,000 other French Jews and anti-Nazis.

Willms said that after the first day of Barbie's questioning, Capt. John Whiteway, a French Foreign Legion officer, urged him to leave the Nazi in French custody and claim "a misunderstanding had taken place."

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