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SUBJECT Klaus Barbie

DAN RATHER: Two months ago today, former Gestapo official Klaus Barbie was spirited back to France to stand trial for Nazi war crimes. For the 32 years before that, Barbie had lived in Bolivia, his close ties to that government blocking French extradition demands. But what about the years between the fall of Nazi Germany and Barbie's arrival in South America? CBS News has learned that documents not yet made public establish that from 1947 to 1950 Barbie was in occupied Germany, an employee of U.S. Army Intelligence.

Robert Schakne reports.

ROBERT SCHAKNE: The evidence gathered so far by the Justice Department is now indisputable. Klaus Barbie, Nazi SS officer and war criminal, became Klaus Barbie, secret agent, paid for and protected by American intelligence in postwar Germany.

EARL BROWNING: Klaus Barbie's name appeared on the list submitted for authorization to use as an informant. He was being used through the back door, I guess you would say.

SCHAKNE: Pentagon documents and eyewitnesses trace Barbie's shadowy moves through U.S. headquarters and safe houses from 1946 to 1950. Although Colonel Browning says he ordered Barbie's immediate arrest in 1947, the documents show that for unexplained reasons the never happened. Instead, American intelligence kept employing Barbie.

GENE BRAMEL: We knew that Barbie had been a Gestapo officer. We knew that various ways that he was wanted by the French. We didn't care.

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SCHAKNE: Barbie's first mission, providing information about suspected Communist influence in French government and security services, using his wartime contracts as a Nazi SS officer combatting the French resistance in Lyon.

ERHARD DAUBRINGHAUS: We were still trying to get what is the hottest information here in occupied Germany. So we use any -- any force -- any sources of information.

SCHAKNE: In 1949 and '50, France formally requested Barbie's extradition for wartime atrocities, without success. One French document ruefully notes, "Barbie enjoys the protection of American occupation authorities."

The reasons why the United States would protect a war criminal are cloudy. But these were the early Cold War years, when combatting Soviet influence took first priority.

DAUBRINGHAUS: They were unaware of the enormity of these war crimes. They said, "Well, okay. We know that they've committed crimes." They knew about the concentration camps and the extermination of Jews. He says, "We want to get the information, no matter how."

BRAMEL: The most valuable people to us, the ones who had the expertise, were Nazis. To deny ourselves the use of them would have been on the verge of suicide, as far as the intelligence mission.

SCHAKNE: Whatever U.S. intelligence knew about Barbie, U.S. authorities nonetheless issued him a transit visa under the alias Klaus Altman for his escape first to Argentina and eventually to Bolivia.

And the Barbie story doesn't end there. CBS News has also been told that interest in Barbie continued. In the mid-1960s, at the time of the Che Guevara insurgency in Bolivia, American military intelligence discussed recruiting Klaus Barbie, until the CIA said no.