

Hitler's Nest of Vipers: The Rise of the Abwehr

Nigel West (Frontline Books, 2022), 327 pages, notes, photographs, appendices, index.

Reviewed by Graham Alexander

Jacket notes for Nigel West's *Hitler's Nest of Vipers: The Rise of the Abwehr* promise a sweeping reappraisal of the much-maligned Nazi-era intelligence organization. They claim West's work comprises "the most detailed review of Axis intelligence operations yet published." It quickly becomes clear to the reader, however, that these statements are irrelevant to the book in hand. *Hitler's Nest of Vipers* is, instead, a sometimes excruciatingly dry summation of Abwehr operations in several geographic theaters culled mainly from British intelligence memoranda, from which West often quotes at page-spanning lengths of stilted, highly bureaucratic prose. Far from prompting a reassessment of the Abwehr's lowly reputation, the book demonstrates just how thoroughly the British and Americans penetrated and blunted its operations well before the end of World War II. A better, more appropriate advertisement for *Hitler's Nest of Vipers* would have been to label it a quasi-reference volume on Abwehr operations, assets, and personnel relevant only to seasoned intelligence scholars of the era.

West's organization of the often esoteric content makes the book feel more akin to an encyclopedia than a narrative. He focuses on Abwehr personnel and assets across various theaters where the Abwehr was active, notably omitting the Eastern Front. Simultaneously, abbreviations, era-relevant jargon, names, and cryptonyms pepper the reader with the ferocity of a rainstorm on a tin roof; the abbreviations and *dramatis personae* sections mercifully listed at the beginning of this standard-length work run a full 20 pages. Abwehr leader Wilhelm Canaris's visage graces the cover but West makes little mention of his actual work or plans for the organization.

Whatever the title, there is also next to no mention of how the Abwehr was active in planning to depose or assassinate Adolf Hitler. There are occasional instances of recruitments and tactical success but these are far outweighed by the Abwehr's shortcomings. "During the critical 'invasion summer' of 1940," West writes, "the Abwehr possessed only three sources in England, and all were run by MI5." (66) One year later, he quotes British documents showing that they had identified every Abwehr agent on 38



Under the leadership of Adm. Wilhelm Canaris (1933–44), German military intelligence was generally ineffectual and often bested by Allied counterintelligence. Canaris was hanged on April 9, 1945, for plotting against Hitler. (Photo: Wikimedia)

Spanish ships and remarks, "In counter-intelligence terms, it is hard to imagine a more comprehensive coverage of an adversary's espionage system." (174)

West typically avoids any in-depth discussion on the Abwehr's genuine intelligence production and the impact, if any, it had on German policymakers. Late in the volume, however, he stumbles unexpectedly onto analysis that could, and probably should, have been the basis for his book. German intelligence, West argues, was disadvantaged by shifting demands created from the speed of military developments. Long-distance radio transmitters were not effective means for communication and, besides, German commanders were not used to placing faith in

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predictive intelligence. The German approach, one deeply ingrained in its military and political decision makers, was to learn the adversary's order of battle and attack. The seeming effectiveness of this approach during the first years of the war reinforced this belief and further prejudiced its leaders against Abwehr reporting. (209)

This reluctance to integrate human intelligence into decisionmaking left the Abwehr with only the most marginal of roles for affecting the outcome, whether for better or

worse. Understanding its consequences, however, helps to contextualize its ineffective collection, poor vetting methods, and blunt-force approach to recruiting assets. Admittedly, this framing of the Abwehr's failure as the product of a larger political and military culture will not resuscitate its checkered reputation. It may, however, provide the premise for the kind of reappraisal that *Hitler's Nest of Vipers* promises but ultimately fails to deliver.



The reviewer: Graham Alexander is the pen name of a CIA officer in CSI's Lessons Learned Program.



Further Reviews

The Abwehr is a seemingly bottomless pit to be mined by intelligence and military historians, and it has made many appearances in articles and reviews in *Studies in Intelligence*, among them:

David A. Foy, review of *Secret Operations of World War II*, by Alexander Stillwell (63, no. 1, March 2019)

Hayden Peake, review of *Double Agent Victoire: Mathilde Carré and the Interallié Network*, by David Tremain (62, no. 4, December 2018)

Hayden Peake, review of *Hitler's Spy Against Churchill: The Spy Who Died Out in the Cold*, by Jan-Willem van der Braak (63, no. 4, December 2022)

David A. Welker, review of *The Nazi Spy Ring in America: Hitler's Agents, the FBI, and the Case That Stirred the Nation*, by Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones (65, no. 2, June 2021)

Nigl West, review of *The Secret War: Spies, Codes and Guerillas, 1939–1945*, by Max Hastings (60, no. 1, March 2016)