

Intelligence in Public Media

Nazis on the Potomac: The Top-Secret Intelligence Operation that Helped Win World War II

Robert K. Sutton (Casemate Publishers, 2021), 240 pages, photos, map, appendix.

Reviewed by Warren Fishbein

Retired National Park Service (NPS) Chief Historian Robert Sutton has written the first comprehensive account of World War II intelligence operations undertaken at Fort Hunt, a onetime coastal artillery facility, now a park, along the Potomac River near Mt. Vernon. Sutton draws heavily upon a set of interviews of Ft. Hunt veterans compiled by NPS more than a decade ago but hitherto not systematically exploited for historical purposes. Plumbing the interviewees' personal recollections, Sutton details the intelligence programs and relates them to the backgrounds, motivations, and thinking of the soldiers who served there. This makes for a particularly engaging read.^a

The largest intelligence operation was the Military Intelligence Service-Y (MIS-Y) program for interrogating select German prisoners of war. The decision to base this program, known by its cover address "P. O. Box 1142," at Ft. Hunt reflected the Army's need for isolation to maintain secrecy but also proximity to the Pentagon to facilitate quick transmission of important revelations.^b More than 3,000 prisoners were interned there, including high-ranking officers and weapons scientists.

To question the prisoners, the Army recruited US soldiers fluent in German, many of whom were Jewish refugees who had fled Nazi persecution in Germany. They were well suited to the work, being both familiar with then current idiomatic German usage and especially motivated to obtain information needed to win the war.

MIS-Y techniques evolved through trial and error to become more sophisticated and tailored to different types of prisoners. For instance, cooperative high-value prisoners were rewarded with reading material and liquor, while interrogators would seek to unnerve recalcitrant prisoners

by exploiting captured German Army records documenting their patronage of Wehrmacht-affiliated brothels.

One technique oral history interviewees said interrogators abjured was physical coercion. However, the interrogators did effectively employ one semi-coercive stratagem for pressing the most resistant prisoners: a bogus threat to transfer them to the Soviet Union for questioning. The threat was rendered believable by the presence of fake Red Army liaison officers played by Russian-speaking US soldiers.

The interrogations coupled with audio surveillance of the prisoners—initially controversial due to a lingering "gentlemen do not read each other's mail" mentality—produced numerous important revelations that assisted Allied war efforts. These included learning that the Germans were loading supplies at railway crossings rather than at heavily bombed stations and that the German Navy had built faux concrete structures at submarine pens to confuse Allied bombers—both of which led to productive changes in Allied aerial targeting.

Sutton recounts two other wartime intelligence operations at Ft. Hunt: the MIS-X program for aiding US military personnel evade or escape capture, and a Military Intelligence Research Service (MIRS), which exploited captured enemy documents for building "basic intelligence" on German forces. One of the MIS-X program's signal achievements was to develop a code that allowed captured Americans to send back intelligence information in letters from their prison camps.

Staffed by just a few dozen soldiers, MIRS produced detailed orders of battle that supported Allied military operations from D-Day onward. Looking back, the branch's

a. See also, Thomas Boghardt, "America's Secret Vanguard: US Army Intelligence Operations in Germany, 1944–47," *Studies in Intelligence* 57, no. 2 (June 2013) and his subsequent encyclopedic history, *Covert Legions: U.S. Army Intelligence in Germany, 1944–1949* (US Army Center of Military History, 2022); Jay Watkins, review of *Operation Paperclip: The Secret Intelligence Program to Bring Nazi Scientists to America*, by Annie Jacobsen, *Studies in Intelligence* 58, no. 3 (Extracts, September 2014); Hayden Peake, review of *Our German: Project Paperclip and the National Security State*, by Brian E. Crim, *Studies in Intelligence* 63, no. 4 (December 2019).

b. According to retired Department of the Army historian Dr. Kathryn Coker, who is authoring a book on POW camps in Virginia, Ft. Hunt was one of at least 23 facilities that held some 17,000 Axis prisoners in the Commonwealth. See "PO Box 1142," www.kathryncoker.com/index.php/2019/05/03/rebel-garden-ladies-at-the-richmond-law-library.

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veterans attributed the unit's success to the willingness of its officers to allow enlistees great latitude to organize their work.

Nazis on the Potomac fills a gap in World War II intelligence history by documenting the origins of a number of European Theater intelligence successes thanks to the work of Ft. Hunt interrogators. It demonstrates how good

intelligence arises from patient accumulation and synthesis of information. Sutton also reminds us of the value in selecting the right people for the job and letting them do their thing.

[See also Hayden Peake's brief review of *Nazis on the Potomac* in the Intelligence Officer's Bookshelf.]



The reviewer: Warren Fishbein is a retired CIA analyst, manager, and methodologist.