

Intelligence in Public Media

Writer, Sailor, Soldier, Spy: Ernest Hemingway's Secret Adventures, 1935–1961

Nicholas Reynolds (HarperCollins, 2017), 357 pp., notes, bibliography, photographs, index.

Reviewed by JR Seeger

Nicholas Reynolds's work on Ernest Hemingway offers new insights into one of the most famous American writers of the 20th century. This extensively researched book highlights Hemingway's interest and participation in the major wars of the century and, whereas other books have covered this ground before, Reynolds's is the first to use historical records, declassified intelligence, and personal correspondence to focus on Hemingway's personal and professional links to both the US and the USSR intelligence communities of the mid-20th century. Reynolds makes clear in this book that Hemingway was in periodic contact with the Soviet foreign intelligence service—the NKVD (the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs)—while at the same time in contact with and informally assisting both the US Navy Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) and, following the invasion of France in June 1944, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). The question that Reynolds poses throughout the book is, “Who was in charge of this relationship?” By the time the reader finishes the book, the only reasonable answer is, “Ernest Hemingway was in charge.”

It is easy enough to imagine why the Soviets would want to establish contact with a writer of Hemingway's stature. His works had been published in multiple languages and he was one of the most popular writers of the 1930s. In 1935, Hemingway submitted an article to the leftist journal *New Masses* which was a scathing description of the US government's handling of the Matecumbe Keys catastrophe, following a hurricane landfall in an area that was housing World War I veterans. Reynolds points to Hemingway's experience in assisting in the aftermath of this hurricane as the start point for Hemingway's disenchantment with Depression Era America. It was also the starting point for NKVD interest in Hemingway.

Though on the NKVD radar, it is unlikely that there was a plan to recruit Hemingway, but rather a disposition to take advantage of any opportunities that might present themselves. If that happened, the NKVD—or its

surrogates—would craft a suitable approach, sending the appropriate man or woman to sound him out and find out how far he was willing to go.

In 1937, Hemingway served as both a journalist and a part-time fighter in the Spanish Civil War, on the side of the Republicans. Reynolds outlines the cast of characters who were all part of the same civil war environment, including fighters, writers, polemicists, and political advisors, who were all associated with the communist volunteers fighting for the Spanish Republic. Among this cadre were two close associates of Hemingway—Joris Ivens and Alexander Orlov. Reynolds points out that Ivens was a member of the Communist International (Comintern)^a and Orlov was an established recruiting agent for the NKVD. While in Spain, Hemingway made no secret of his grave disappointment with the US and the UK official position of neutrality while Nazi Germany supported the fascists in Spain. The only Republican lifeline for resources was from the Soviet Union—and from Hemingway's perspective—the only nation-state focused on the fight against fascism. Hemingway used a phrase later in his life to explain this commitment at the time: he called himself a “premature antifascist,” to describe his strong support for the Comintern effort in Spain.

Reynolds describes in detail how Ivens used his access to Hemingway to introduce this well respected American author to Comintern-selected warriors, connecting him to

... the right people: communist fighters. For this purpose, the International Brigades, created and run by the Comintern to fight for the Republic, were made

a. The Communist International, abbreviated as Comintern and also known as the Third International (1919–1943), was an international communist organization that advocated world communism. The International intended to fight “by all available means, including armed force, for the overthrow of the international bourgeoisie and for the creation of an international Soviet republic as a transition stage to the complete abolition of the State.” Source: “Communist International” Wikipedia page, available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communist_International.

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to order. They were filled with tough, colorful, and educated men (as well as a few women) from various countries, including the United States, the kind of people who appealed to Hemingway. (25)

This was the beginning of a multi-year effort, first on the part of the Comintern and then the NKVD to formally recruit Hemingway as what would most accurately be called an “agent of influence.” By 1937, Hemingway was writing articles, stories, a stage play, and even making public speeches that supported both Republican Spain and Soviet assistance to the Republicans. Reynolds offers no evidence Hemingway did this for any reason other than his own commitment to anti-fascism. However, in the summer of 1940, Hemingway was formally pitched to serve the Soviet Union, and that pitch was managed by an established NKVD talent spotter—Jacob Golos. Reynolds’s research effort uncovered a Soviet summary of the recruitment; below, he quotes a key line from the report:

Before he left for China, [Hemingway] was recruited for our work on ideological grounds by [Golos]. (81)

After this recruitment message, all subsequent NKVD reporting used Hemingway’s NKVD issued cryptonym: Argo. We know from available Soviet intelligence records and from declassified intercepts of Soviet cable traffic from the United States that cryptonyms were used almost exclusively for individuals the Soviets believed to be their committed agents.

The most important part of this book follows, as Reynolds takes us through the extensive research effort he used to confirm what he saw as the NKVD claim to have recruited one of America’s greatest writers. Reynolds describes the painstaking effort of wading through Soviet archives that were available in the first few years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. By the end of the chapter entitled “The Secret File,” Reynolds has made a very strong case that the Soviets certainly were convinced their talent spotter and agent handler, Golos, had recruited Hemingway.

It is common for US intelligence officers after a recruitment to point out that their target said “yes,” but it is not entirely clear what “yes” means until the new contact begins to deliver on tasking. Throughout the remaining two-thirds of the book, Reynolds underscores that it is not entirely clear what Hemingway thought he had agreed to and, for that matter, what the Soviets wanted from him.

What is abundantly clear is that they made a critical error in case management: they did not maintain regular contact with their newly recruited agent as he went off on a journalist mission to China. By the time Hemingway returned to the United States and then onward to his residence in Cuba, the United States was at war, and Hemingway had alternative means of satisfying his commitment to fighting fascism.

Reynolds takes us through Hemingway’s war years, focusing on his links first to the US Navy—through the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI)—in Cuba, and then with the Office of Strategic Services in Europe after D-Day. The Cuba episodes underscore both Hemingway’s enthusiasm for adventure and intrigue as well as his regular disregard for chain of command and tasking by the US government. This period in Hemingway’s life also brought him in direct contact and conflict with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in Havana. Cuba had local political intrigues as well as embassy conflicts, and Hemingway seemed drawn to both—perhaps because of his interest as a writer, but more likely because conflict was part of the “essential” Hemingway.

The conflict and intrigue started when Hemingway offered to create an informal “counterintelligence bureau” (which he called “the Crook Factory”) that he directed, to hunt and report on suspicious characters in Havana and throughout Cuba. The Crook Factory ran in a manner more akin to 1930s and early 1940s film noir than any formal effort that might produce results usable by the US government. It was almost as if Hemingway were creating a novel of intrigue in real life. Hemingway’s enthusiasm and charisma charmed the US ambassador and the naval attaché, and they sidestepped any effort on the part of the FBI to claim primacy on spy hunting. This followed a scheme by Hemingway to use his fishing boat, the *Pilar*, to hunt for German submarines in the Caribbean. In the early days of the US entry into war, Hemingway’s suggestions made some sense and were consistent with the overall effort to “just do something.” By late 1943, however, these types of operations were no longer useful and Hemingway moved on to Europe.

In the European theatre of operations (ETO) in 1944, Hemingway found another role in intelligence operations—this time with other “glorious amateurs” from the Office of Strategic Services. The OSS Special Operations and OSS Operational Groups in France focused on

supporting, training, and guiding French resistance forces. Just prior to and after D-Day, this effort included working with the allied commands to synchronize the French resistance operations with the strategic and operational efforts to defeat the German Army in France. Hemingway was initially affiliated as a war correspondent with the 4th Infantry Division and specifically with a brigade commanded by Col. Charles Lanham. Lanham provided Hemingway with a jeep and a driver and gave Hemingway remarkable leeway to travel throughout his area of operations; in fact, Hemingway used this mobility to travel beyond the frontlines. He spent much of the summer of 1944 in French villages between the advancing US forces and the retreating German Army.

Along the way, he picked up some members of the French resistance and, while doing so, he met with OSS colonel David K.E. Bruce and other the French resistance fighters who were under Bruce's responsibility—though not his “command.” Hemingway thrived in this type of battlefield, which was consistent with his experience in the Spanish Civil War. Reynolds focuses much attention on the short period between mid-July 1944 and the liberation of Paris on 24 August 1944. Multiple authors have done the same, since it was during this period of Hemingway's involvement that his role in the war arguably morphed into something complex. Was Hemingway a correspondent, or was he an informal combatant? Did he lead French resistance forces, or was he simply a partner in the effort lead by Bruce? The compilation of Bruce's diaries^a suggests that Hemingway was both correspondent and sometime resistance guide. In her book on the Paris Ritz Hotel entitled *The Hotel on the Place Vendome*, Tilar J. Mazzeo presents an image of Hemingway arriving in Paris as part soldier, part journalist, and a full time violent, sometimes charismatic individual.^b It is hard to know who Hemingway was at any given time.

As Michigan State University journalism professor William Coté writes in an article for *The Hemingway Review*,

Pinning down the truth of the particular claims is elusive, as with many aspects of Hemingway's life. It is

a. *OSS Against the Reich: The World War II Diaries of Colonel David K.E. Bruce*, Nelson D. Lankford, ed. (Kent State University Press, 1991).

b. Tilar J. Mazzeo, *The Hotel on Place Vendome: Life, Death, and Betrayal at the Hotel Ritz in Paris* (Harper, 2014).

necessary to try to sift what he said from the exaggerations and total fabrications that sometimes infused his accounts of his wartime exploits. As in many other activities during his life, he often viewed the war—and the portrayal he sought of his own personal involvement—through a storyteller's eyes.^c

Reynolds spends the last third of the book on the remaining 16 years of Hemingway's life, describing the author's time in Cuba as he watches the Cuban Revolution unfold before his own front door. It was a bittersweet time for Hemingway who was suffering from both physical and mental maladies and difficulty writing commercially successful works of fiction. As Reynolds and other biographers have pointed out, after the publication of *The Old Man and the Sea* (1954) and his winning the Nobel Prize for literature that same year, Hemingway began a downward spiral that would eventually result in his suicide. During that period in America, the revelations of Soviet espionage in America, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) investigations, and Senator Joseph McCarthy's hearings clearly played on Hemingway's mind. Reynolds's research into Hemingway's letters at the time make it clear that he was concerned not only about the accusations concerning his former friends' activities but also about the possibility that he himself might be called to testify.

Hemingway carried an inner and an outer burden. Hemingway was able to tell Lanham and one or two others about his outer burden of “premature antifascism,” but the inner burden of his relationship with the NKVD was known only to himself and the Soviets—he could not share it with anyone else. To make matters worse, Hemingway certainly would have had to worry that there might one day be a defector—another Gouzenko or Bentley—who happened to know his secret, and would share it with the FBI or HUAC. (213)

Reynolds's book belongs on the shelf of anyone interested in Hemingway, the Spanish Civil War, and World War II operations in the ETO. His extensive research establishes him as an excellent historian, and he is a superior storyteller. At another level, Reynolds's book is important to any practitioner of espionage. The book illustrates

c. William E. Cote, “Correspondent or warrior? Hemingway's murky World War II ‘combat’ experience,” *The Hemingway Review*, Vol. 22, No.1 (Fall 2002): 88–104.

several key points in “the trade.” First, it identifies how a man most would argue was a quintessential 20th century American could be recruited to spy for the Soviets. It shows in detail how well the Soviets managed the case during the spotting and assessment phase and how they slowly developed Hemingway for the recruitment pitch. Second, it shows how easy it is for the recruiter to get the target to say “yes,” even when it can remain unclear to either the target or to the recruiter—or to both—what

“yes” means. This part of the story demonstrates precisely how and why the recruitment effort failed. Finally, it emphasizes the importance of maintaining a regular and professional relationship with a target—especially in the first year of the relationship. Hemingway may have said “yes” to the Soviet recruitment pitch, but unless there is some additional trove of material in the NKVD archives that argues otherwise, it is clear Hemingway was never a productive Soviet agent.

