

In the Shadow of the Sphinx: A History of Counterintelligence

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

James L. Gilbert, John P. Finnegan and Ann Bray. Department of the Army: Fort Belvoir 2005. 174 pps., appendix, photos, bibliography.

Reviewed by Michael J. Sulick

In the Shadow of the Sphinx takes its title from the mythical figure epitomizing wisdom and secrecy that became the symbol of army counterintelligence, the subject of James L. Gilbert's monograph. Gilbert traces the colorful history and complex evolution of army counterintelligence from its roots in the American Revolution through World War II, the post-war occupation of Europe, and to the espionage battles of the Cold War. Gilbert draws heavily on previously published sources but includes new material and effectively weaves individual counterintelligence stories and larger strategic issues together into a concise overview. In his preface, Gilbert acknowledges that the monograph relies heavily on the work of John Finnegan, author of *Military Intelligence*, and Ann Bray, the Army major who edited a 30-volume unpublished official history of army counterintelligence. Both are included as coauthors, but Gilbert also wisely decided to supplement their histories in his narrative with photos and personal stories.

The individual stories Gilbert weaves in are among the highlights of this eminently readable history. As one example, in World War II, two *nisei* (second-generation Japanese) agents of the Army Counterintelligence Corps (CIC) went undercover as draft-dodging seamen to collect information on Japanese sabotage plans in the Philippines; one was eventually caught and tortured, but he still managed to slip information to Filipino guerrillas before he eventually escaped. Another intriguing vignette—reminiscent of a romantic spy novel—involved the recruitment of Sybille Delcourt, the mistress of a German spy chief in Belgium, as a CIC double agent, who would compromise hundreds of German agents. In yet another instance, after the war ended, a Bavarian-born CIC captain posed as a Hitler sympathizer and infiltrated a group of would-be saboteurs. While supposedly driving them to an arms cache, he took a detour and delivered the agents directly to CIC headquarters in Munich. These few examples of the two dozen or so similar accounts of individual heroism and professionalism in the book characterized the wide range of CIC accomplishments.

After a brief review of military counterintelligence in the revolutionary and civil war periods, Gilbert explores the development of army intelligence in World War I, which grew from an office of “two officers and two clerks” to become a Military Intelligence Division, which was divided into “Positive” (intelligence collection) and “Negative” (counterintelligence) Branches, the latter name perhaps an inauspicious one to launch the concept of CI in the military. Gilbert focuses most heavily on CIC’s exploits during World War II. Gilbert provides a detailed account of Army counterintelligence operations in every combat theater, from Italy, France, and Germany, in Europe to the Philippines, Burma, and China in the Pacific. Army CIC was at the forefront of every major campaign, and the narrative reflects the vital role it played, among them the capture of German and Japanese spies and saboteurs, seizure and intelligence exploitation of key enemy documents, neutralization of enemy radio transmitters, and arrest of war criminals, such as Gestapo chief Ernst Kaltenbrunner and the “Butcher of Dachau.”

While Gilbert extols Army counterintelligence successes during World War II and the post-war occupation period, he balances the generally laudatory account by underscoring the “devastating critiques” of CIC by the Army Inspector General (IG) and others. As Gilbert notes, IG evaluations gave CIC a “mixed report card,” criticizing the organization for lack of productivity, time-consuming investigations of marginal threats, and aggressively exercising more zeal than judgment. In one comic opera episode recounted in the book, CIC planted a bug in the hotel room of an army sergeant

suspected of communist links, who was also a close friend of Eleanor Roosevelt. At the time, the president's wife happened to be staying in the same hotel. The White House learned to its chagrin that CIC believed the sergeant and Mrs. Roosevelt were involved in a romantic liaison and called for heads to roll when the sergeant's female companion ultimately was identified as his fiancée. During the occupation period, the Army IG assessed one major CIC office in Europe as "bewildered, inept and chaotic," and Gilbert also notes that Army counterintelligence spent disproportionate amounts of time monitoring and reporting on political activities in post-war Japan and Korea (although he adds that this monitoring enabled CIC to discover a communist plan to seize control of the Korean peninsula).

Army counterintelligence also monitored political activities in the United States at various times in its history. Pendulum swings of policy on the controversial subject of counterintelligence activities is a recurring theme in Gilbert's discussion of army CI. During World War I army counterintelligence secretly placed agents among the troops in efforts to sniff out radical activities. In addition, it monitored civilians suspected of opposition to the draft or impeding the production of war materiel. Counterintelligence even relied for assistance in these efforts on the American Protective League, the shadowy union of vigilante groups infamous for its excesses in pursuit of suspected subversives.

After the war, the Army prohibited monitoring of non-military personnel, but the ban was lifted again during the Depression. In a move that would undoubtedly be controversial by today's standards, counterintelligence agents were dispatched to investigate potential unrest that might be fomented by the "Bonus Army," veterans petitioning Congress for increased pensions. An interagency agreement eventually removed the Army from the domestic counterintelligence job but, in yet another swing of the pendulum, CIC was tasked again by the Army staff to monitor anti-war protests in the Vietnam era. Counterintelligence agents infiltrated protesters during the anti-war march on Washington and resumed collection on a dramatic scale against internal subversion, using, as Gilbert notes, a "vacuum cleaner" approach to gathering information on citizens affiliated with churches, universities, and groups opposed to the Vietnam War. According to Gilbert's candid commentary, CIC often expended resources for marginal information, and its personnel even joked among themselves that there were more agents than activists at anti-war rallies. Following Senate hearings on violations of civil liberties in 1971, the Army suspended its counter-subversive activities. Gilbert's detailed analysis of

this theme provides compelling historical lessons for the impassioned post-9/11 debate over the role of the military in counterterrorist activities on American soil.

Besides monitoring domestic subversion, throughout its history, Army counterintelligence performed tasks beyond its immediate counterespionage and countersubversion missions that Gilbert reviews in the narrative. As Japan retreated from its Asian conquests during World War II, CIC agents, because of their linguistic capabilities and immersion in local cultures, were called on to support civic action projects by recruiting native labor to rebuild destroyed roads and bridges and distribute food and medical supplies. In another instance, a CIC agent who resembled Franklin D. Roosevelt posed as his double during the Tehran Conference with Churchill and Stalin.

The mission that Gilbert portrays best is the Army CIC role as an intelligence collector. The line between counterintelligence information and positive intelligence is often blurred, and counterintelligence can yield nuggets of interest to a policymaker or military commander. Gilbert provides several striking examples of Army CIC agents' contribution to the overall intelligence mission, whether capturing codes for the U.S. Navy to entrap German U-boats in World War II or acquiring intelligence on North Korea from refugees during the Korean conflict.

In spite of these successes, the development of Army counterintelligence was frequently hindered by internal obstacles. Gilbert traces the evolution of Army counterintelligence against a backdrop of resistance and distrust that often plagues practitioners of the craft, by necessity “black-hatters” bearing news unwelcome to recipients. Gilbert notes that “tradition-minded officers disliked the business of counterintelligence” and field commanders often failed to appreciate the necessity, or the contributions, of CIC. He particularly emphasizes the rivalry and turf squabbles between intelligence collectors and counterintelligence agents that plagued the overall military intelligence effort at the start of the Cold War, until both sides were eventually unified into INSCOM, the Army Intelligence and Security Command.

In the Shadow of the Sphinx is not only an overview of army counterintelligence but a study of an organization that consistently managed to overcome these prejudices through concrete achievements and evolved into an integral element of army combat operations. The US Army command alternated between dismantling army counterintelligence

and reviving it. Gilbert traces in detail the evolution of army counterintelligence through seven major reorganizations since World War II. In Gilbert's commentary on each of these reorganizations, the reader must at times plow through a dizzying litany of changing unit designations, acronyms, and restructuring measures that may only be of interest to the military historian. Still, the narrative captures the difficult development of a military counterintelligence capability. Gilbert describes the book as an “overview linking fragments” of army counterintelligence history. However, his stories of the prowess and courage of individual agents and his frank assessment of Army counterintelligence flaws, its problematic role in the domestic subversion arena, and difficult evolution into an accepted part of the Army mission all make *In the Shadow of the Sphinx* a compelling story for historians, intelligence and counterintelligence professionals, and general readers who simply like good spy yarns.

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