

Spying Through a Glass Darkly: American Espionage Against the Soviet Union, 1945–1946

David Alvarez and Eduard Mark (University of Kansas Press, 2016), 344 pp., notes, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by John Ehrman

It seems to be common knowledge that the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) was abolished only weeks after the end of World War II and that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was established in the fall of 1947. The story of US espionage operations during the two years in between is a virtual black hole, however, barely mentioned in histories of intelligence. To fill this gap, and especially to understand how human intelligence (HUMINT) reporting informed policymaking during the critical early days of the Cold War, is the goal of intelligence historians David Alvarez's and Eduard Mark's new history, *Spying Through a Glass Darkly*. The result is an interesting and informative book—if at times slow going—that helps flesh out our understanding of US intelligence collection at the dawn of the Cold War.

For the United States, the end of World War II brought a rush to demobilize. This meant not only scaling back the US military machine and returning millions of draftees to their civilian lives but, as Alvarez and Mark show, also dismantling the global intelligence apparatus that had been built during the war. When the OSS was abolished in September 1945, the War Department took in the former service's espionage function, now renamed the Strategic Services Unit (SSU), and operated it until October 1946. (In October 1946, the SSU became the Office of Special Operations, within the Central Intelligence Group.) For the first half of that year, as Alvarez and Mark document in detail, the SSU spent much of its time simply trying to sort out its structure and missions under the difficult bureaucratic circumstances of declining resources and interagency rivalries.

At the start of their account, Alvarez and Mark describe how unexpected developments drove the SSU's collection priorities in directions few had foreseen. Immediately after the German surrender, the major intelligence target was not the Soviet Union, which many in Washington—including such high-ranking intelligence officials as OSS Director William Donovan—believed would remain if not a US ally then at least not an active threat. Instead,

HUMINT operations concentrated on guarding against resurgent fascism in Germany and Italy, rounding up Nazis and war criminals, and collecting on other allies, such as the French. Only gradually, as Soviet overt actions and the first reporting on Moscow's covert moves made it clear that Stalin was consolidating his control over Soviet-occupied lands and violating his agreements regarding the postwar order, did the focus of collection shift toward the Soviet Union.

Spying Through a Glass Darkly is at its best in describing the development of the resulting espionage operations. After reviewing the ascent of the Soviets to the top of the collection priorities, Alvarez and Mark shift to a geographic approach and describe operations in Germany, Austria, Eastern Europe, and then France and Italy. In each, the broad story was the same: a period immediately after the end of the war during which HUMINT capabilities largely collapsed, followed by a time of confusion and incompetence as inexperienced officers—or, in Germany, officers corrupted and distracted by black marketing—tried to undertake operations with only minimal guidance from Washington, and, with painful lessons learned and more competent officers starting to distinguish themselves, the start of effective operations against the Russians. Separately, as Alvarez and Mark further detail, the SSU relied heavily on close liaison relations with European services for much of the reporting it passed to Washington.

Filling in the details of these operations allows Alvarez and Mark to tell some good spy stories. Some are cautionary tales of inexperienced or naïve US intelligence officers falling into classic traps. Reprising the Trust operation of the 1920s, for example, in Germany the Soviets sent agents to the SSU who claimed to represent resistance networks in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union itself, and thus were able to deceive the Americans with bogus reporting and also gradually uncover US networks. Other cases brought important successes, however. One of the first involved Leo Skrzypczynski, a member of the

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wartime communist espionage rings in Germany who was arrested and survived a concentration camp and became a high-level economic planning official in the Soviet zone. By the spring of 1946, he had become disillusioned with the Soviets and began passing information to the SSU, providing an “excellent window on industrial and economic conditions and policies” in Eastern Germany. (102)

Alvarez and Marks also provide a nuanced and overall positive view of James Angleton’s operations in Italy, where he worked closely with the Italian services while at the same time recruiting assets within them to ensure that he did not become dependent on Rome’s views. Angleton, moreover, directed operations in Albania, Hungary, and Yugoslavia that resulted in recruitments that, while small in number, brought good information. His work, Alvarez and Mark conclude, was “probably the equal of any American intelligence station in early postwar Europe.” (267)

Alvarez and Mark tell their story in a well-organized and detailed package that reflects extensive archival research. They are careful, too, not to go beyond their documents, noting when materials remain classified and therefore prevent them from telling a complete story. The only serious weak point of the book is that it could have been more carefully edited. Alvarez and Mark have an un-

fortunate tendency toward page-long paragraphs in which the reader can at times become lost, and their recitations of the litany of the SSU’s administrative and resource woes occasionally become repetitive. These are minor issues, however, that detract only a little from the overall high quality of the work.

Alvarez and Mark conclude that, given the constraints under which the SSU operated, it “performed fairly well” in that it provided customers with “timely and accurate information . . . not available from other sources.” (274) This is certainly a supportable judgment, given the wealth of detail upon which Alvarez and Mark base it. Still, the SSU’s problems and foul-ups leave the reader wondering if this conclusion might be a tad too generous, especially when its performance in Europe is compared to the unit’s operations in Asia.^a A more accurate conclusion might be that the SSU, in its year of operations, gained important experience that did much to lay the foundations for greater US intelligence successes later on.

a. For an example of SSU’s work in Asia, see William J. Rust, “Operation Iceberg—Transitioning into CIA: The Strategic Services Unit in Indonesia” in *Studies in Intelligence* 60, no. 1 (March 2016), available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol-60-no-1/operation-iceberg.html>.

