

Destination Casablanca: Exile, Espionage, and the Battle for North Africa in World War II

Meredith Hindley (Public Affairs, 2017), 491 pp., notes, bibliography, index, photographs.

Reviewed by Clayton Laurie

In *Destination Casablanca*, Meredith Hindley has produced something rare, a non-fiction book that can serve as a vital companion piece to a classic fiction movie—in this case, the Ingrid Bergman, Humphrey Bogart film of 1942, *Casablanca*. The book will enhance any viewer's knowledge and understanding of the film and of history, and it will provide the modern-day intelligence officer with operational insights into tradecraft of 75 years ago that remain valid today.

Doubtless, many have asked when viewing *Casablanca*, as Hindley did, “What is going on at Rick's *Cafe Americain*? What are letters of transit? Why so many refugees in Casablanca? What became of them, what lay behind the complex American-German-French relationships in North Africa, and how did they evolve and conclude? Are these events real?” This well written, readable, and thoroughly researched history answers all. Dr. Hindley has conducted exhaustive research in archival and published sources, accomplishing what so many historians seek but so often find difficult to achieve—producing a scholarly history with broad popular appeal. In addition to her historical work, Dr. Hindley writes for the National Endowment for the Humanities, the *New York Times*, *Salon*, and *Christian Science Monitor*.

In the opening chapters, in what may seem overly long to those seeking a quick account of wartime intelligence and military activities, Dr. Hindley provides a travelogue-like description of the history of Casablanca and Morocco. Established as a French protectorate in the early 20th century, Morocco and its premier city, Casablanca (literally “white houses”—as those approaching from the sea described the skyline), developed into a bustling and dynamic economic powerhouse as the only major Atlantic port in Northwest Africa. In a seemingly idyllic setting that US Army Maj. Gen. George S. Patton later described as “a city which combines Hollywood and the Bible,” (326) Jews, Moslems, and Christians, traders, businessmen, and entrepreneurs, foreigners and North Africans intermingle in Casablanca's cosmopolitan old and new towns.

Events in Europe seemed far away until war erupted in 1939. What had been a trickle of refugees fleeing the Nazis became a flood in June 1940 with the fall of France. The establishment of the collaborationist Vichy French regime under Marshall Henri Petain significantly complicated matters as the defeated and much-weakened yet proud rump nation struggled to protect colonial holdings in Africa and Southeast Asia. The influx of tens of thousands of refugees, swelled the pre-war Casablanca population of 350,000 with men, women, and children of all means, ages, and nationalities, including Jews, escaped soldiers, and anti-Nazi resisters—all in need of safe haven, food, housing, and support while seeking letters of transit out of Morocco, first to Lisbon, and then the Americas.

Restrictive immigration policies of the day, however, required refugees to have sponsors in receiving nations before issuance of visas or even letters of transit (hence the value of blank letters of transit in the film). Foreign consulates in Morocco remained lightly staffed, sponsoring groups and individuals were only then organizing, and wait times could last months or years without any guarantee of success. Thousands languished in desert refugee camps impatiently awaiting relief or in overcrowded dwellings in the city. French officials sought to maintain order and stability to avoid giving the Nazis any pretext for establishing a military foothold, a frequent demand from Berlin deftly ignored in both Vichy and North Africa. The Nazis were present, however, in black uniforms and civilian clothes as part of an Armistice Commission meant to insure French compliance with surrender terms, but also as a cover for Gestapo agents seeking to intimidate or apprehend anti-Nazi refugees or reveal nascent resistance groups. The *Casablanca* movie scene of dueling anthems where those passionately singing “La Marseille” win out demonstrates how Frenchmen, anxious refugees, Nazis, and neutral Americans existed daily in wary and begrudging proximity.

Complicating the humanitarian crisis, wartime disruptions of trade and Nazi expropriations of European

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resources, especially food, meant that famine soon threatened French North Africa. The United States maintained diplomatic relations with Vichy through Charge d' Affairs Robert D. Murphy and promised food assistance in the Weygand-Murphy Agreement of March 1941. The only caveat was that a handful of State Department officials, soon known as "Murphy's 12 Apostles," would travel to Morocco to insure that the aid arrived, that it stayed in North Africa, and that it remained out of Nazi hands. Col. William Eddy of William J. Donovan's Office of the Coordinator of Information (predecessor to the Office of Strategic Services) soon joined the Apostles, and in 1942 with a growing OSS team, took control of the entire network.

Together they supervised relief efforts but more important was that they functioned as an intelligence organization. Free to roam the country, although often tailed by German and Vichy agents, they recorded arrivals and departures of Allied, Axis, and neutral warships and commercial shipping, inventoried port facilities and military fortifications, compiled order-of-battle statistics, and observed logistical and communications systems and power grids, while also tracking movements of Vichy and German officials. Further, they identified and contacted anti-Vichy and anti-Nazi resistance groups, began caching arms, and dutifully reported all to the State and War Departments.

As the author shows, this timely intelligence figured into Anglo-American war planning then under way. Although he had been pressed by Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin to open a front against the Germans in the West, President Roosevelt sided with the Brits, who preferred a southern front, decided that on a North African invasion (Operation TORCH). Animosity between the French and the British, stemming from the Royal Navy's devastating surprise attack on the French fleet anchorage at Mers-el-Kebir in July 1940, led to US domination of the landing forces.

Secret US efforts to solicit local Vichy cooperation or non-resistance failed before the TORCH landings commenced in Oran, Algiers, and at three locations in Morocco, including Casablanca, on 8 November 1942. Vichy forces resisted, killing over 500 Americans. US naval, air,

and ground units responded ferociously with overwhelming firepower, killing and wounding some 3,400 Frenchmen. Within days, the commander of French Forces in North Africa, Adm. Jean Darlan, agreed to a ceasefire as Anglo-American forces quickly established a foothold and began to engage German and Italian forces in Tunisia.

The author's final chapters treat the high-level Anglo-American military, diplomatic, and political events of the 16–21 January 1943 Casablanca Conference attended by Prime Minister Churchill, President Roosevelt, and their top military leaders. Underlying the summit was the nagging question of French leadership as the Nazis had occupied mainland Vichy, North African Vichy leaders had lost legitimacy and credibility (as Casablanca Police Inspector Renault commented to Rick, his loyalties "blow with the wind . . . And the prevailing wind happens to be from Vichy," (426), and Frenchmen everywhere remained divided between followers of Petain, Gen. Henri Giraud, and the upstart Free French leader Charles de Gaulle. While Roosevelt and Churchill left the matter unresolved, more and more Frenchmen began to rally to de Gaulle as the only leader unsullied by collaboration, treachery, or defeat.

In closing, the author describes the history behind the movie *Casablanca* and its impact. Scheduled for release in early 1943, producers accelerated filming to premier in mid-November 1942 to coincide with the TORCH landings. The film had entertainment value surely, but also the intent to provide the American public with some needed reassurance and pro-Allied propaganda at a time when the Axis powers appeared nearly invincible and had only begun to suffer significant military setbacks. The film raised morale and provided hope and optimism that humanity and goodness, through self-sacrifice and selflessness (as in Rick's giving up the letters of transit to his true love Ilsa and her husband Lazslo), would ultimately triumph over brutality, darkness, and evil. Although not entirely factual as the author notes, and "even with the discrepancies, the core of the film's story holds true. The morality play that unfolds perfectly captures the real choices that real people faced in Casablanca." (426)



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