

Intelligence in Public Media

Cover Name: Dr. Rantzau

Nikolaus Ritter, trans. and edited by Katharine R. Wallace (University Press of Kentucky, 2019), 264 pp., foreword, preface, bibliography, notes, index.

Reviewed by Ryan Shaffer

This is the memoir of Nikolaus Ritter (1899–1974), chief of air intelligence for Nazi Germany’s military intelligence service, Abwehr. Originally published in German in 1972, this is the book’s first appearance in English. It was translated and edited by Katharine Wallace, Ritter’s American-born daughter. The foreword is a synopsis of Ritter’s life and an overview of intelligence during the period of Ritter’s service written by historian Mary Kathryn Barbier. We learn, surprisingly, that the original manuscript was written in English with American author Beth Day, but the original apparently found no English-language publisher, so it was translated and published in Germany. Wallace was unable to locate the English manuscript, so she translated the German edition and added comments throughout, providing real names of agents and historical background. The real value of the book is its rich detailing of Ritter’s work in recruiting agents, through bribery or ideological loyalty, to collect scientific or tactical material in aid of Nazi Germany. Ritter also discusses the tradecraft intelligence officers used while posing as international businessmen and making contact with agents through third parties.

The book’s 25 chapters are chronologically ordered and culminate with Ritter’s arrest, interrogation and imprisonment by the Allies. Ritter begins his introduction by describing a visit to the United States in 1937, soon after he was hired by the Abwehr to collect intelligence on the United States and the United Kingdom. He was selected for the job because of his knowledge of the United States and mastery of English; he had lived in the country from 1924 to 1935, marrying in 1926 and having two children before moving back to Germany, disillusioned with the state of the US economy in depression. Ritter explains that he was reluctant to write a book, but after finding out that all the names of his agents and records were publicly available in the US National Archives, “there were no reasons to keep secrets” anymore. (3) He writes that the people who worked for him “were not Hollywood heroes, but rather human beings of flesh and blood, with much courage, selfless commitment, and great idealism. But there were also issues of greed, foolishness, and treason.” (4)

Ritter details how he recruited agents, starting with Arthur Owens, codenamed Johnny, who was an electrical engineer in England.^a Ritter contacted Owens through the mail under the guise of importing batteries, which created a cover for Owens to travel to Hamburg. Ritter used numerous cover names other than Dr. Rantzau when making contact with such agents. Other agents who worked at US diplomatic missions were recruited through contacts in other countries, where they had access to non-public information or could provide passports and shipping documents. By the time war broke out, Ritter explained, “My section was the only one in all of Intelligence I Air that had a secret transmitter in Britain,” and it was used to provide intelligence about British radar stations. (108) As the war progressed, the two met in Spain and Ritter suspected that Johnny was by then working for British intelligence or he would not have been able to leave the country, which Ritter claimed Johnny confirmed.

Ritter often posed as a textile merchant, a job he had held in New York City, and had four phones in his German office: three for business contacts, each associated with a specific company name. The networks he launched used a variety of people from those in private business who had access to blueprints for military equipment to cleaning personnel with access to an American ambassador’s office where he “had the habit of throwing his notes and other papers in the wastebasket by simply crumpling them up instead of destroying them.” (19) He also describes the internal structure and issues of the Abwehr and provides insight into Admiral Canaris, head of the service, who “radiated a striking air of calm.” (13)

In 1937, Ritter was given the task of acquiring intelligence related to the US Army Air Corp armament industry. He built a network of assets using false names in different locations, but his most notable collection achievement was acquisition of designs for the Norden Company’s bombsight; these he sent back to Germany in

a. For more on Owens, see: Nigel West and Madoc Roberts, *Snow: The Double Life of a World War II Spy* (Biteback Publishing, 2011).

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newspapers. Analysts in Berlin declared the blueprints to be “completely worthless,” but Ritter refused to believe this since his source had not accept payment and provided them to help Germany. (78) Ritter took the unusual step of showing them to an expert, who declared they were legitimate, and the bombsight “was quickly built for assembly line production,” while “Americans were still in the experimental stage.” (82) In addition, a German at an American company that made gyrocompasses provided technical designs for the Sperry Gyroscope.

Ritter also helped train two men to parachute as agents into England. Each was given proper British identification and ration cards. One was immediately caught in a tree during landing. Ritter wrote that he reluctantly had Johnny help, but found out after the war that Johnny met the person “accompanied by two men from the British Security Service” and that the man was imprisoned for the rest of the war. (154) The other man landed safely and subsequently provided reports about weather, airfields, and aircraft, among other things.

Ritter also describes his mission in Africa, which included helping two informants get behind the Egyptian-British front. He was on board an aircraft, which crashed and the men survived on a rubber raft with just “a small pouch of ship zwieback plus a half-liter bottle of cognac.” (188) Eventually, they were rescued by a local man, and both agents arrived at their intended location and “were able to establish contact with the Egyptian Revolutionary Committee. Their contact man was Anwar el-Sadat.” (191) Meanwhile, Ritter was discharged from a military hospital in July 1941, and by the fall news broke that dozens of German spies were arrested in the United States. He learned that one of his assets had been turned by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and exposed the entire spy ring. Therefore, Ritter “could no longer work in the United States” and subsequently served in military operations in Italy and Germany until his capture. (195)

At the end of the war, he fled through US and British lines to Hamburg where a British officer arrested and interrogated him about his informants and travel. He was released from prison in August 1946. Remarried after his American wife divorced him, his German wife worked as a notary, and Ritter became “self-employed” and connect-

ed with “various import and export firms.” (209) In the years that followed, he met some of his former contacts and learned the fate of others. Of Johnny in particular, he writes “there is no further doubt that Johnny was a master spy.” (213) Ritter concludes the book by discussing the vital importance of intelligence and the people involved. He explains, “True informants are those who place themselves at the state’s disposal out of idealism or out of a patriotic sense of duty. Among all volunteers, they have drawn the heaviest lot because they are almost always lone wolves—often in a losing battle.” (218)

This book is a valuable primary source, offering insight into a German intelligence officer’s activities before and during the WWII. Historians have for decades, cited the German-language version of this autobiography. Now this translation makes it accessible to new readers interested in German intelligence history. However, there are notable omissions and questions about Ritter’s accuracy in describing the involvement of his assets in counterintelligence and deception operations. For example, former CIA historian Benjamin Fischer described Ritter “as hapless in the field” and “behind his desk in Hamburg,” but he also noted it was unclear what, if anything, Ritter knew about Britain’s double-cross system under the Twenty, or XX, Committee that turned Nazi agents, because it was not mentioned in the book.^a In addition, in her preface Wallace writes that Ritter “damaged” her family. In the foreword Barbier explains that Ritter’s first wife, Aurora, and their two children were essentially abandoned during Ritter’s frequent disappearances, leading to the divorce and an attempt to leave the country with the children. However, “the Gestapo abducted the children and wanted their mother to leave for America without them.” (xii) These interesting details are missing from the memoir itself, but they have been published in another book by Wallace written under her maiden name, K.F. Ritter.^b Nonetheless, historians will find rich detail about Nazi Germany’s intelligence work and tradecraft in this book.

a. Benjamin Fischer, “A.k.a. ‘Dr. Rantzau’: The Enigma of Major Nikolaus Ritter,” *Center for the Study of Intelligence Bulletin* no. 11, Summer 2000. Online at <https://web.archive.org/web/20070214054501/http://www.cia.gov/csi/bulletin/csi11.html>

b. K.F. Ritter, *Aurora: An Alabama school teacher in Germany struggles to keep her children during WWII after she discovers her husband is a German spy* (Xlibris, 2006).



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