

Espionage and Covert Operations: A Global History—An Audio Course

Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius. (Chantilly, VA: The Great Courses, 2011) 12 CDs, 12 hours.

Reviewed by Nicholas Dujmovic

As countless commuters know, hours of unproductive time in cars can be transformed into learning experiences with interesting material on audio CDs, iPods, or other devices. The CIA Library has done the Agency's workforce a great service by providing a multitude of audiobooks and courses on a wide range of subjects. But what has been missing—because it hasn't been available commercially—is an audiocourse on intelligence. For many years, The Great Courses, a Virginia-based enterprise formerly named The Teaching Company, has offered recordings on a wide variety of subjects in the sciences and the humanities. In history, the courses, often taught by giants in the field, cover the gamut from ancient civilizations to the rise of modern terrorism. But only recently has The Great Courses produced a history of intelligence. *Espionage and Covert Operations: A Global History* is the first commercially available course that I've seen on the world of intelligence. It is a first, I'd say wobbly, step in the right direction, and one hopes it has set the stage for better in the near future.

The course teacher, Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, is a professor at the University of Tennessee. He has an academic background in European history, particularly in diplomacy and war, which he teaches on four other sets of audiocourses prepared by The Great Courses. Liulevicius, whose resume includes an impressive list of published works on 20th century European history, is engaging and often witty, with impressive knowledge of the historical and cultural backdrop to the episodes he describes. This knowledge is used to good effect, making the course valuable for intelli-

gence officers wishing to better understand the historical context of their profession. In this respect, the breadth of *Espionage and Covert Operations* is impressive, covering in its 24 lectures spying and operations throughout human history, from ancient Mesopotamia through today's era of terrorism, cyber war, and Wikileaks. In addition—and this is an especially useful aspect of the course—Liulevicius discusses how spies and spying have been perceived in terms of spy scares, cultural attitudes, and spy fiction during various periods.

On the downside, Liulevicius evidently has researched the subject of intelligence, but he lacks experience and significant academic background in the field. It shows in the course's lack of depth, impersonal approach, and lack of systematic arrangement—weaknesses professional intelligence officers will recognize immediately and have to accept if they are to continue the 12 hours of instruction. For example, Liulevicius's first lecture is an overview of terms that, while marginally acceptable for a general audience, will rightly be seen as flawed by knowledgeable professionals. His bifurcation of intelligence collection into HUMINT and SIGINT is oversimplified and unaccountably ignores IMINT, which he does cover later in the course. Analysis is not even mentioned up front as an intelligence matter, as if what is gathered immediately makes sense and is useful to political authorities. Still, he covers prominent analytic issues later. (One senses that the course was cobbled together on the fly and without a full conceptualization of what was to follow.)

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On basic terminology, Liulevicius seems an eager but not very precise beginner, guilty of many of the same terminological gaffes evident in journalism and popular stories about intelligence. CIA officers are not “agents,” and Aldrich Ames and Robert Hanssen were not “double agents.” A “walk-in” is inexplicably termed a “covert operator.” He is not, at least not when he walks in to offer services.

He labels the use of Navajo code talkers during World War II “an intelligence success” when it was really an innovative and effective communications security measure. Herbert Yardley, the early 20th century US cryptographer, was no “whistle blower”—he was a self-promoting publicity hound. A “fifth column” is not a “Trojan Horse.”

Liulevicius also seems shaky or inconsistent in relating basic concepts. He defines “covert operations” as “secret action” by governments to achieve some result, presumably an action with a connection to intelligence, but this is frequently not the case. Liulevicius categorically overreaches, calling the stealing by Venetian merchants of St. Mark’s relics from Alexandria in the 8th century a “covert operation.” Likewise earning the “covert” label are the passage of a ship manned by escaping slaves from Charleston harbor during the Civil War, the operation of the Underground Railroad, the bomb plot against Hitler, or, most bizarrely, the Holocaust. It would have helped if Liulevicius had sorted out the differences among “covert,” “clandestine,” and “secret” ahead of time. Liulevicius is very good in addressing the historical theme of intelligence in the service of internal repression, but mentioning the Nazi and Soviet secret police in the same breath as the McCarthy era in the United States is breathtakingly inappropriate.

Arguably one can ignore these quibbles and focus on Liulevicius’s strength, which is his enthusiasm for telling stories that demonstrate the ubiquitous nature of espionage and, yes, “covert operations” throughout history. By the end of the first half of the course the lis-

tener has learned something about the Russian secret police, from Ivan the Terrible’s *oprichniki* to Lenin’s Cheka; about the continental intrigues of France’s Cardinal Richelieu and Prussia’s Wilhelm Stieber; about the American intelligence legacy of the Revolutionary and Civil wars; and about much else. Specialists will never be happy with the lack of depth on any particular subject, but overall this is an impressive achievement.

The course’s second half, however, will disappoint listeners knowledgeable about CIA history, and it may mislead those without a fair background in that Agency’s story. In the context of world history, beginning a breezy and shallow treatment of CIA on the ninth of a dozen discs probably is unavoidable. Some of the faults in this portion of the lecture series could easily have been rectified. These especially include the lack of coverage of the development of US intelligence in the period between the end of the OSS and the establishment of the CIA, and the muddled discourse, riddled with omissions and errors, on aspects of CIA history—e.g., the origins of covert action, Cold War covert influence campaigns, the U-2 program, and the Ames and Hanssen cases. Most galling, Liulevicius repeats the canard—disproven by the record and by recent scholarship—that the decline and fall of the Soviet Union came as a surprise and therefore represented a “massive intelligence failure” on the part of the CIA and other Western intelligence services.

In sum, this audiocourse is a good, pioneering effort—a B minus in my judgment—that I hope will spark in listeners a greater appreciation for and an interest in the role of intelligence in human history. I also thank Liulevicius for citing the Web site of the Center for the Study of Intelligence (CSI) as an online resource, but I urge him to use CSI materials and the rest of his good course bibliography to increase his familiarity with this subject.

