

Critical Analysis of German Operational Intelligence Part II

Sources of Intelligence

The study of sources and types of intelligence available to the Germans shows clearly how the inherent weaknesses of their intelligence system extended to their detailed work. The insufficient importance they attributed to intelligence meant that all its branches suffered from shortage of personnel and equipment; and, although in some fields there was an approach to German thoroughness, in the main the lack of attention to detail was surprising.

The interrogation of prisoners of war, which they regarded as one of their most fruitful sources of information, is a good example. In the beginning of the war, their need for detailed and comprehensive interrogation was small; but even later, a standard OKH questionnaire was still being used and at no time was much initiative shown on the part of interrogators. Only later, in the Russian campaign, did it become obvious to the Germans that their system was not nearly flexible enough and that more individual attention had to be paid to the problem of exhaustive interrogations. Even so, it seems clear that Allied interrogation methods, employing more and better interrogators and producing competent work at all levels down to battalion, were probably far superior to anything the Germans ever knew.

The same holds true for work on captured documents. The Germans realized the value of document

work, and many German field orders stress the importance of the capture, preservation, and quick evaluation of enemy documents; but they paid scant attention to adequate training of personnel, and no outstanding work seems to have been done. During the second half of the war, the amount of captured documents in German hands decreased, owing to the nature of their defensive warfare, and the opportunity for good document work became fewer.

That the Germans were capable of good detailed work is shown by their practice in the Internment Center for Captured Air Force Personnel at Oberursel, where all Allied air crews were first interrogated. The German specialists here realized the value of combined document and interrogation work, and devised an excellent system of analysis. In order to identify the units of their prisoners — a matter of the highest importance to the Germans so as to analyze the steadily increasing size of Allied air fleets — they went so far as keeping card files on the types of ration cards issued to the Americans, or the type of photographs used for their identification papers, etc. Generally speaking, so exhaustive a study was unknown in the Army.

A major contributory cause of the weakness of German intelligence was their loss, toward the end of the war of an important source of intelligence — air reconnaissance. The failure of the German Air Force to stay in the air during the last two years of the war, meant an almost paralyzing loss of eye-sight to the German Army. The Germans expended much ingenuity in the development of other sources of intelligence, but for the long-range exploration of enemy intentions,

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the loss of air reconnaissance, both visual and photographic, remained a severe handicap. There was practically no air reconnaissance over England prior to D-day, with great consequent advantages to the Allies at a time when their preparations and concentrations could hardly have been concealed from the air.

This failure was a purely physical one, for the early campaigns of the war, when the Germans had air superiority, showed that they fully realized the value of serial photographs as a source of intelligence in the planning of tactical operations. In the planning of the campaign in France, the field echelons were given aerial photographs of the Maginot Line, both verticals and obliques, in sufficient quantities for distribution down to companies. This undoubtedly helped their successful campaign against the line.

As the war progressed, there was a definite shift of emphasis in photographic interpretation from tactical to strategic considerations, i.e., to photographic reconnaissance and interpretation of enemy air forces, air fields (France), enemy navies, ports and shipments (England), air fields and landing places for parachute troops (Crete), roads and supply routes (Russia). Until late 1942, photographic reconnaissance planes remained under the commander of the air support (*Koluft*), the officer who was responsible for supplying photographic coverage to field units. After 1942, such available planes were taken over by the Air Force and, though theoretically they were to function as previously, flight missions for photographic reconnaissance were no longer automatic but had to be requested.

Not only did the quantity of necessary photographic missions decrease, but the quality of photographic reconnaissance also deteriorated rapidly when Allied air strength forced photographic reconnaissance planes to be equipped to fight and to be flown by men who were primarily fighter pilots.

Along with the reorganization, useful experiments which were in progress ceased altogether. Developments in night photography, so important in Russia, infra-red photography, and penetration of non-transparent intermediaries were either curtailed or stopped altogether. Technically trained civilian personnel (e.g., from the *Hansa Luftbild Company*) were absorbed elsewhere, and there was no one left who had either the technical knowledge or the energy to pursue further developments in this field. Because of lack of supervision, the entire field of photogrammetry, with the exception of rectification, was ignored. Finally, there was no coordinating authority, nor anyone of sufficiently high rank to sponsor air photographs at higher headquarters. Such were the conditions on the higher levels. It must be emphasized that, fundamentally,

the entire subject of photographic intelligence was left in the hands of Air Force personnel. This meant that the air liaison officer and his staff not only arranged for the flying of the missions, but were responsible for the developing, interpretation, and reproduction of photographs as requested by the Army G-2, with whom the air liaison worked closely. The implication of this must be immediately apparent, for such cooperation presented the problem of training Air Force personnel in interpretation for use in ground force operations.

That this was realized can be established by the existence of a photographic intelligence school located at Hildesheim. Significant is the fact that emphasis was laid on studying photography, the technique of air photography, and the handling of cameras; interpretation was taught to a limited extent. It was only in the officers' course that the subject of enemy Army organization and tactics were stressed. Though advanced courses were offered, specialists were developed only through actual experience, and more in the various practical aspects of photographic reconnaissance than in interpretation itself.

Over-all policy and direction for the training of interpreters were lacking. Although there were other schools of limited duration instituted by the higher air echelons of the various theaters, the need for courses in ground tactics, enemy Army organization, etc., was never fully realized.

With this thought in mind, the limitations of photographic interpreters attached to army (the lowest level at which interpretation was carried out) must be realized. The tactical problems of one division, the need for minute study and interpretation of its sector as seen from verticals (scale 1:10,000), obliques, and from semi-oblique stereographic pairs, could not be taken care of at army.

To illustrate this important point, let us consider the problem of a division. Since a mission could be flown by neither division nor corps, the request was passed on through the chief intelligence officer at army, who stated his request to the air intelligence officer indicating the limits by coordinates. The latter prepared the mission and coordinated it with the reconnaissance section which carried it out. The interpretation was done by the photographic reproduction section (*Stabia*), which returned the interpreted photographs with annotations to the air intelligence officer responsible for their sorting, filing, and distribution. Through intelligence channels, four or five copies were forwarded to the division in question which distributed the photographs to the various commands. Interpretation at army obviously could not be so efficient as at

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the division concerned, where so much more was known of the terrain and the local problems; and it was often necessary to refer back a questionable interpretation to the photographic reproduction section at army (*Stabia*) to clear it up. Systematic and continuous coverage, so necessary for a proper interpretation, was seldom possible, in view of the many limitations, as well as the lengthy front of an army and, correspondingly, the sector of a division.

On the eastern front, the Germans attributed the shortcomings of their photographic intelligence to the skillful camouflage of the Russians, their excellent road discipline, and their ability to transport great numbers of troops at night. Perhaps a more accurate explanation was the lack of planes and equipment in the German Army, their poor technique, and the inadequacy of their personnel, both in quantity and training. Finally, there was a lack of supervision and control in the filling of the requirements of ground force field echelons when the interpretation was done by Air Force personnel. Technically, German air reconnaissance, as long as it could be practiced, was sound; interpretation, even in the first two campaigns of the war, was never really well-developed or organized.

The loss of air reconnaissance was an incentive to the Germans to develop their methods of radio intercept work, and signal intelligence later became important on all fronts. In the West, it accounted for approximately 60 per cent of all intelligence received.

With the development of signal intercept, although it made no essential difference to the attitude of the General Staff, there could be found the beginnings of a higher prestige for intelligence work. Good intercept work, producing, as it did, almost 90 per cent reliable information, was invaluable for helping the intelligence officer to sell himself; and the efforts expanded by the Germans in this field, in training specialists and equipping field units with intercept teams, reflect the greater value they attached to it.

It is true to say that this was the only field of intelligence in which the Germans came near to an adequate personnel and technical solution. They trained and prepared a sufficient number of specialists, from operators and technicians to mathematicians and linguists; the amount of equipment at their disposal was limited by the shortage of labor and materials and does not seem to have been very plentiful, but, on the whole, was sufficient to meet the steady expansion and improvement of the service.

Another important factor in their success was the close cooperation built up between the intercept agencies and the G-2s of the various command echelons. This was insured by locating the command posts of

the intercept and evaluation units at or near unit headquarters. In addition — and this was probably the key to their ultimate success — the Germans realized at an early date, through practical experience, that the greatest gains could be achieved only through a physical dispersal of the actual intercept stations coupled with a strictly centralized direction and evaluation of the results. They learned that in this field a correct picture could be obtained only by assembling all the intercepted messages at higher headquarters and by disseminating intelligence from the top down, rather than from lower echelons up. This avoided the danger of overestimating the value of a single message and insured that it received its proper place in the over-all picture.

Throughout this work, the Germans appear to have concentrated on the aspects from which they could gain quick and operationally useful results, and to have limited the over-all effort. They made little attempt at intensive work on high-grade ciphers, which offered great resistance to the cryptographers but stressed the rapid exploitation of low-grade codes and messages in the clear, and the development of means for rapid dissemination of the results. They did not achieve the mass of intelligence produced by the Allied intercept organizations: but, even at the cost of security, they did at least equal the Allies in the production of results of tactical value to the lower levels.

A good example of this was their work on Allied air liaison nets. Messages from ground forces calling for air support, were often evaluated sufficiently to enable the troops to be warned, though the actual targets mentioned were in a code which the Germans were unable to break. In the West, for example, a broadcast system was established and put at the disposal of the Chief Intelligence Office at Western Theater Command, with receivers at all division, corps, army, and army group headquarters. (This was a system often considered by the Allies but always turned down for security reasons.) There can be no doubt that by a procedure such as this the Germans succeeded in disseminating the results of intercept more rapidly than the Allies, but they fell short of the over-all results of Allied intercept, and impaired their effort by poor security.

The Germans distinguished between long-range and short-range reconnaissance through agents. Although both types were under the *Abwehr* and after 1944 under the Military Office of the National Security Office (i.e., under the *SS*), there were important differences.

Long-range secret intelligence was handled by static headquarters, which were usually in Germany proper

or at least far behind the actual front lines. They sent agents who were not employed on front-line activities through neutral countries, or by parachute, far into the rear of enemy territory. It has not been possible to check the German claim that these agents were reasonably successful, especially in the West. Coverage of English invasion bases prior to D-day, for example, was claimed to be adequate, and, until fairly late in the western campaign, there were no surprises so far as order of battle was concerned.

Prior to their attack in 1941, the knowledge about Russia which the Germans possessed was scanty. Although it is said that the German attaché in Moscow repeatedly informed his superiors of the strength of the Soviet Union, the Germans either disbelieved his reports or did not have enough information on that point from other secret sources. Intelligence on the whole had greater difficulties to overcome in Russia than in the West, and the Germans themselves admit that most of the material available before the inception of the campaign was of doubtful value.

In the short-range secret intelligence the Germans obtained their greatest successes in Russia and in Italy, and were least successful in the West. This type of work was in the hands of Abwehr units and subunits, which, after the reorganization in 1944, were renamed intelligence reconnaissance units and subunits (*FAKs*, *FATs*). They were mobile units attached to army groups and army. For operational intelligence they were important in two ways: *FAKs* I (or Abwehr I) sent agents through the enemy front lines, *FAKs* III (or Abwehr III) were engaged in counterespionage and the apprehension of Allied agents behind the German lines. The counterespionage work of *FAKs* III, which seems to have been most successful in the East in the appreciation of the Russian employment of agents and the knowledge of the various missions assigned to them, formed one of the most important bases upon which the operational intentions of the enemy could be estimated. It was complemented by signal intelligence. *FAKs* III furnished a consolidated report on the activities of Russian agents every ten days. These reports were evaluated by the sections dealing with partisan matters, where a map was kept showing when and where the agent was detected or apprehended and, if known, by whom he was sent out. Army information concerning the agent's mission was included in a legend to the map. It was found, by experience, that the entries, as they increased in density in certain sectors of the front, indicated very clearly where the Russians were planning to engage in large-scale operations. It was also found that on those sectors of the front where a large number of agents

who had been given their missions directly by the General Staff of the Red Army were being employed, a clear picture of impending main efforts could be obtained. In this way, the defensive use of secret intelligence on the eastern front was particularly valuable to operational intelligence. The offensive use of German espionage behind the Russian front lines also seems to have shown fairly good results. It was estimated that only 20 percent of the messages received by German agents were of value, but that those messages were extremely useful for operational intelligence and well worth the effort and expense. The same seems to be true of the Italian theater, where by and large, the Germans were able to obtain good results through agents and counterintelligence work. In the West, however, the picture was different. *FAKs* III were successful up to a point, but their reports on apprehended Allied agents did not form the basis for any operational intelligence comparable to that carried on in the East. And as far as *FAKs* I, i.e., active espionage through and behind Allied lines, were concerned, German efforts were a dismal failure. In view of the successes achieved on other fronts, this may sound surprising but close analysis reveals several reasons for it.

Until D-day in June 1944 there was no front line and the *FAKs* could not engage in active espionage by which they might have gained experience and developed the required machinery. In Russia and Italy, the necessary organization was developed over a period of years, whereas in France the Germans were faced with a new situation for which they could not be completely prepared.

The Abwehr was reorganized on 1 June 1944, and was transformed into the military office under SS leadership. Direction of espionage came into the hands of party fanatics, who were little more than dilettantes in this field. A few days after D-day, the confusion that reorganization caused in the higher echelons hindered the study of current procedures and the carrying out of the necessary improvements. In the East and in Italy, experience was gained throughout the campaigns. The espionage machinery was in existence in June 1944, and the changeover amounted to little more than a change of name, higher administration, and command channels. This only slightly encumbered current work.

In the Russian and Italian theaters of operations, the work of German agents was helped by the confused political and ethnological situation. This facilitated both recruiting and employment of agents. In Russia, although the bulk of the population was wholeheartedly on the side of the Red Army, a considerable number

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of Ukrainians, White Russians, and Cossacks, were to some extent pro-German. This made penetration of enemy organizations by agents comparatively easy. Only SS stupidity and unwillingness to arrive at a political compromise with some of the anti-Soviet groups in Russia and Poland ruined this fertile ground for German espionage. In the West, on the other hand, the Germans were faced by solid blocks of hostile populations. England, favored by the insular character of the country, was a particularly difficult problem for agents. By 1944, France also had become almost solidly united against the Germans as a result of the short-sighted manner in which the Germans treated the French.

Directing secret service work is, perhaps more than any other kind of intelligence work, largely a question of personalities. Many agents do not work directly for a cause, but are mercenaries working for the officer who hired them. Often they do not even realize what cause they are working for. This requires a great deal of personal skill and knowledge of psychology on the part of the directing officer. In addition he must have detailed and accurate knowledge of the enemy, of local conditions and habits, and of tactical situations. He must work relentlessly and have a love for anonymity. Altogether the German character, so easily given to illusions, romantic speculations, and spectacular deeds does not lend itself too well to secret work. In that sense, the Germans obviously did not have the right personalities available when the invasion started. It is quite typical that, in order to reinforce their organization in the West, the Germans brought, from an army group in the East, the experienced commander of a FAK, an officer who had never worked in the West, but who knew France. It is reported that this officer, although at first quite unfamiliar with local conditions, achieved more in two weeks than his predecessor had attained in six months.

In the East, there was no continuous front line, and the employment of agents, their infiltration through the enemy lines, and their return were comparatively easy. In Italy, the long coastal stretches on both sides of the country favored the employment of agents, since they could enter and return from enemy occupied territory by water around either end of the front. In the West, however, more or less continuous front lines existed — at least during the static phase of the war — that hampered the regularity of such movements.

The Allied employment of agents in the West gave the Germans little indication of Allied intentions. In the East, communications behind the front lines were exceedingly poor as compared to the West, and the Russians, in order to gain important data about the

enemy for their next operations, had to send their agents directly into the region in which they were interested. In the West, there was no technical difficulty in sending agents to Holland with missions covering anything between the Ruhr and the French Alps. The place of capture, therefore, meant very little unless the exact mission of the man became known, so that intelligence obtained by counterespionage in the West could be used for operational purposes only in an extremely indirect manner.

Concerning the organization of the secret service, one other point needs emphasis — the dual chain of command of the intelligence reconnaissance units. For formation, direction, and administration they were first under the Abwehr and later under the Military Office of the National Security Office. The tactical employment of these units, however, was a function of the chief intelligence officer at army group and army level. He never personally directed agents, and almost never saw an agent himself. He could give orders and designate objectives to the commanding officer of the FAK who, in turn, had to take the steps needed to achieve the results desired by the chief intelligence officer. To this extent — i.e., in having an agent organization over which the local commander had little or no control — the Germans suffered from the same disadvantages as the Allies.

Channels

Distrust of the specialist was the chief factor in the strict limitations set by German Army orders to intelligence channels. In practice there was more freedom than appeared. The chief fault, as far as can be ascertained, was that, while the intelligence channel was efficient in the forwarding of information (Foreign Armies in Berlin was informed of new identifications in a matter of hours), the channel was not so effective as a means of exchanging ideas. The extent to which the G-2 of a field unit could discuss with his superior G-2s the day's information, and thereby outline the enemy situation with them, was severely limited by the fact that he was required to submit his ideas to his G-3 or his chief of staff. The influence of these operations officers in intelligence matters was, by Allied standards, far too great; for, instead of having the differences in appreciation straightened out over the telephone between G-2s, the chief of staff and even the commander, came into such discussions much too often. The result of such a procedure was that the intelligence picture at the various echelons frequently differed. This had two negative results. First, it did not help to raise the prestige of the intelligence officer

in the eyes of the rest of the staff. Second, it lessened the contact between intelligence officers of different echelons. Many divisions, for example, instead of placing reliance on the enemy division history folders produced for them by higher authority (a good feature of German intelligence), preferred to compile and keep up their own. The 65th Division in Italy, for example, built up its own division folder, relying largely on the results of its own interrogations.

This extent of self-reliance often caused a lack of harmony in the solutions of the day-to-day problems in interrogation and appreciation which repeatedly plagued division, corps, and army intelligence officers.

Foreign Armies

There is little doubt that of the two agencies — Foreign Armies East and Foreign Armies West — the one dealing with the eastern theater of war was the more valuable and efficient. After its initial grave errors in its judgment of Russian military strength and over-all war potential, the work of Branch Foreign Armies East improved steadily. There are several reasons for this superiority over Foreign Armies West.

After the initial failure of the Germans to bring the campaign in the East to a quick and successful conclusion, General Halder, then chief of the Army General Staff, realized that intelligence methods had to be radically altered and improved. His choice for Chief of Foreign Armies East, Brigadier General Gehlen, was excellent, and it was due to the latter's personality and drive that the branch attained a degree of efficiency which, because of the lack of such leadership, Foreign Armies West never equaled.

Branch Foreign Armies East profited by the fact that the direction of its theater of war was always under the OKH and the Army General Staff, and that its mission was simply to be the intelligence agency for the OKH. This facilitated the coordination of all intelligence efforts. Foreign Armies West, on the other hand, suffered from an increasing influence of the OKW and its political leaders in the so-called "OKW Theaters", i.e., the Balkans and Italy, and later the West. The branch was, therefore, under the dual control of the OKW and the Army General Staff, which encumbered the coordination of work and the speedy solution of problems.

Although certain intelligence sections, notably those dealing with the Balkans, the United States, and the Pacific, were shifted back and forth several times between Foreign Armies East and West, Foreign Armies East was, on the whole, allowed to concentrate its

efforts on Russia alone. This meant that the branch could be organized on the basis of a functional rather than a geographical division of work, so that Section I dealt with operational intelligence, Section II with long-range research, statistical data, manpower, etc., Section III with translation and propaganda work, Section IV with all matters pertaining to Sweden, Section V with map and photographic reproduction, and Section VI with personnel administration. To a great extent, this avoided duplication. Foreign Armies West, on the other hand, dealt with a number of enemy armies and was organized according to countries, not theaters. The duplication resulting from this was realized by the Germans, and they created the office of an executive officer whose section was responsible for the intelligence of the Italian theater as a whole. For the western theater, separate sections dealt with the British, French, and American Armies and with other Allied forces, a separation which was not suited to the production of an harmonious intelligence picture.

From 1941 until the end of the war, there was a continuous campaign and a gigantic front in the East. This enabled German intelligence to gain experience constantly and to develop and improve its methods of collecting and evaluating information. Although, in 1941, the Germans knew very little about Russia and the Red Army, they were able in the course of the war to establish a fairly adequate and reliable Russian order of battle. That the result of their labors was neither well used by the High Command nor much believed by Hitler, was not Gehlen's fault. In the West, the Germans gained considerable insight into the organization of the British Army through and after Dunkirk. For the next four years, the German and Allied armies were in fighting contact only in North Africa and Italy, which hampered the continuous collection of intelligence by the Germans. They were able slowly to pick up knowledge about the new British and French Armies and the US Army in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy. It may be true, as the Germans claim, that on 6 June 1944, the new situation did not confront Foreign Armies West with any major surprise in order of battle, but it still remains very probable that the branch did not have too extensive a knowledge of Allied intentions.

The center of gravity of German operations was in the East. The Russian campaign absorbed most of Germany's manpower and material. Accordingly, Foreign Armies East had a much greater staff at its disposal and was in a position to do more thorough work and to publish more detailed reports. As far as can be ascertained, Foreign Armies West never em-

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ployed more than 100 people, whereas Foreign Armies East had, at its peak, several times that many.

Foreign Armies West, not equipped to deal with economic matters, gave these only secondary treatment, and relied, to all practical purposes, on the efforts and results of the Field Economic Office (*Feldwirtschaftsamt*) in the OKW. Foreign Armies East paid increasing attention to the questions of the Russian industrial and armament potential, and organized Subsection II for that purpose. Foreign Armies East even joined efforts with the Field Economics Office by taking as chief of Subsection II an officer who was also a specialist on Russia in the Field Economic Office, so that the work of both agencies was properly coordinated, and each office could utilize directly the facilities of the other for carrying out its work.

Through Gehlen's outstanding personality, Branch Foreign Armies East gained direct influence over agencies whose efficient functioning was important to its success. The tactical employment of agents came directly under the branch, which was able to direct short-range secret intelligence in accordance with its day-to-day needs. In the West, there was no such simple chain of command, and the intelligence reconnaissance units did not do nearly so well.

Such were the main reasons for the noticeable difference in efficiency between Foreign Armies East and West. Because of outstanding leadership, Foreign Armies East received all the support and cooperation it needed in order to increase its intelligence effort according to the needs of the German Army. Foreign Armies West, lacking such support, remained a small agency too busy with the day-to-day technical details of work to develop into the large central intelligence agency which the Germans needed for their great fight in the West. In neither case, however, while the Army's and the High Command's attitude toward

intelligence remained what it was, could these agencies carry out their mission adequately.

Conclusion

The results of this study are largely negative. It shows that the German approach to intelligence was a faulty one: insufficient attention was given to the subject as a whole, its importance was generally underrated, and the intelligence officer was rarely able to attain the prestige necessary for his job. For the first three years of the war, this had but little adverse effect on operations, but later the very success at arms which the Germans had enjoyed served only to increase their neglect of intelligence, so that, as the tide turned, they were unable to estimate correctly the extent of allied superiority. It would be untrue to infer from this that German intelligence was bad. Perhaps it would be more precise to call it "mediocre", and to say that its disadvantages were largely offset by the high military efficiency of the Germany Army as a whole.

Because there is little that the Allied intelligence services can learn from the Germans, no attempt has been made in this study to collect every possible detail of German methods and their results. These have been merely outlined and only those aspects from which a lesson could be learned have been considered and emphasized. Some of the different methods used by the Germans point a moral, as in the case of their concentration on signal intelligence, their emphasis on low rather than high-grade ciphers, and their disregard for security in the dissemination of results. In other procedures, they stressed detail to an extent which we might well follow. Apart from these points, this general discussion of German methods can have at least the negative value to Allied intelligence of lessons in weaknesses.