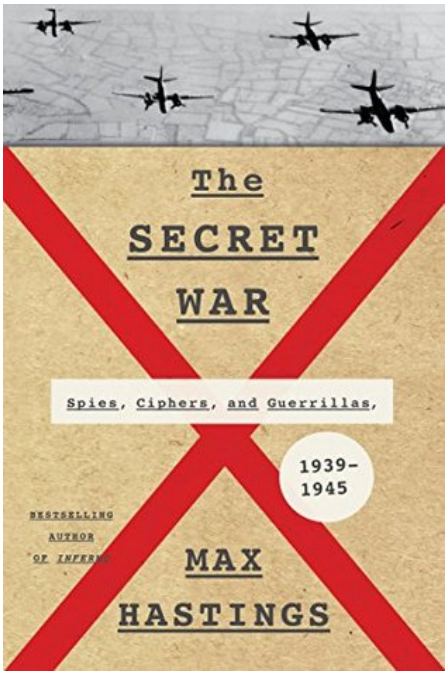

The Secret War: Spies, Ciphers, and Guerrillas, 1939-1945

Max Hastings

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The Secret War: Spies, Ciphers, and Guerrillas, 1939-1945 Max Hastings
Examining the espionage and intelligence stories in World War II, on a global basis, bringing together the British, American, German, Russian and Japanese histories.

There were two Second World Wars: one fought on the battlefields, and another conducted by men and women few of whom ever fired a weapon in anger, but whose efforts vastly influenced the conflict.

‘The Secret War 1939-45’ examines that other war waged by British, American, German, Russian and Japanese intelligence-gathering personnel. Moving chronologically through the conflict, Max Hastings charts the successes and failures of allied and axis forces, espionage and counterespionage.

Observing how the evolution of electronic communications dramatically increased the possibilities and significance of these secret battles, this is the story of intelligence beyond Bletchley to the FBI, Russia and the spies of axis dictatorships. For the first time since his best-selling ‘All Hell Let Loose’, Max Hastings returns to the Second World War, this time to chronicle its second, untold story.

The Secret War: Spies, Ciphers, and Guerrillas, 1939-1945 Details

Date	:	Published May 10th 2016 by Harper (first published September 10th 2015)
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From Reader Review The Secret War: Spies, Ciphers, and Guerrillas, 1939-1945 for online ebook

Jerome says

A comprehensive and well-researched history of the Allied and Axis powers' wartime intelligence and covert action efforts.

The narrative is roughly chronological, and Hastings shifts back and forth somewhat, but this is unavoidable due to the scope of his work. Hastings does a great job stripping away the romanticism people can have about espionage work. He also argues that Allied SIGINT efforts were more fruitful and had a greater impact than HUMINT or covert action. "Only 1/1000 of 1% of collected intelligence changed events on the battlefield," he writes. "But that could be precious."

He covers how the German and Soviet intelligence establishments were undermined by Stalin's purges and by Hitler's micromanagement. Most of the coverage ends up devoted to the British side. Hastings describes famous and well-known cases like Sorge, Bletchley Park, Soviet infiltration of the Manhattan Project, and the Cambridge Five without making them boring or repetitive. He's also pretty critical of Donovan.

There are also some minor errors here and there, like calling Helen Wilky "American," calling Lisel Gaertner Canaris's "mistress," mixing up the NKVD with the GRU (when describing a *rezident*), some incorrect first names, and some speculation here and there. In one part of the book he seems to get TRICYCLE and GARBO mixed up. He also writes that the Cicero affair was first revealed by Bazna (not Moyzisch?) and that Claude Dansey thought Fritz Kolbe was a double agent (he did?) He also writes that Hans-Berndt Gisevius was MI6's only known source in the Abwehr (really?)

A clear and well-written work overall.

Campbell says

After slogging determinedly through about a third of this book, I've given up. As others have noted, it reads more like a "Who's Who?" of WWII espionage dramatis personae and suffers in the extreme from any contiguous narrative flow. It has the feel of having been assembled from the cut-off pieces of information that didn't quite fit into other books. Most disappointing.

Zora says

Well researched, well written, but I felt I grasped his main points in the introduction. At a hundred pages in, I realized I didn't want to read 900 more.

Paul says

A thoroughly enjoyable and interesting read. Despite my possessing a good number of books on espionage in WW2, Sir Max brings cases to light that I'd never heard of. As usual the author redresses the imbalance away from the Western allies, but his verdicts show how intelligence gained was often, particularly amongst the dictatorships, ignored or misinterpreted.

Adrian Matthews says

Very long, very detailed. Too long, too detailed. Interesting in places though.

Mattthew McKinney says

I really loved this book - a series of vignettes about HUMINT and SIGINT operations by all the major powers in WWII. Would make a great series ala Turn. Highly recommend the audiobook version!

Xan says

Interesante si te gusta todo l referente a la IIGM, pero no está al nivel de otros de sus libros. Reiterativo hasta llegar a cansar.

Marty says

I expected this to be interesting tales of spying, code-breaking, and other aspects of war behind the front lines. Unfortunately, after the prologue it seemed to become a list of who spied for whom, why, who they used, and how they died. I tired of it after the first 60 pages or so.
The prologue was quite interesting. It puts forward a number of opinions of the author's and others' about spying and code-breaking that are hardly complimentary. One went so far as to say that all the intelligence work of the Allies during the war made no difference whatsoever. It basically boils down to the observation that no matter how much you know about the enemy and their actions you still have to win the battle. And the enemy is hardly going to publish something admitting that they were made fools of, so no matter how good your intelligence was it's hard to conclude that it had any real effect on the battle.

Andy says

Hastings' magisterial and epic overview of the secret war which underlaid the Second World War is a tremendous and essential single volume with much in it for the general reader as well as for those with greater knowledge.

He examines, with typical fluency and great style, the global conflict with special emphasis on codebreakers, spies and guerillas.

I was particularly pleased to see the emphasis given to German successes in reading British codes, an area often overlooked.

As Hastings puts it: "Hitler's codebreakers, especially in the first half of the war, could claim some important successes. In North Africa until June 1942, Rommel knew as much about the British Eighth Army as his enemies knew about the Afrika Korps, and the latter's commander used his information better."

And he examines the role played, initially by British decrypts of Enigma code traffic and later - and perhaps more importantly - of German teleprinter systems by a team which included Alan Turing but also other brilliant minds, Gordon Welshman, Bill Tutte, Max Newman and the man who designed Colossus, arguably the world's first digital computer, the remarkable Tommy Flowers.

His assessment of the work of Bletchley Park is clear:

"While the Third Reich executed wholesale spies, traitors and saboteurs who threatened its security, its functionaries remained insistently oblivious of the most deadly threat of all – a few hundred tweedy, bespectacled young English academics labouring in drab suburban Bedfordshire. The only credible explanation is hubris: an institutional unwillingness to believe that their Anglo-Saxon enemies, whom they so often humbled on the battlefield, could be so clever."

The extent of Soviet espionage is laid out in its full panoply, from the many British and American agents who facilitated Stalin with the West's atomic secrets to the remarkable "double cross" system which allowed Operation Monastery to effectively derail Hitler's Stalingrad offensive.

Hastings' findings are stark: signals intelligence was far more important in this conflict than human intelligence - setting the scene for the primacy of electronic warfare in the modern world; intelligence is not a substitute for intelligent leadership, fighting skill or numbers on the battlefield; and that totalitarian regimes were, by their very natures, always handicapped.

"The democracies," he writes, "handled intelligence better than the dictatorships – including that of Stalin – because they understood the merit of truth, objective assessment of evidence, not as a virtue, but as a weapon of war."

This is a fine work and an important addition to the history of secret warfare.

Bevan Lewis says

The Lloyd Report on German oil resources estimated that by December 1940 the aerial bombing campaign had achieved a 15% cut in German oil availability. This would have been news to the Nazi leadership, who at the time were unaware that the allies were engaged in a systematic bombing campaign. Intelligence on the state of the German economy, as Max Hastings discusses in The Secret War was one of the weakest areas, little helped by the all-important interception and decryption of Axis communications. Additionally, the RAF was the agency which probably had the weakest use of intelligence.
The other area of allied espionage which was lacking was 'humint' – intelligence derived from human sources i.e. spies and informants in Germany. Hastings outlines how the Russians were so much more effective in harnessing dissidents in Germany, mostly through ideological commitment to the Communist

cause. Despite this, however, this magisterial history of espionage, cryptology and resistance (emphasis on the first two) firmly presents the allied intelligence as far more effective.
Britain in particular benefitted considerably from its ability to extend its pool of talent beyond the military and established intelligence services for the duration, recruiting a range of brilliant talent from academic institutions. Additionally, the culture of openness meant that the results of intelligence were able to be honestly reported to the military and politicians. Although they did not always take the notice they should have there were none of the aberrations of the Soviet and Nazi leadership, where unpalatable truths had to be suppressed, or in the instance of events such as the many predictions of Barbarossa, willfully ignored.
Max Hastings book is sweeping, without being encyclopedic. As befitting a veteran journalist and author of over twenty books, his prose is well written without being intrusive and the research is broad, encompassing secondary works, memoirs and research in the Russian archives. Hastings applies a sensible amount of skepticism to the almost compulsive mix of fact and fiction in most of the spies accounts. He also avoids the temptation to become enthralled by the drama and derring do, and repeatedly steps back to look at how much realistic operational or strategic benefit was derived. The answer usually was not that much. He is especially dismissive of much of the sabotage and 'behind the lines' activity of OSS and SOE.
Hastings finds many shortcomings of MI6, and is very dismissive of its head Stewart Menzies. He relates how someone who knew him at school could not believe "'how so unbelievably stupid a man could have ended up in such a position". The main reason MI6 had any credibility whatsoever was the fact that the Ultra sigint programme was under its control, although Hastings gives little credit to Menzies for its success.
He offers a balanced view of the value of Ultra as well. Many historians have allowed themselves to wax superlative about Bletchley Park, making claims such as that it was the single most important breakthrough in winning the war. Hastings points out how fitful its beginning was, and "that the signals intelligence war, certainly in its early stages, was less lopsided in the Allies' favour than popular mythology suggests". A significant theme is that raw sigint wasn't enough on its own. Often doubts developed about its apparent flaws when correct information was later rendered irrelevant when individuals like Hitler changed their mind. Additionally, even timely information about events such as the impending invasion of Crete failed to make a difference to events. Then of course all the intel in the world was valueless if there was insufficient force to take advantage of it. Hastings reminds us, for example that "it is quite mistaken to view the Battle of the Atlantic exclusively as a struggle between Bletchley and the B-Dienst – here, as everywhere else, hard power was vital".
There are some areas that receive surprisingly little coverage – for example the "Double Cross" programme and the pre-D Day deception, however Hastings argues that they have been well covered elsewhere. A lot of the material on the Soviet side will be fresh for most general readers, and the limited Japanese information can be attributed to the lack of primary research as he points out. This book provides a fresh, well written and balanced assessment of the Secret War, and is highly recommended..

Peter Mcloughlin says

very detailed history of spying and signal intelligence during the second world war. What struck me and I find hard to understand is what it takes to be spy undercover. That state of mind would seem very hard to sustain. Being friends or even lovers of people you are out to betray. I would have a hard time being friends with someone just to ruin them or feign allegiance to something while tirelessly trying to undermine that very thing. It must be a very weird state of mind to act in such a role. It never struck me before until I picked up this book. There is stuff on the sig int and resistance but they seem far more normal to me. Very detailed.

Jill says

Hastings contends in his preface to this quite detailed history that the contributions of espionage were not significant in WWII, at least not without factoring in the political will and military prowess to exploit any intelligence. He avers that perhaps only “one-thousandth of 1 per cent of material garnered from secret sources by all the belligerents in World War II contributed to changing battle field outcomes.” Yet that tiny fraction was of immense value.

Nevertheless, he provocatively contends:

“The record suggests that official secrecy does more to protect intelligence agencies from domestic accountability for their own follies than to shield them from enemy penetration.”

There are a number of barriers to the success of spycraft. One is the large amount of information, misinformation, misdirection, and outright fabrications from which “pearls of revelation” must be extracted. Another is the reluctance of leaders to accept information that runs counter to their own beliefs, and the reluctance of intelligence agents to risk angering them (especially relevant when your boss was Stalin or Hitler). But leaders on all sides, Hastings reports, dismissed information that contradicted their preconceptions. Hastings quotes a journalist who noted wittily: “Career officers and politicians have a strong interest in cooking raw intelligence to make their masters’ favourite dishes.” A third is the problem that intelligence very often becomes out-of-date as soon as (if not before) it is received. Fourth, there may be a “failure of will”: i.e., even when you get the information, you may be unwilling or unable to act upon it for political and/or military reasons. Fifth, there is sometimes a reluctance to act upon information because it would reveal too much about decryption prowess in the case of signals intelligence, or it might compromise sources in the case of human intelligence. And finally, intelligence is often assessed and analyzed from the worldview of the those who receive the intelligence, without a full understanding that enemies might have radically different value systems.

So, if much intelligence is of limited use, and if it doesn’t really matter unless it can be acted upon, what is to be gained from reading this very long, in-depth study of global intelligence efforts during World War II? The main reason is that it is just interesting. The topic has an undeniable appeal to those of us so long exposed to James Bond movies and Cold War thrillers. The book contains plenty of amazing and heroic vignettes, and a good look at military and political leaders from the side, as it were, in examining how they reacted to the information their agents gleaned.

Evaluation: What sort of people are interested in risking their lives to spy against and inside of other countries in the midst of very dangerous wars? Who is willing to spy against their *own* country and why? And is all that risk and expense worth it? What purpose does it actually serve? This book provides detailed answers to all these questions and more.

Rating: 3.5/5

Mal Warwick says

Shelves-full of history books have been written about the triumphs of Allied intelligence in World War II. The Ultra Secret. The Man Who Never Was. Operation Mincemeat. Agent Zigag. Double Cross. A Man Called Intrepid. I've read all these and more. (There are hundreds more.) Now comes British journalist and historian Max Hastings with a revisionist view in The Secret War. With his eyes focused on the harsh realities of that all-consuming conflict, Hastings debunks the myths that inspired these books and takes their exaggerations down a peg with a long-lacking sense of perspective. The effect is sobering. This is revisionist history at its best. Anyone who seeks to understand how World War II was really waged should read this book without delay.

Revisionist history: myths debunked

Hastings reviews some of the many fanciful reports that have come out over the years about British and American espionage in World War II. For example, he savages William Stevenson's self-aggrandizing tale in A Man Called Intrepid, calling the book "wildly fanciful." Among the more obvious lies in Stevenson's book is the fact that no one but he himself ever called himself Intrepid. And, as Hastings makes clear, Stevenson's work coordinating British intelligence in the United States had virtually no impact whatsoever on the war.

He is less harsh in his oblique references to other books, but he makes clear that the many bestselling titles exaggerate the importance of the spies they made famous. Even the legendary Alan Turing comes under the microscope: Hastings asserts that another young mathematical genius who also worked at Bletchley Park was equally important in cracking the Enigma Code. More significantly, that celebrated breakthrough itself made less of a contribution to the Allied victory than other successes in deciphering Axis codes. (He cites in particular the German and Japanese naval codes.) "Bletchley was an increasingly important weapon," Hastings notes, "but it was not a magic sword."

Signals versus human intelligence

The overarching theme in The Secret War is the primacy of signals intelligence. Hastings contends that breakthroughs in deciphering codes by the British, Russians, and Americans contributed far more decisively to the successful outcome of the war than any missions undertaken by spies. And, except in Russia from 1943 onward, the efforts of Resistance movements in Europe were even less significant (although they played a large role in fostering popular morale). There is one possible exception, the work of the improbably colorful agents portrayed in Ben McIntyre's Double Cross: The True Story of the D-Day Spies. But even this undeniable success story has to be tempered by the realization that signals intelligence played a large role in setting up and supporting the operation. On all sides, enormous numbers of people were engaged in listening to, decoding, interpreting, and reporting on intelligence gained by radio.

However, "One of the themes in this book is that the signals intelligence war, certainly in its early stages, was less lopsided in the Allies' favor than popular mythology suggests."

How much did secret intelligence actually contribute to the war's outcome?

Viewing the big picture, Hastings is skeptical about the effectiveness of intelligence of any sort. As he notes, "Perhaps one-thousandth of 1 per cent of material garnered from secret sources by all the belligerents in World War II contributed to changing battlefield outcomes." In the course of The Secret War, he cites just

four strategically significant battles where intelligence turned the tide: the North Atlantic war under the sea, the American victory over the Japanese at Midway, the unexpected Russian offensive at Kursk, and the misdirection about the Allied landing at Normandy rather than the Pas de Calais.

Viewed from 30,000 feet and the passage of more than seventy years, “nowhere in the world was intelligence wisely managed and accessed.” Though Stalin and Hitler were both notoriously disdainful of secret intelligence, as was the Japanese military, the Americans and the British also failed to make genuinely effective use of the information turned up by their spies and code-breakers.

Other revelations

Perhaps understandably, in writing about Allied intelligence in the war, American and British authors have focused on the work of MI6, MI5, the OSS, and the enormous team of academics at Bletchley Park. However, Hastings makes clear that the Soviet Union was far more successful in uncovering actionable espionage than either of its chief Western Allies. “Some Russian deceptions,” he writes, “dwarf those of the British and Americans.” Hastings’ account of Stalin’s intelligence operations is particularly revealing. So, too, is his skeptical exploration of both German and Japanese secret intelligence. The FBI also comes under fire: “All intelligence services seek to promote factional interests and inflate their own achievements, but the wartime FBI carried this practice to manic lengths . . . The FBI’s incompetence was astonishing.”

About the author

Max Hastings is a prominent British journalist, editor, historian, and author. He has served as editor-in-chief of the Daily Standard and The Daily Telegraph and has presented historical documentaries on the BBC.

Lynn Matheson says

I was really looking forward to this book as I love things about the Second World War and the world of espionage is endlessly fascinating. The book is vast and well researched. It covers the work of spies in Britain, the US, the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany and Japan. Hastings is at pains to play down the glamour of spy work and describes how dull most of it was. He seems to have a predudice against the Soviet Union which he regards as a greater evil than Nazism. Many people at the time did not share this view. The upshot of Hastings' argument is that spy work did not contribute a great deal to winning the war and has been over-glamourised since.

In spite of this there is a vast array of flamboyant and eccentric characters who are described in snippets. I found this intensely annoying as I was reading as I wanted to know more about each person, have their tales fleshed out. It became like reading the telephone book and I started to lose interest about half way through. Perhaps the fault is within me as I usually read fiction. I could so easily have been enthralled but I just wasn't.

History nerds will probably enjoy this but for me it needed more skill in the writing and I found Hastings' patrician, condescending tone irritating.

Derek Nudd says

Max Hastings' courage in tackling a one-volume history of the covert battles of the Second World War as his first foray into the world of intelligence is beyond doubt. To a large extent he succeeds. His usual mix of anecdote and overview, combined with even-handed treatment of the main participants, produces an accessible introduction to the subject.

He does not attempt to replicate the libraries already written on, for example, the Cambridge Five or the workings of Bletchley Park but looks instead at their impact on the war. Here he repeatedly and validly makes the point that the value of intelligence is not in its acquisition but in its use. First the nugget of relevant truth must be sorted from the slag heap of gossip and misinformation – bearing in mind that a true report when written may not be by the time it is read. Then it must be fitted into a coherent picture and believed by the decision-makers. Finally there must be the capacity for action. There is no point in knowing when, where and how your enemy will attack if all you can do is send empty good wishes or – worse still – inadequate or wrong reinforcements.

He makes the point that the British and Americans were more effective overall than their enemies not because they were any better at gaining intelligence but because they were less bad at managing and exploiting it.

The book's main weakness is flagged in its subtitle. Hastings is interested in spies, saboteurs and signals (specifically cryptography). Other sources of physical intelligence (reconnaissance, captured documents and equipment) and human intelligence (defectors, refugees and prisoners-of-war) get a nod in passing but almost no serious consideration. The Royal Navy's astonishing meld of service and academic skills in the Joint Services Topographical Department isn't mentioned at all. A riveting story then – but not quite the whole story.
