

## Canadian Military History

---

Volume 25 | Issue 1

Article 8

---

3-24-2016

### "Fighting to Lose: How the German Secret Intelligence Service Helped the Allies Win the Second World War (Book Review)" by John Bryden

Joshua McCarty

---

#### Recommended Citation

McCarty, Joshua (2016) ""Fighting to Lose: How the German Secret Intelligence Service Helped the Allies Win the Second World War (Book Review)" by John Bryden," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 25: Iss. 1, Article 8.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol25/iss1/8>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized administrator of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

*Fighting to Lose: How the German Secret Intelligence Service Helped the Allies Win the Second World War.* John Bryden. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2014. Pp. 415.

The last fifteen years have seen a resurgence of literature on Second World War intelligence activities from both the Allied and Axis sides. The release of previously classified government documents from the war and its surrounding years have opened the doors for new debate and perspectives on the role of intelligence activities during the Second World War. With the release of these documents, new insights can be gained and new assessments made connecting secret intelligence activities between nations at war previously unseen. John Bryden's nineteen-chapter book *Fighting to Lose: How the German Secret Intelligence Service Helped the Allies Win the Second World War* seeks to provide evidence that the Abwehr purposefully provided intelligence to the Allies through a series of double and triple-agents in hopes of bringing the United States into the war as Britain's saviour.

Bryden's examination of Second World War secret intelligence organizations highlights a connection between the Abwehr, German Secret Intelligence, and Allied intelligence agencies, MI5 in Britain and the FBI in the United States. Based on incomplete archival evidence, Bryden infers that Admiral Canaris, head of the German Abwehr, purposefully planted agents for the British to exploit. His intention was to inform the British about Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia, Operation Barbarossa, and the ultimate attack on Pearl Harbor that moved the United States to enter the war (p. 12). What MI5 did with this information is a point of contention for Bryden and one which he dwells on frequently while building his argument.

Bryden provides a note to the reader at the beginning of the book in hopes of making the reading experience easier by offering some historical context before moving to the introduction. The three-page introduction outlines the inspiration of this project as Ian Colvin's 1951 book *Chief of Intelligence* that offers the first mention of Admiral Canaris as a "British agent" during the Second World War (p. 12). Where Colvin relied on word of mouth and hearsay to develop his book, Bryden jumped into the official records released in the 1990s and the numerous books subsequently released books to find evidence of the idea that Canaris exercised anti-Nazi sentiments by providing Allied intelligence agencies with crucial elements of

information, namely the attack on Pearl Harbor, which brought the United States into the Second World War.

Bryden uses a chronological sequence of events to provide a backdrop on which to build his theory. He begins by providing a detailed synopsis of the state of secret intelligence agencies in Germany, Britain, and the United States leading into the war. The disparity between German and Allied intelligence agency preparation leading into the war is quite large. Admiral Canaris conducted research and developed methods to ensure the viability of the Abwehr in what would turn into the Second World War. By implementing guidance from his predecessor and mentor Colonel Walter Nicolai, Canaris created an intelligence organization capable of providing intelligence on military, diplomatic, and economic to German leadership as codified in Nicolai's "espionage 'bible'" *The German Secret Service* (London, 1924), which was first published in English and largely ignored by MI5 (p. 52). This theme of British inadequacy continues from the prologue to the conclusion, with numerous examples of outdated methods and thinking in the upper-echelons of British intelligence services (p. 59).

The author loosely connects Canaris directly to the various double agents discussed throughout the book. However, he clearly describes how the Abwehr informed MI5 of planned operations. Not all the information was acted upon by British intelligence, based on their belief that Germany was sub-par when it came to intelligence gathering. One of only a few mentions of Canaris' direct involvement in the schemes of supplying information to MI5 comes from the perspective of one of the "double-agents" employed in the beginning of 1941 that met with Stewart Menzies, MI6 Chief (p. 174). Most connections with Canaris made throughout the book are two or three times removed. This leads one to think that, perhaps it was not Canaris that directed information be passed to Britain, but a subordinate that shared similar anti-Nazi views and Canaris simply allowed the actions.

Bryden clearly defines his aim and argument at the beginning of the book. However, the first half of the text covers the ineptitude of MI5 and MI6 more than the supposed connection between Canaris and Allied intelligence. Not until the later chapters of the book does the argument come to fruition. Chapter 15 provides a timeline of events leading up to Pearl Harbor and the mishandling of intelligence that implied a pending attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese.

Bryden finally makes a solid accounting of how the Abwehr provides sound information to both Britain and the United States encouraging them to prepare for attack in the Pacific based on a questionnaire supplied to one of the German triple-agents, Dusko Popov (p. 216).

Until the final chapters, much of the preceding information leads one to believe the book seeks to explain that MI5 and MI6 were inept at running an effective intelligence organization. Then one realizes that, chapter-by-chapter, Bryden builds his argument by incrementally covering the Second World War up to the entrance of the United States after Pearl Harbor. Each chapter covers a specified time period ranging from a few months to a few years. Bryden develops his argument using both primary documents and secondary sources from those directly involved with the "double-cross system" and the xx Committee. He draws his conclusions from the gaps in primary documentation and connects events, in some cases, with no direct support (p. 179).

John Bryden's background as politician, journalist, and accomplished military historian make this book a relatively easy read. The layman with little knowledge of the inner workings of intelligence agencies, specifically those of the mid-twentieth century, will find Bryden's style of writing easy to comprehend. He clearly outlines the structures of each intelligence service and provides background information on the efficacy of each organization. On the other hand, he often switches between codename, case number, and name when he refers to the many double agents throughout the book.

I would recommend this book to any person interested in the history of intelligence and espionage. It provides a unique lens from which to view secret intelligence activities during the Second World War and is easily digestible for an undergraduate student. This book would also be a beneficial read for professional intelligence personnel dealing in human intelligence and espionage. Bryden succinctly outlines the connections one must make between tidbits of information to create a larger understanding of events. He also provides the aspiring intelligence historian with a historiography of sorts for the study of Second World War espionage that would give any historian a head start on research. *Fighting to Lose* is worth the read if for nothing more than an enjoyable experience.

JOSHUA MCCARTY