

BOOK REVIEW

Covert Legions: U.S. Army Intelligence in Germany, 1944–1949

By Thomas Boghardt. Washington, D.C.: Center for Military History, United States Army, 2022. Pp. 546. Paperback \$34.99.
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Official histories are a curious genre, sometimes tilting just so toward an organization's favorable perception of itself. It is a testament to Thomas Boghardt that this official history—a comprehensive, operational, and organizational study of Army Intelligence in Germany between 1944 and 1949, written at the U.S. Army Center for Military History—is first and foremost an excellent and engaging piece of scholarship. *Covert Legions: U.S. Army Intelligence in Germany, 1945–1949* also fills a major lacuna.

The historiography in US intelligence efforts in postwar Germany is curiously, and understandably, lopsided. Much of it focuses on covert operations or on the most controversial episodes, such as Project Paperclip, or Operation Rusty, or the practice of recruiting former Gestapo members to gather knowledge about the reconstituted KPD, the Communist Party of Germany, or Communists in general. At the same time, OSS/CIA (Office of Strategic Services/Central Intelligence Agency) activities take up much historiographical space, but they were but a small—and subordinate—part of US intelligence efforts in postwar Germany. At its very center stood Army intelligence and most of the organization's work was much more mundane than what historiographical marquee events might suggest. Boghardt's resolutely panoramic study provides the needed counterpoint to existing historiography then, and it allows the reader to gain a fuller understanding, possibly even an appreciation, of the organization and its activities.

Boghardt also accepts as matter of fact the early decision to shift US intelligence's focus from the recently defeated enemy to its erstwhile ally, the Soviet Union, and communist activities in postwar Germany in general. Indeed, he considers the shifting relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union his study's primary prism. Assessing Army Intelligence, a conservative and anti-communist entity from the start, not by pre-1945 plans, ideas, and visions but by its perceptions of the realities in Germany and central Europe beginning in late 1945 adds another interesting layer to his historiographical intervention. And it undeniably also tilts the narrative “just so.”

Boghardt divides the book into three parts. The first two parts, each about ninety-odd pages long, set the scene. Part I clearly delineates the wartime creation of the Army's “large and complex intelligence organization” (40) and notes the discrepancies between theory and reality that came to the fore when the Allies took the war into Germany proper in autumn 1944. The book's second part is a particular marvel and a testament to Boghardt's talents. Few historians have the ability to write a meticulous treatment on the “Intelligence

Organization in Occupied Germany,” likely a reference tool for many for years to come, that is not only clear but also a good read. And few are self-aware enough to advise their readers that, depending on their interest, the section can be skipped or simply used as needed.

The book’s center of gravity is Part III, which deals with operations in Germany throughout the entire occupation period. Ostensibly organized topically, it follows a rough chronology moving from “The Long Shadow of the Third Reich” through “New Challenges” to “The Berlin Blockade.” It is here that Boghardt’s prism bears most fruit, for he shows that the liquidation of Nazism, incomplete as it was, constituted but one of Army intelligence’s tasks. The chapter on “New Challenges,” which should possibly have included the word “unexpected,” considers the Black Market, DPs (Displaced Persons), questions of Soviet espionage as well as chaos and corruption at various levels, including within Army intelligence itself. “Democratization” focuses on the organization’s central objectives and makes a persuasive case that the intelligence provided helped the Military Government in its decision-making process. At the same time, the vetting processes as such, meant to keep National Socialists and Communists away from future power, created formal and informal relationships with a generation of German politicians of all democratic stripes and on all levels; it also bound people together, both ideologically and personally, pointing toward a shared future. Equally relevant was Army intelligence’s growing understanding of the developments in the Soviet Zone, which eventually became central to the US recalibration of policies toward the Soviet Union. By the time of the Berlin Blockade, Army intelligence had a fine understanding of Soviet capabilities and designs—two very different things—and their limitations, even if it did not always receive the hearing or the attention it deserved.

In a sense, Boghardt leaves the question of morals out of many of the activities he describes, even when he notes them and mentions developments that backfired. One can certainly quibble with this approach. Yet at the same time, it allows for a clearer window into the realities on the ground. And ultimately, Army intelligence achieved what it set out to do in occupied Germany—while also creating a long-lasting legal framework beneficial to American intelligence objectives in Germany and Europe and establishing itself as a prototype for modern US intelligence.

Boghardt is, it bears repeating, a gifted storyteller. He has a keen eye for telling details and pithy, often droll quotes that he uses to great effect in his descriptions of intelligence activities, the colorful cast of characters involved in them, and the environment in which these men—and very few women—moved. Written largely out of the sources and augmented by memoirs and contemporaneous reporting, Boghardt conjures defeated Germany and its inhabitants, with a special focus on Berlin, at a level of density and detail all too rare for scholarly monographs. *Covert Legions* is then also a general history of the occupation period, which the author deems a “transformative historical period in its own right” (489); of the very early West German postwar; and of many of its leading characters, albeit from the unusual perspective of Army Intelligence. It is also a marvelous read.

Thomas Boghardt has written an excellent book that will stand the test of time. *Covert Legions* is not only a superb piece of scholarship, deeply researched and contextualized, but also a fantastic, often spellbinding read.