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Review of *The Walls Have Ears: The Greatest Intelligence Operation of World War II* by Helen Fry

Adrian Phillips

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are portrayed as having been the Jews, and the latter came in for the most terrible treatment. Setting aside mere robbery, taunting and other acts of humiliation, every day saw appalling acts of murder and massacre, with large numbers of men, women and children shot to death or, still worse, burned alive locked up in blazing barns or synagogues. In Wieruszow, we hear of 21 deaths; in Czestochowa 180; in Bedzin 200; in Mielec 55; and in Pilica, 32. As for the total of those slaughtered in the course of fighting, a sensible estimate might be 3,000. What these works now present, however, is that the Jews were not alone. On the contrary, thanks to racial hatred, the paranoid fear of partisans that dated back to First-World-War Belgium and, before that, the Franco-Prussian War, many hundreds of Christians perished alongside them in the pogroms, the total number of fatalities being estimated by Moorhouse at some 16,000. To state this, of course, is not to minimise the Jewish tragedy, but rather to maximise the German guilt: though German soldiers leaving Berlin might have proclaimed that they were off to 'thrash the Jews', the reality was that they were the agents of a system that set no bounds on its victims, no bounds on its goals, and no bounds on its evils. If the Poles were the first to fight, they were also the first to fall.

CHARLES ESDAILE
University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK

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Helen Fry, *The Walls Have Ears: the Greatest Intelligence Operation of World War II*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019. 31 plates. 2 illustrations. Xiv + 319pp. ISBN 978-0300238600 (hardback). Price £18.99.

The official history of British intelligence in the Second World War made it clear that the three best sources of information available were signals intelligence, photo reconnaissance and prisoners of war. The first two have spawned a vast literature but the last far less. The official history severely excluded the human dimension from its account with prisoner of war intelligence referred to throughout simply as "POW". Helen Fry has helped to fill both these gaps with her study of one fascinating component of prisoner of war intelligence: how the private conversations of German prisoners of war were recorded secretly in an industrial-scale information gathering operation which ranked along with Bletchley Park in thoroughness and organisation. She has drawn on a huge trove of hitherto unexploited official papers and personal reminiscences of the small army of listeners recruited to man the operation to

produce an extensive record of the administrative side of the work and the unguarded conversations that it was able to feed into the intelligence analysis machine.

High ranking officer prisoners were deservedly a particular target of the bugging and herein lie some of the book's best passages. The material is so strong that it can be left to speak for itself. The reports on the cosmetic skincare efforts of one general are laugh-out-loud funny. The squabbles and tensions amongst the generals provide a microcosm of the flaws in the Third Reich. Some of them were so obsessed with the minutiae of status that they seemed unaware that there was a war on, still less that they were captives. The British were fully aware of the value of these prisoners and came up with an imaginative way of getting the most from them: a fake, Fascist-leaning peer baptized as Lord Aberfeldy, who, astoundingly, won their confidence. Presumably Debrett did not feature in the camp library.

The resources devoted to the whole set-up is testimony on its own to the value placed on its product. The listeners' greatest coup was the early information on the V weapons. The book recognizes that the story is already well-known but paints a fuller picture of the information from other conversations, which provided a bewildering array of often contradictory data from which the British had to assemble a workable assessment. It would have been welcome to learn more detail on the process of sifting worthwhile intelligence from the dross of perfectly honest, but wildly misinformed, discussion between low level prisoners working from garbled hearsay. It must have been someone's job to follow up tales of partially submersible E-boats and an equally imaginary air-towed 5,000kg bomb.

Far more useful to the higher reaches of Naval Intelligence was the crucial background detail on U-boat organisation, technology and methods gleaned from captured crew members. They also alerted the British to the construction of concrete U-boat pens at Lorient and St Nazaire. The statement in the book that these immense structures were undetectable by photo reconnaissance is wrong, although it is unclear whether the text is reporting an erroneous belief on the part of a listener.

When the narrative moves beyond its immediate source material the touch becomes less sure. In the space of a single paragraph the aircraft carrier *HMS Glorious* becomes a battlecruiser, the German invasion of Norway is opposed by "French and Finnish resistance fighters" (no mention of the regular Norwegian army) and the ensuing occupation of Norway lasts six years.

The account of Nazi war crimes is especially revealing of both German and British attitudes. The listeners encountered hard proof that post-war pleas of utter ignorance were self-serving twaddle. The attitudes that emerge from the recorded conversations run the full gamut from wilful blindness, through fear that the speakers will bear blame

themselves – always for someone else's misdeeds - to contrived apologetics. British attitudes can be even more chilling. Victor Cavendish-Bentinck, aristocratic Foreign Office and intelligence grandee, saw in early intimations of the Holocaust useful material to distract from criticism of the murders at Katyn Wood perpetrated by Britain's wartime ally of convenience, the Soviet Union. When the time came to punish war criminals, the obsession with security trumped thoughts of justice. To begin with the authorities had taken care to make recordings of incriminating conversations but when it came to the crunch, the unthinking reflex that intelligence operations should never be disclosed ruled out the use of bugged conversations as evidence at Nuremberg.

ADRIAN PHILLIPS
Independent Scholar, UK

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Greg Baughen, *RAF on the Offensive: The Rebirth of Tactical Air Power 1940-1941*. Barnsley: Air World, 2018. Vii + 304 pp. ISBN 978-1526735157 (hardback). Price £25.

This is Baughen's fifth publication on early twentieth century British or French air power and as with his previous works there are serious flaws on display in the most recent volume to be published. The work is aimed at a general audience rather than the academic community, and this is one of its major failings. The bibliography is exceptionally limited and from this it appears that the most recent historical works published in the last ten to fifteen years have not been consulted. It is not clear if the author is simply unaware of these works or has deliberately not engaged with them as he is unable to counter the arguments being made in them as they firmly refute his own. This makes Baughen's claim to have written a definitive history of air power in Britain inherently questionable. It is, however, not only the lack of academic rigour which highlights real failings within this book. The author clearly does not (either deliberately or inadvertently) understand basic air power concepts such as air superiority and how fundamentally important these are for the conduct of any aerial operation. This lack of understanding is demonstrated through the following quote:

> The Air Staff … maintained that air support had only worked for Germany in Poland and France because they had air superiority. Once the RAF had air superiority, the Army would get all the support it wanted. This was very dangerous thinking. Clearly providing an army with air support is easier with air