

Fighting to Lose. How the German Secret Intelligence Service Helped the Allies Win the Second World War

by John Bryden

Toronto: Dundurn, 2014

415 pages, \$26.99 Soft Cover

Reviewed by Bernd Horn

This is a very intriguing, thought provoking book on the Second World War. Its premise is that the *Abwehr*, that is, the German Secret Intelligence Service, and particularly, its leader, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, fought a secret campaign to prevent Britain from certain defeat in 1940/1941. The book begins strong by laying out the thesis and creating a foundation to build upon. The author uses the post-war interrogation of surviving senior intelligence officers to paint the picture of Canaris as an avid opponent to Hitler and his Nazi party.

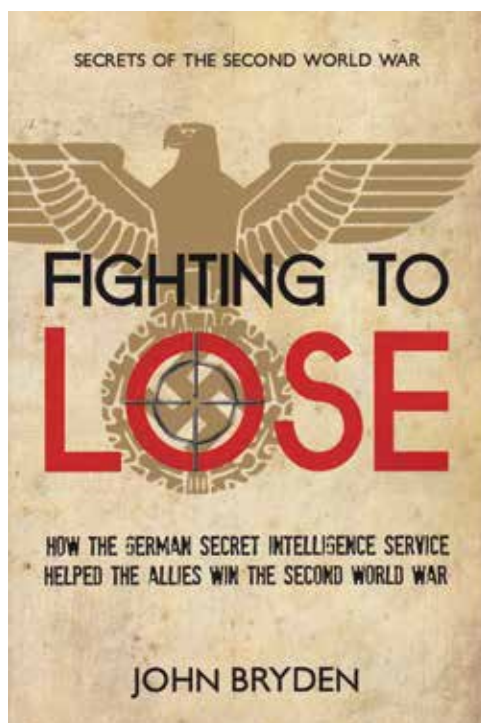
Part I of the book is absorbing. It describes the ongoing battle of espionage between the great powers in the years prior to the start of the war. Importantly, it highlights the fact that the *Abwehr* was, by 1939, the most advanced and effective secret intelligence service operating, and that the British MI5 was arguably one of the most inept, which was in complete contrast to what the author indicates was the contemporary depiction of MI5 at the time as being highly effective. Bryden also lays out the opposition to Hitler and the attempts made by Canaris and his fellow conspirators to undermine and overthrow *der Führer* in the lead-up to the war, all, of course, failures, as history has shown.

The book takes a turn in Part II. The next 117 pages are a detailed account of the espionage war between Britain and Germany, a 'spy versus spy' narrative. This account is engaging,

particularly the battle of double and triple agents. At times, the apparent ineptitude of the British intelligence authorities is shocking. The narrative is crisp, and, at times, it reads like a spy novel. The content is fascinating, and a number of important wartime issues arise. However, the link to the thesis of the book is tenuous. It is left to the reader to make a connection, or if there actually is one, between events described and the premise that Canaris was 'fighting to lose' by helping the British.

The author places a lot of emphasis upon the fact that German agents being sent over to Britain had cyphers and papers that were so primitive that capture was almost assured. Yet, he also points out that the British so badly managed their double agents, who, at the end of the war, were confirmed to have been triple agents, that it becomes logical that the Germans actually wanted their agents to be captured and 'turned,' since they were having so much success getting valuable information from their current crop of triple agents.

The book takes another turn in Part III, which makes up almost a third of the book. In this section, the author undertakes a detailed examination of the lead-up to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941. His research and narrative make a compelling case for those who argue the 'surprise' of the attack was the result of a Churchill/Roosevelt conspiracy that would finally push America into the war. The link to the *Abwehr* was the disclosure by one of the German triple agents of a number of microdots that held a long questionnaire received from the Japanese with specific queries on the military disposition of infrastructure and ships at Pearl Harbour in Hawaii. The text is exceptional, including great detail with respect to FBI and US military intelligence intercepts and decryption. However, again, the links are vague between the thesis of the book and the actual text. It is seemingly left to the reader to draw out the necessary assumptions and conclusions. Nonetheless, Part III is a powerful section that stimulates much reflection.



BOOK REVIEWS

The final part of the book contains the analysis and epilogue, and it totals 33 pages. Therein, the author addresses and reviews myriad scintillating issues, ranging from the penetration of British security services by communist and fascist infiltrators, the ineptitude of MI5, the bombing of London and Churchill's role in deflecting the attacks on the RAF and from the centre of London to other civilian targets, and to the obvious *Abwehr* mistakes in preparing German agents sent to England. However, only seven pages actually address the thesis of the book, wherein the author tries to make a direct link between Canaris and his efforts to help the British. In the end, it is not the 'smoking gun' for which the readership might hope.

In sum, the book is very well written. The writing is exceptional and fast flowing. The research is equally first-class, and the book contains a wealth of endnotes that consist of excellent primary and secondary sources. It also has a superb select bibliography and a very comprehensive index. Important to note, however, is the fact that throughout the book, the author makes assumptions and conclusions to fill in gaps where there is missing evidence, many of which with readers may or may not agree. In all fairness, this

is not surprising, since any work dealing with secret intelligence organizations, espionage, and conspiracies against dictators will suffer from a lack of hard evidence that prove theories conclusively, and *particularly* in this case, where files were destroyed due to the war, and records between the conspirators were not kept lest they fall in the hands of the secret police.

In conclusion, although I would argue the book fails to conclusively support its thesis, it is an extremely interesting read and a valuable tool to the understanding of some key issues in the Second World War. I unconditionally recommend it to anyone who has an interest in intelligence, espionage, and/or the Second World War.

Colonel (Ret'd) Bernd Horn, OMM, MSM, CD, Ph D, *is a former Regular Force infantry officer. Dr. Horn is also an adjunct professor of the Centre for Military and Strategic Studies at the University of Calgary, as well as an adjunct professor of history at the Royal Military College of Canada and Norwich University. Additionally, he is a (jolly good) Fellow of the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute.*