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SIGINT and the Holocaust

ROBERT LOUIS BENSON

SIGINT from British and French sources provided a limited but authentic picture of the early stages of the Holocaust. This information was made available to Prime Minister Churchill and, in midwar, to the U.S. Churchill recognized the importance of the information and used it in at least one major speech (without reference to the source). In this article we will review the SIGINT, compare it to other sources of information, and comment on a number of controversies including the bombing of Auschwitz.

The Holocaust can be divided into four phases:

| | |
|-------------------------------|---------------|
| 1933 - September 1939 | Repression |
| September 1939 - January 1942 | Mass Murder |
| January 1942 - November 1944 | Genocide |
| November 1944 - May 1945 | Nazi Collapse |

Secret intelligence was not needed to follow the first phase. The Nazis openly arrested people they didn't like; their racial laws were publicly promulgated; foreign visitors and the press reported on the Crystal Night atrocities.

The second phase, the mass murder of Jews and others, began with the German invasion of Poland in September 1939 and especially with their invasion of Russia on 22 June 1941. SIGINT information about the Holocaust is mostly from July 1941 into 1942.

THE GERMAN POLICE DECRYPTS

The most revealing SIGINT came from intercept and decryption of German police Morse radio traffic passing between the police units with the invading forces and Berlin. Under the Nazis (and under the Weimar and the old Empire too) the German police were a militarized, armed body often formed into regional or municipal battalions. These formations, regular police (Ordnungspolizei or ORPO) in peacetime, formed the major killing force in the mass murder phase of the Holocaust. Other parts of the Nazi police and security apparatus included the SS security and intelligence units (the SD), the Gestapo, the Kripo (criminal police) and the concentration camp organizations.

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The British SIGINT service, then known as GC&CS, and their French counterpart broke into German police ciphers in 1938, a year before the war began. These ciphers, summarized below, were read (with one exception) throughout World War II:

| Police Group | Message Extracts |
|------------------------|---|
| ORPO | Simple Hand Ciphers Medium-Grade Hand Ciphers Roulette Enigma (machine) |
| Gestapo & Kripo | TGD Enigma |
| SS Military Units | Orange II Enigma |
| SS Concentration Camps | Orange I Enigma |

Only the TGD Enigma remained impenetrable. The British records released so far show little concerning SIGINT from police traffic before the invasion of Russia. Thereafter we have this sampling of dreadfulness, taken from police radio messages intercepted and decrypted during July and August 1941:

| Police Group | Cipher |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| At Slonin, Regt South Minsk area, SS Cavalry Brigade | 1,153 Jews shot 3,600 executed |

(The SS Cavalry Brigade was merely an ORPO (police) unit that was partly mounted.)

| | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Minsk area, SS Cavalry Brigade | 3,247 Reds and Jews shot |
| Southern area, Police Regt. 314 | 367 Jews shot |
| Southern area, Police Regt. 314 | 294 Jews shot |
| Police Regt. South | 549 Jews shot |
| Special Task Force, Police Bn. 320 | 4,200 Jews shot |
| Police and Security Service | "Jew operation: 700 incapable of labor shot" |
| Police Bn. 320 | 2,200 Jews shot |

These sorts of communications continued, including the summary report of 7 August 1941 that 30,000 civilians (mostly Jews) had been shot by the police in the central sector alone since the beginning of the invasion - small numbers compared to what was to follow.

On 24 August 1941, Prime Minister Churchill gave a radio address concerning the progress of the German invasion of Russia in which he said:

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The Germans are committing the most frightful cruelties - whole districts are being exterminated. Scores of thousands, literally scores of thousands, of executions in cold blood are being perpetrated by the German police troops - since the Mongol invasions of Europe there has never been methodical, merciless butchery on such a scale, or approaching such a scale. We are in the presence of a crime without a name.

Clearly the prime minister was drawing upon the special series SIGINT that was being delivered to him daily by "C," Sir Stewart Menzies, the chief of the Secret Service and head of British SIGINT.

The British assigned substantial intercept assets to German police traffic though not necessarily, or solely, to cover the atrocities. The police traffic contained important intelligence on the progress of the war and in later years was a good source for information on guerrilla warfare and the political and economic situation in occupied Europe.

The French SIGINT service element that had stayed behind in Vichy France intercepted some 6,000 police messages and radioed both decrypts and traffic to the U.K. A French decrypt of a 28 August 1941 police message from Russia reported that 5,130 Jews had been shot that day by an SS Brigade, Police Regiment South and Police Battalion 320.

This traffic declined in 1942 as Kurt Daleuge, the ORPO commander, had ordered that information on mass murder should be sent to Berlin by courier rather than trusted to radio.

SIGINT AND THE DEATH CAMPS

SIGINT produced no clear information about the genocide in the death camps and apparently nothing about the gassings. However, traffic in the readable Orange I Enigma Key produced considerable, though misleading, information about the camps during 1942-43. The British decrypted traffic from some ten camps, including Auschwitz, identified in the SS messages as "Camp G." The GC&CS analysts determined that the unlabeled columns in these messages probably gave a daily report showing number of inmates at the beginning of the day, new arrivals, "departures by any means" and nationalities. But the numbers, including those in the ominous "departures" columns, are relatively low. The British *Official History of Intelligence in World War II* does not remark on this.

Though this has gone unnoticed, it might seem to be an opening for the sorry few who deny the reality of the Holocaust. The answer is this: Through SIGINT we have an example of Nazi bureaucracy, for we know that most transports, the great majority of Jewish arrivals, were destined for immediate murder in the gas chambers. They were never processed in but went straight to their deaths and were thus not counted in these daily reports which concerned only those who were sent to work as slave labor and who "departed" from disease and mistreatment.

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AN ALL-SOURCE EVALUATION

SIGINT was not the most important source of information about the Holocaust. This darkest secret of the Third Reich leaked out immediately from and to sources too numerous to describe. Just a few examples: Within weeks of the end of the Polish campaign of 1939, some brave German officers went to the Papal Nuncio (ambassador) to Berlin to report that the German Army was murdering Jews and other defenseless Polish civilians. During 1942, many reports reached the Allies and Neutrals, that all the Jews in occupied Europe were being murdered. The Polish Home Army (underground) intelligence service reported this to their exile government in London. Similar reports were made by the Czech services, by the Red Cross, and the Swedes. U.S. representatives in Switzerland obtained this information.

In early 1944, two young Slovakian Jews, Rudolph Vrba and Alfred Wetzler escaped from Auschwitz and got their story to the Allies. They described in amazing detail what was going on at Auschwitz; they named the SS officers in charge, described the layout of the camps and of the gas chambers.

The Allies undoubtedly believed these reports. We know that President Roosevelt, Prime Minister Churchill, Marshal Sikorski, and Tito did. In this short space it seems pointless to wonder what they could or should have done. But it is important to say that in the U.S. and Britain the general population probably did not really understand the magnitude of the Nazi crimes. Consider these recollections of the eminent intellectual and historian Sir Isaiah Berlin, who lived in London and Washington during the war:

I assumed from the very beginning that Hitler meant to inflict terrible sufferings on the Jews - he was a fiend and implacable. . . . I assumed that terrible things were happening to Jews [but] before 1944 I knew nothing about systematic extermination, the gas chambers. Nobody told me, in England or America; there was nothing about it in anything I read. There probably were articles on back pages or news items but I missed them.

And Sir Isaiah had access to official information. So there was certainly a lack of focused reporting and analysis - so far as I can determine, none of the Allied intelligence services had divisions or branches or whatever devoted to what we now call the Holocaust. The SIGINT was compartmented, and the German police decrypts were not made available to the U.S. intelligence services until the summer of 1943, when a mission from the U.S. Army's Military Intelligence Service Special Branch visited GC&CS.

The German police decrypts were made available to the U.S.-U.K. Nurnberg trial staff after the war. These could not be used because of security reasons but were hardly necessary to the case. Some years ago, in his long slow road to admitting that he had been an officer of both the British Security Service (MI-5) and the Secret Service (MI-6), the author John Le Carré recalled that just after World War II he had been assigned to a British military intelligence unit tracking down German war criminals. Le Carré said that he had carried a thick handbook that listed the German police units and commanders - undoubtedly information based on the decrypts. Perhaps he will have more to say about

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this, as will other sources. Prime Minister Churchill's intelligence files (those delivered to him by "C") are being opened. We may learn more as researchers work their way through the files of the OSS and Military Intelligence. We close with a case study and enduring controversy.

THE AUSCHWITZ BOMBING QUESTION

Should the Allies have bombed the Auschwitz death camp and the rail lines leading there? Was it feasible? What was the available intelligence? A summary answer to the last:

- U.S. aerial photography in possibly 1943 and definitely in 1944 showed that Auschwitz was a huge slave labor complex with important industrial facilities, all served by rail across relatively empty Polish countryside.
- SIGINT (decrypts of the Orange I Enigma messages) had identified Auschwitz as a major prison camp and industrial complex. This information was probably not available to the U.S. Army Air Force (USAAF) planners in Italy.
- The Vrba-Wetzler report was available to the U.S. in the first half of 1944, but we have no knowledge that it was communicated to (or at least highlighted) to the USAAF in Italy.
- The true nature of Auschwitz had been reported in the press since 1942. We do not know how this figured in USAAF appreciations.

The bombing was feasible; in fact, some parts of the Auschwitz industrial complex, that is, facilities a few miles away from the death camp, were bombed (on missions flown from Italy) in 1944. The War Department in Washington did receive suggestions, mostly from Jewish leaders and refugee authorities, that Auschwitz or the supporting rail lines should be bombed for the specific purpose of ending the murders.

In June 1944, the War Department in Washington rejected these suggestions finding that such air operations were not practical and would require the diversion "of considerable air support essential to the success of our forces now engaged in decisive operations" and that the best hope for the victims was "the early defeat of the Axis, an undertaking to which we must devote every resource at our disposal." This position was very much in keeping with the simple orders that had just been given to General Eisenhower by the Combined Chiefs of Staff and which ever since have been cited as a model for a clearly stated mission objective:

You will enter the continent of Europe and destroy the German armed forces.

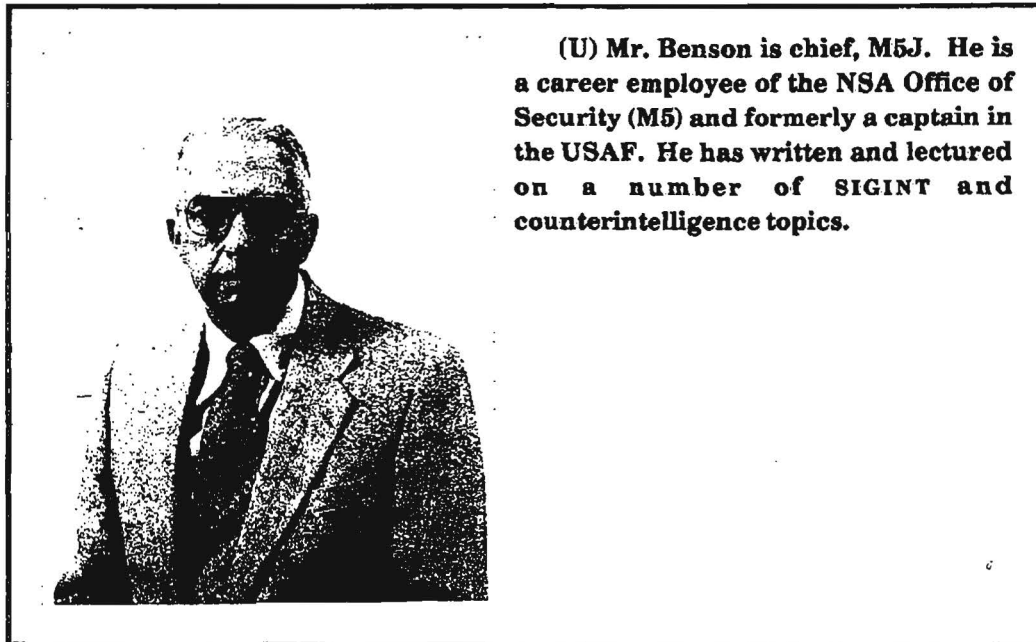
The debate then moves to military and intelligence technicalities which, however, are crucial to a fair resolution of this controversy (which of course will never be resolved). It comes down to this: The U.S. heavy bombers had the range but not the accuracy; the lighter B-25s, B-26s, etc., would have been hard put to make the round trip; the British

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special-mission Mosquitos were spread thin and best used in attacking clearly identifiable targets closer-in, such as Gestapo headquarters in Holland, Copenhagen, and Oslo. The intelligence officers and planners with 15th Air Force in Italy lacked information on specific targets in the huge Auschwitz complex. And almost everyone agrees that the rail lines into Auschwitz could not have been permanently taken out or even significantly annoyed.

Air attacks could have been made; they probably would not have been successful. Such attacks should have been tried, but only if there had been intelligence cells dedicated to the Holocaust that could have wrung from all sources (SIGINT, air photography, agents, and close questioning of Messrs. Vrba and Wetzler) information needed to identify good targets. The honor of the U.S. Air Force ought not to be in question. The commander in chief (FDR) might have spoken up.



(U) Mr. Benson is chief, M5J. He is a career employee of the NSA Office of Security (M5) and formerly a captain in the USAF. He has written and lectured on a number of SIGINT and counterintelligence topics.

REFERENCES

Author's note. *There are too many sources to cite: call me for a reading list, 963-1978s or (301) 688-5052b.*

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