

*H-France Review* Vol. 8 (October 2008), No. 134

Simon Kitson, *The Hunt for Nazi Spies: Fighting Espionage in Vichy France*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008. xix + 218 pp. Maps, glossary, chronology, bibliography, notes, and index. \$25.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-226-43893-7.

Review by Lynne Taylor, University of Waterloo.

Simon Kitson's book, *The Hunt for Nazi Spies*, is a fascinating trip into the shadowy world of espionage and counterespionage in Vichy France. Based on recently released archival material only just repatriated from Moscow, where it had been sent at the end of World War II, Kitson has used the story of the secret services to convincingly demonstrate and explore the contradictions that plagued the Vichy government as it strove to maintain its independence in the face of the German occupation, and its ultimate inability to find a balance between the two competing objectives it had set for itself—the maintenance of its sovereignty and collaboration with the Nazi regime.

On first glance, it seems counter-intuitive that there would be much in the way of espionage in France once Germany had defeated her, but a closer look reveals that the reality was much different. Germany actually significantly increased the number of agents it had operating in France and North Africa after the armistice was signed. This happened for a variety of reasons, many of which reflected the Germans' deep distrust of the Vichy regime: The Germans wished to ensure that the French were abiding by the terms of the armistice. They feared that the French might be rebuilding their armed forces clandestinely. They wanted to keep a finger on the pulse of the French population, to ensure that Vichy was controlling and pacifying the population effectively. They sought to ensure the security of the German administrations put in place by using spies to vet applicants for work with those administrations. The Germans also used their spies to monitor the French colonies, whose reliability was suspect. Finally, the spies were directed to inventory all of the economic resources in the non-occupied areas, in anticipation of their exploitation. Kitson points out that many of the Germans' spies were actually French nationals. He offers several categorisations to explain why French nationals might spy for the Germans against their own country: calling them patriots, ideologues, profiteers, the sentimental, adventurers, the vulnerable, and the reluctant (who might be better called 'the coerced').

At the same time, in spite of its strict prohibition in paragraph 10 of the Armistice Agreement, the French secret services continued to operate in the non-occupied territories—both southern France and the colonies, especially North Africa. There were several French organisations created to conduct counterespionage and they were directed against both the Allies and the Axis powers. Their objective was to fight all spies, whoever they represented. Interestingly, the French spies were more obsessed with the German agents than they were with the Allied agents. The French secret services were deeply anti-German. Traditionally, the Germans were considered the greater enemy, not Britain. They mistrusted the Nazis' intentions and sought the country's liberation from the Nazi yoke. And so they pursued the German agents with zeal. Anti-Germanism, however, did not necessarily mean they were pro-Allies. At best they were ambivalent about the British, Gaullist and American secret services (especially the British and Gaullist). They considered them dangerously bumbling amateurs who were poorly trained, poorly equipped and easily infiltrated by the Germans, and so jeopardizing everyone who worked with them. They objected to the increasing politicization of the Gaullist agents. In spite of

this attitude, however, the French were ready to help the Allied agents, by sharing information they might find useful and assisting captured agents in escaping.

No such courtesies were extended to German agents. Instead, when captured, the German agents were treated harshly by French police. Torture was not an uncommon event. Conditions in the prisons were abysmal and the agents were often held in solitary confinement, carefully hidden away from the German authorities' eyes. The German agents were tried before military or naval tribunals up until November 1942, and by civilian courts afterwards. Between 1500 and 2500 were arrested as German spies and a number of them were executed. All of this was done with Vichy's knowledge and assent, so Kitson argues. Too many of its non-clandestine branches (the *Contrôle Technique*, the courts, the regular police) assisted the secret services for Vichy to be unaware of their operations. If the Vichy government had objected, it could have easily ended that cooperation, but it didn't. After the occupation of the south, the French secret services disbanded or joined the Resistance, and it was left to the Vichy government to deal with the imprisoned agents. The agents remained imprisoned, many went on to trial, and some, to execution. Vichy both knew of the counterespionage activities and endorsed them.

This is not to say that the relationship between the secret services and the Vichy government was an easy one. It was not. Vichy needed the secret services because they helped preserve its sovereignty—sovereignty over the individual, institutional sovereignty, and territorial sovereignty. Its agents monitored the French population with the intent of limiting contacts between the French and Axis organisations. The Vichy government did not want individual French citizens contacting the occupiers directly as a supplicant about anything. Allowing this to happen would have undermined Vichy's control over its population as well as the legitimacy of its administration. Only French governmental organs were supposed to have jurisdiction in the southern zone and to allow the Germans to solve individual French citizens' problems would seriously compromise Vichy's authority. Even German infiltration of the Resistance movements was unacceptable, as it threatened Vichy's monopoly in the repression of dissident activities. The government was determined to maintain total power below the demarcation line, having lost the territory above it. The secret services allowed them to do that, both by monitoring the French population's interaction with the Germans and by monitoring (and hopefully preventing) German infiltration below the demarcation line.

Yet, while the Vichy government understood the secret services' role in the maintenance of its sovereignty, it did not always approve of their activities. Too often for the services' liking, the government was not willing to accept the diplomatic consequences of secret service actions and so sought to rein them in. The secret services resented intensely these attempts to bring them under governmental control. When the Vichy government accepted a series of compromises on counterespionage (such as giving the Germans access to their arrested spies; and returning arrested spies to the Germans), the strain between the government and the secret services was palpable. These compromises were a result of divisions within the government over the secret services' role; differing degrees of anti-German sentiment between the various ministries; and the centrality of the policy of collaboration. For the Vichy government, collaboration was the lynchpin in its relations with Germany and key to the country's future. It could not be compromised by actions of the secret services, even if those ensured its sovereignty. This was the impossible balance Vichy sought in vain—between sovereignty and collaboration.

The ambiguity of the secret services' position as explained by Kitson offers an intriguing insight into the difficult bind in which Vichy found itself. While Vichy's goal might have been to cast itself along the lines of Franco's Spain or Salazar's Portugal, "where nationalist authoritarian regimes... had been able to stay in power without foreign occupation," this ultimately proved impossible (p. 143). France, unlike Spain and Portugal, had been invaded and occupied, at first in part, but soon enough, in the whole. Unlike Spain and Portugal, France made too great a contribution to the German war economy for the Germans to safely ignore. Unlike Spain and Portugal, it was too significant strategically to be left alone,

given its domination of the western Mediterranean. Finally, unlike Spain and Portugal, France was too enmeshed in the German plans for the continent to truly be an independent partner. Collaboration was essential, but so too was maintenance of sovereignty. As one organ of the government chiefly focused on the issue of sovereignty (and which had little patience with the notion of collaboration), the secret services soon ran into conflict with the competing governmental policy of collaboration, forcing Vichy into interesting contortions while it tried to strike that elusive balance. Kitson's studies of the French secret services have provided us with a valuable case study of the implications of the ambiguities and inherent contradictions in Vichy's policies of sovereignty and collaboration, an instance where the two repeatedly collided with revealing results.

Lynne Taylor  
University of Waterloo  
ltaylor@uwaterloo.ca

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172