War of Shadows: Codebreakers, Spies, and the Secret Struggle to Drive the Nazis from the Middle East

Gershom Gorenberg (Public Affairs, 2021), 474 pages, map, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by Brent M. Geary

For nine months in 1941, besieged by German and Italian forces under the command of German Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, "British" Army forces in the Libyan port city of Tobruk had held out. The defenders were a hodgepodge of Australians, Poles, New Zealanders, South Africans, Indians, Free French, and Greeks. They had provided for many around the world a sense of solidarity and hope in the face of Adolf Hitler's seemingly unstoppable conquests. Then, in June 1942, Tobruk fell to Axis tanks in less than a day. Only 90 miles from the border with Egypt, Rommel now had a clear path to the Persian Gulf and its rich oil reserves, control of the Suez Canal, and the destruction of the Jewish settlements in Palestine and annihilation of those who lived there. Or so it seemed.

War of Shadows, by Israeli historian and journalist Gershom Gorenberg, is a riveting, exhaustively researched account of how Allied intelligence services undermined Rommel's drive across North Africa and ultimately helped stop him before he could reach Cairo and dash unimpeded into the wider Middle East. It is the story of clerks, adventurers, soldiers, politicians, aristocrats, codebreakers, diplomats, and one very devoted wife who refused to be evacuated to safety and chose to fight on however she could.

Now famous figures such as Rommel, Alan Turing, and Anwar Sadat feature prominently, but so too do many most readers will meet for the first time in this book. Gorenberg stitches their stories together, taking readers from British colonialism in North Africa to the German invasion of Poland in 1939, from the creation of Britain's renowned Bletchley Park to the United States during its prewar struggle with isolationism, and back again to Egypt and Palestine. Reading like the best of historical fiction, his tale pulls readers along through the personal experiences of its many characters, in service of the larger narrative of how they all contributed to Hitler's defeat or, in the case of Italian and German actors, their ultimately unsuccessful efforts to secure Axis victory.

Marian Rejewski, for example, was the brilliant Polish mathematician who led a team for the Polish General Staff that, starting in 1931, found a way to crack the Enigma machines that enciphered German military communications. As Gorenberg explains, by 1932 Rejewski calculated that the elaborate wiring of the machines—which he had never seen—had a number of possible configurations, with an approximate number written as five followed by 92 zeroes. "Obviously, no codebreaker was ever going to look at messages and figure out the wiring—not in a trillion years," he writes. Rejewski and his tiny team of Jerzy Rozycki and Henryk Zygalski did it in three months. (27) By 1933, they were able to read every encrypted German message that Polish radio interceptors could provide them, but their efforts were not enough to stop the Blitzkrieg. Polish commanders ordered the team to flee and try to provide their expertise to the Allies, which helped form the foundation of French and later British codebreaking efforts that would prove decisive in North Africa and elsewhere.

Gorenberg recounts the creation of Bletchley Park in some detail and, more briefly, the story of its most noted figure, Alan Turing. He shines more light, however, on other British codebreakers—many of them women—who found the human errors that pervaded German communications and provided avenues for revealing their most sensitive operations, and helped identify and crack Nazi intelligence networks. Margaret Storey, for example, whom a contemporary recalled as being "a woman of daunting intelligence," helped identify a human source who was providing the Germans with spectacular information from Cairo that was aiding Rommel's efforts in North Africa. Storey and untold hundreds like her worked maniacally to pull coded needles from haystacks to stop the Axis powers from taking over the world. Many suffered from nervous breakdowns. In the process, though, one of her superiors, Gordon Welchman, recalled that he and many others were also having "the greatest fun that life would ever offer." (256)

Another aspect of the war that Gorenberg illuminates is the lack of trust between conventional military and intelligence agencies and those created during the war. Many authors, for example, have discussed this phenomenon in relation to the US Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and the US military. In Egypt, the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) operated often without the knowledge of local British Army commanders, leading the latter to take extraordinary measures to keep tabs on the former. One SOE clerk, a lesser English noblewoman formally known as Countess Hermione Ranfurly, smuggled documents in her brassiere from the Cairo SOE office to a disgruntled SOE officer who was working secretly for British Army authorities across town. Ranfurly and others viewed their superior as being personally and financially corrupt and as "spending more on women than on war." (179) Ranfurly later quit the SOE and transferred to Palestine to work for the British Army commander there.

But Gorenberg does not limit himself to examination of the Allied intelligence effort. He also describes an operation in Rome that began in the mid-1930s and later provided the Axis with insights into British Army order of battle and defensive plans against Rommel's forces. Elements of the Italian security services—led by the daring Major Manfredi Talamo—over several years broke into foreign embassies in Rome, stole, copied, and replaced code books, and used that information to read encrypted messages. Additionally, and in stark contrast to the Italian successes against Allied embassies in Rome, Gorenberg recounts "Operation Condor," the tale of two comically inept German spies a Hungarian explorer and

army officer smuggled across the southern Egyptian desert to the Nile valley. Once they reached Cairo, in the months leading up to Rommel's advance toward the Egyptian capital, Johann Eppler and Heinrich Sandstede spent their time and Nazi money at expensive night clubs and on female companions while doctoring their journals to make it appear they had tried to do their jobs, concocting "evidence" they planned to provide to their superiors when the Axis forces conquered Egypt. Despite their incompetence, Rommel received better intelligence from Cairo than his two wayward spies could have ever hoped to acquire. That exquisite intelligence was provided by his Italian allies in Rome, sourced to a well-intentioned and loyal American officer in Cairo. The flow of intelligence was ultimately identified and stopped by Bletchley Park codebreakers. It would not do to reveal more; readers deserve to have their fun unspoiled.

While this book is riveting and highly recommended, it is not always easy to follow and might be somewhat of a commitment for casual readers. To call it complex is probably an understatement. Gorenberg, for example, provides eight pages at the beginning of the book listing the "cast of characters" from across 11 countries and 18 separate intelligence agencies. But for intelligence professionals, the effort is worth it. *War of Shadows* is not just highly entertaining, it is positively filled with examples of innovations, successes, and failures in collection, analysis, counterintelligence, liaison relationships, interagency teamwork, and timely information sharing with policymakers and warfighters. Gorenberg's ensemble helped save the world from fascism, and his telling of their story is inspirational.

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