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The Secret War: Spies, Ciphers, And Guerrillas, 1939-1945



Synopsis

From one of the foremost historians of the period and the acclaimed author of *Inferno* and *Catastrophe: 1914, The Secret War* is a sweeping examination of one of the most important yet underexplored aspects of World War II - intelligence - showing how espionage successes and failures by the United States, Britain, Russia, Germany, and Japan influenced the course of the war and its final outcome. Spies, codes, and guerrillas played unprecedentedly critical roles in the Second World War, exploited by every nation in the struggle to gain secret knowledge of its foes, and to sow havoc behind the fronts. In *The Secret War*, Max Hastings presents a worldwide cast of characters and some extraordinary sagas of intelligence and resistance, to create a new perspective on the greatest conflict in history.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

“A spy should be like the devil: no one can trust him, not even himself.” (Joseph Stalin)
“Perhaps one-thousandth of 1 per cent of material garnered from secret sources [in WW II] contributed to changing battlefield outcomes.” (Max Hastings)
“Most accounts of SOE agents, particularly women and especially in France, contain large doses of romantic twaddle.” (Max Hastings)
Hastings brings a wealth of experience as a military historian of twentieth century wars to this fascinating account of spying, codebreaking and guerrilla warfare in the Second World War. And by casting his net wide, he adds perspective to a tale that is often blown out of proportion when looked at small – the story of a single spy or operation. He also brings a salutary dose of

skepticism to a story that is so romantic that it has repeatedly been made hyperbolic. Spying certainly, support of guerrilla operations also, codebreaking less so — none of these activities significantly altered the course or duration of a long, hard fought, costly war. Brute force, as always, made the difference: where one side or the other had men and guns, and the leaders didn't mess it up spectacularly, that side won the battle. And enough battles won, you won the war as well. Humint (human intelligence) was especially problematic. Even where the intel received was good, (1) the reputation of the spy agencies (especially MI6) was low in the eyes of their masters, in part because of past embarrassments, (2) good intel often arrived accompanied by bad intel, information that was extraneous, confusing or outright incorrect or (3) was received or looked at too late to be of assistance.

Max Hastings has produced a number of well-researched and comprehensive works on military history over the years, notably on WWII, and this is his account of the unconventional aspects of that war. It's a comprehensive, wide-ranging and perhaps definitive review of espionage, counter-espionage, and insurgent/unconventional warfare in that conflict, on all continents and all sides. It's a new work that follows, and often critically examines, previous accounts by Malcolm Muggeridge, Hugh Trevor-Roper, Harry Hinsley and others about the spy business of the time; certainly the British secret war was in many ways the most complex and sophisticated. Hastings covers other countries' efforts: Germany's wide-ranging, often inept, spy work in Africa, the Americas, the Soviet Union, even Ireland; Japan's efforts in cryptography and espionage in China and against the US; the US espionage and counterespionage, notably its code-cracking and problematic relationships with their UK counterparts. Some of Hastings' work is troubling, perhaps revelatory: the disappointments and failures in the resistance war against the Nazis; the loss of 40,000 Soviet troops in Operation Mars near Moscow in a failed offensive now known to be a deliberate ruse; the complications of simple intelligence gathering; the code-breaking and missed chances even when the codes broke. Certainly we learn more about Ultra, Enigma, the Bletchley Park team headed by Alan Turing, the SOE. And, we find, it was a war that had a high death rate among its participants.

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