The Abwehr:
From German espionage agency, to centre of resistance against Hitler

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The Project:

My research for Dr. Vourkoutiotis has mainly involved searching the microfilmed finding-aids for the German Captured Records archive located in Washington, D.C. The task requires me to scan the microfilmed data sheets for information relevant to the project, and then summarize that info for the Professor. The process has greatly familiarized me with the everyday work of a professional historian, and some of the necessary research steps for a historical monograph. The project has also furthered my knowledge of German history, especially regarding the different espionage organizations at work during World War II.

This work is in preparation for Dr. Vourkoutiotis’s eventual trip to the archives in Washington D.C. where he will locate the important documents relating to the Abwehr. The research completed by myself in Ottawa will enable him to visit the archives already aware of what relevant documents exist, and where to begin in his search for primary sources. The final outcome of the research product will hopefully be a monograph by Dr. Vourkoutiotis giving the first comprehensive account of the history of the Abwehr.

An example of a microfilmed data sheet index (with information relevant to this project circled) is pictured below. There are thousands of such index pages in the microfilmed records, available in the Morisset Library.

About the Abwehr:

The name “Abwehr” in German can be translated literally as “defence.” However, despite its name, the Abwehr became one of the forefront intelligence gathering establishments in Nazi Germany. The organization was tasked with gathering information on the country’s enemies, primarily using field-based agents. The Abwehr fell under the administration of the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (Supreme Command of the Armed Forces) and interacted heavily with other German espionage agencies such as the Sicherheitsdienst (Security Service of the SS and Nazi Party).

During World War II, under the direction of Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, the Abwehr was implicated in numerous espionage functions outside of Germany. It participated in both intelligence gathering and sabotage against the Allies. Such functions were also undertaken by other German agencies such as the Sicherheitsdienst, leading to open competition between such organizations.

Despite the Abwehr’s work in World War II, it is widely purported to have also worked against Hitler while under Canaris. Abwehr agents were accused of having direct contact with the Allies, and attempting to undermine the German war effort and Nazi control of the country. Due to this duplicity, the Abwehr was dismantled in 1944 and its functions were absorbed by the Sicherheitsdienst.

Wilhelm Canaris:

A veteran of World War I, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris of the Kriegsmarine took over command of the Abwehr in 1935 (pictured right). He oversaw a restructuring of the organization in which he ensured key positions were staffed by officials who shared his quiet opposition to Nazi ideology and atrocities. Among such colleagues was Colonel Hans Oster who, along with Canaris, was eventually implicated in a plot against Hitler’s life.

Historical evidence widely suggests that Canaris actively worked contrary to Hitler and Nazi war efforts throughout his time as leader of the Abwehr. He is thought to have had direct contact with British officials with whom he shared information. Canaris is also said to have aided some Jewish refugees from Germany in their flight from Nazi persecution.

In 1944, Canaris’s actions were finally noticed by Nazi party leadership, and he was relieved of his duties. He was eventually executed for his actions as a presumed traitor in 1945 along with Hans Oster. Canaris always maintained that he had acted against Hitler’s atrocities, but for the greater good of the German people.

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