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Wilhelm Canaris was appointed by Hitler to head the Abwehr (the German secret service) eighteen months after the Nazis came to power. But Canaris turned against the Fuhrer and the Nazi regime, believing that Hitler would start a war Germany could not win. In 1938 he was involved in an attempted coup, undermined by British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. In 1940 he sabotaged the German plan to invade England, and fed General Franco vital information that helped him keep Spain out of the war. For years he played a dangerous double game, desperately trying to keep one step ahead of the Gestapo. The SS chief, Heinrich Himmler, became suspicious of the Abwehr and by 1944, when Abwehr personnel were involved in the attempted assassination of Hitler, he had the evidence to arrest Canaris himself. Canaris was executed a few weeks before the end of the war.

Hitler's Spy Chief: The William Canaris Mystery Details

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From Reader Review Hitler's Spy Chief: The William Canaris Mystery for online ebook

Chris says

Overall, this was an entertaining story, but it does not satisfy as a work of history.

Wilhelm Canaris, the protagonist, is a fascinating individual with an impressive array of achievements. Interestingly, as chief of the German foreign intelligence service before and during WW2, there is substantial evidence that he both supported and didn't support Germany in the war.

Some resolution of this central contradiction is essential. Yet, unfortunately, there is no substantive analysis or investigation of this contradiction in Bassett's book. Instead it is, so to speak, "just one thing after another" and ultimately unenlightening. For such a fascinating biographic topic this is a real disappointment.

This review is based on the Audible recording.

Chad Berke says

The book "Hitlers Spy Chief" by Richard Bassett was a good book. This book follows a bright young navy man throughout his naval career and into the ranks to become the head of Hitlers spy organization. The young navy officers name is Wilhelm Canaris.

I thought the book was very well done. However I thought that if you really weren't into WWII and the history of the Nazi's it might become boring. But I really liked the book. Wilhelm Canaris also helped Britain and I quote the abwehr was going to play the role of a most unlikely 'guardian angel' to the British empire"(183). So the whole time the good guys had a leg up on the Nazi's I like it, it was very interesting and informative. It was a nice change from all of the other Nazi books because this guy actually help save some of the Jews. It was also interesting hearing about Hitler trying to get Spain to join him. However after a meeting with Spain's prime minster Hitler Said to Canaris " he was well prepared for that" (154). I didn't realize that Hitler wanted Spain.

I believe that the theme of the book kind of had to do with the good guy vs the bad guy. The antagonist of the whole book is Hitler and the hardcore nazis. And in a was the protagonist is Wilhelm Canaris because he helped out Britain and help keep Spain out of the war and also countless Jews from the concentration camps.

Joe Oaster says

Excellent history of this honorable man who paid with his life next to who people I have come to respect and admire, Dietrich Bonehoeffter and Hans Oster. I have seen he camp where these men were ultimate killed for standing up to Hitler. Good story of this Great than

Dave says

I was not able to complete this book. It appeared to me that the book was written for people with an in-depth understanding of the Third Reich, its government and spy organization, and at least a passing knowledge of William Canaris. I do not fit that bill. It also seemed to be written from a definite point of view. I had no way of following that point of view or judging its veracity.

Jacob says

I read a decent bit about WWII. I knew of Admiral Wilhelm Canaris and the Abwehr but really nothing of substance. In that regard this book was very interesting. I am skeptical of some of the conclusions drawn, but to Bassett's credit whenever he is connecting the dots with only circumstantial evidence at hand, he informs the reader of such.

The overall thrust of the book was that Canaris was a good Christian and a loyal patriot who, after an initial honeymoon with the Nazi regime, fought it by every means at his disposal, sometimes even overtly passing critical info to his enemies that meant the death of German soldiers.

And that is my biggest complaint about the book. No journal of Canaris survives and for that matter, very few records that give personal insight into this man's thoughts (his family fled to Spain and refused to ever talk about the Admiral or the war). Consequently I would have preferred a more neutral book regarding his motives, with the focus instead being on his actions (much how the early part of the book was with his growing up and WWI naval service). Assigning intent to one of the key figures of the Nazi regime and repeating the Mantra of a good man stuck in a bad organization may actually do more harm for the point than if the biography had just been told.

Still, if you are interested in this era, there were several insights into the lead up to and the war itself that are worth the read and as I mentioned the early years of his life are some of the most interesting to read about in the book. Not a spectacular biography but enjoyable nonetheless. I give it a solid three stars.

Mek says

This is a wow book for those passionate about the hidden story of WWII.

I've always tried to read as much documentation and books about the last world war but never bumped into Canaris' real story.

Reading this book helps see things from a very different prospective, and it's mind-blowing the picture depicted about the real involvement and culpability that England had before, during and after WWII

Joanna says

This book attempts to piece together a very important part of the history of WWII - the activities of the spymaster of German military intelligence, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris. Canaris was a military man of the old school and despite being enthusiastic about the Nazis in their first years in the 30s, he concluded that they

were doing great damage to Germany and that their victory in the war would spell total disaster for his country. In addition to personally helping Jews and others who were in danger from Hitler's government, he opened channels of communication with the British. As early as 1938, he – along with other high ranking military – created the conditions for an agreement with Britain that would establish a peaceful relationship between the UK and a post-Nazi Germany. During the war, he kept up contacts with the German opposition in the military and among Catholics as well as with the British. At the same time, he brilliantly carried out his intelligence work on behalf of the German state benefiting Hitler's conquests. For a variety of reasons, the British never took Canaris up on the opportunities he provided for possibly ending the war earlier. The British (and later American) vision of what kind of post-war Europe would serve their own interests could well have led to millions more dying on the killing fields of WWII and in the concentration camps. Finally, as other reviewers have noted, Bassett had to piece together a story without access to still classified British documents related to Canaris. Also, intelligence work – by its very nature – sometimes leaves very few clues. For these reasons, some of Bassett's conclusions must be regarded as only very intelligent deductions based a rigorous research in incomplete sources.

Steven Z. says

Wilhelm Canaris' role as the head of the Abwehr, German military espionage, before and during World War II has been openly debated since his execution by the Nazis in 1945. Some historians argue that he supported the Nazi regime when it was convenient and others who argue he was always in opposition to Adolf Hitler and saw himself as trying to save western civilization from the twin evils of Nazism and Communism. Richard Bassett posits in *HITLER'S SPY CHIEF: THE WILHELM CANARIS BETRAYAL* that Canaris had a tremendous impact on the course of the war by building an efficient intelligence system that refused to engage in the evil practices of the Gestapo and SS; further he should be credited for altering the course of the war through his support of General Franco against Hitler's goal of seizing Gibraltar, thereby saving the Mediterranean Sea for the British navy; and lastly, his deliberate over-estimation of British forces available in his intelligence estimates after Dunkirk being the vital factor in delaying and cancelling the Nazi invasion of England and ultimately causing the defeat of Germany. There is an element of truth in all of these assertions, however they rest on somewhat dated sources and should be grounded in further research. The author presents many theories in the form of conjecture, and to his credit he tries to present both points of view, but then does not reach totally viable conclusions, i.e.; Canaris' role in possibly achieving an Anglo-German demarche in 1943. After reading the book I am not certain how pro-Nazi Canaris really was and to what level did his anti-Semitism reach. Despite these drawbacks there are aspects of the book that are praiseworthy.

Bassett does an excellent job exploring the ideological and policy fissures that developed between Canaris and the Head of the SD, Reinhard Heydrich. Their relationship takes up a significant portion of the book ranging from Heydrich's attempt to foment military purges in the Soviet Union in 1937 that resulted in Canaris questioning the goals and tactics employed by the Nazis. Bassett follows their competition for control of the German military intelligence community that pitted the Abwehr against the SD closely as Canaris saw himself as the antithesis of "the Butcher of Prague" who would be assassinated by Czech and Slovak agents working for the British in 1942. The author's discussion of Canaris' relationship with Winston Churchill is important and the conclusion seems to be had the British Prime Minister followed Canaris' lead perhaps the war could have been prevented in 1938 or at least ended in 1943. These suggestions are supported somewhat, but are not totally convincing. Another area of interest is Canaris' interactions with "C," Sir Stewart Menzies, the Head of British Intelligence during the war. Bassett alludes to a close relationship that impacted strategy, but does not put forth enough supporting evidence to make his assumptions totally viable. Overall the book is an interesting read, but the author should rely on more up to date secondary sources and greater primary materials in support of his theories to gain further credibility.

Tim Pendry says

This a book with insights but, I am afraid, too few insights to recommend it to the casual rather than the specialist reader who may be unable to see through the speculation and the implicit ideological positioning.

However, when we reach 1938, there is a subtle shift in the book from a narrative well told to yet another strike in the never-ending war between revisionist conservatives and the mainstream over the conduct of events after Munich.

Interestingly, given the bias, the story has the odd effect of giving some credence to the old Marxist theory of national socialism as the last refuge of a late imperial military-industrialism faced by the Bolshevik threat.

Canaris was not an aristocrat but he was part of a bourgeois class that had imbibed aristocratic values of war and duty (values that, of course, would have been completely alien to actual aristocrats at any time before the rise of the middle classes).

What we see here is an old story revisited almost by accident - one of classes who are perfectly prepared to go to war with one another as competing nation states for advantage but who rapidly collaborate internationally when a threat to their hegemony appears from 'below'.

Our current condition is not too dissimilar from this although the ruling elite is more likely to be represented by a graduate euro-socialist or bureaucrat in an international agency or NGO than an officer in the imperial navy or a landed gentleman running a ministry.

The evidence for this class interpretation lies everywhere in the first third of the book and beyond, perhaps most poignantly in the strange appearance of at least three Jews at different times as agents of German and national socialist espionage!

There is Canaris' undoubted involvement in protecting the cold blooded murder of Luxembourg and Liebknecht and there is his personal network of alliances with arms manufacturers and bankers that played a critical role in Nazi support for General Franco.

Indeed, one might reverse the usual claim that Hitler supported Franco in an ideological drive to expand international fascism into a far more realistic model where conservative nationalists inveigled the Nazi into supporting one of their own.

Whoever Canaris was by 1938, he was a ruthless player who may have pragmatically felt (like many German conservative nationalists) that the nasty little oik running the country was dragging the country to disaster but who was, equally, no stranger to criminal acts.

The revisionism that fuels the book from this point on seems to be one of the recurrent 'problems' of history where inconvenient truths have to be explained to salvage an interpretation necessary for the self image of a particular element in society.

I am confidently expecting Labour memoirs and historiography to give thoroughly revisionist perspectives in due course on the alleged unwilling complicity of senior Labour left-wingers in the Blair 'regime' and to claim their 'secret resistance'. Ho, hum!

It is true (I think Bassett demonstrates this) that Canaris was horrified by the turn of events within Germany after Kristallnacht. Canaris was not particularly anti-semitic and also understood better than his bosses that the early easy victories of Nazi aggression were not sustainable without some sort of peace with either the Reds or the Empires.

Strategically, Germany can look to the West against the East or look to the East and security and both visions have played their part in German history since Bismarck - as they do 'sotto voce' even today.

Canaris was firmly (remember the violence against the Spartakists) against the East because it was Bolshevik but he may well have had a different view had Russia been Tsarist.

Ideology infected strategy here as elsewhere. Once Germany had bitten off more than it could chew, there was a relatively short period when flexible cynics might have tried to 'do a deal' with one set of enemies in order to crush collaboratively the other.

Bassett concentrates on this 'window of opportunity' but too easily confuses the facts of the matter (the 'is' of the story) with an implied 'ought' - oh how much happier we would all have been if the generals had overthrown Hitler and a strong Germany resisted and beaten Stalin back. Ho, hum again!

Canaris was drawn to circles with a similar conservative anti-Bolshevik view in the West and this undoubtedly drew him into dialogues that any reasonable Nazi (indeed, any reasonable German in a state of war) might reasonably have called treacherous.

It is this treachery that Bassett seems at pains to justify and it is true that all spies are 'treacherous' to a degree in that part of their job is to maintain lines of communication with the enemy - whether IRA or Taliban or 'C' in London - so that deals may be struck later.

Unfortunately, this truth is spun here into something that the evidence simply does not support. Bassett speculates so that we see information that could be interpreted more reasonably in one way being interpreted in another in order to praise the man for the ideological reasons that we will come to.

It is the nature of espionage that we have very little evidence that is reliable and what evidence that we have may derive from a deliberate intent to tell a particular narrative.

Similarly, any dealings with the enemy (the separate peace feelers with London) are part of an elaborate game of maintaining options and advantage in which we simply cannot KNOW what precisely was intended.

Contacts with London could be interpreted in many ways and not all of them treacherous. The treacherous aspects do seem to have been there but it would also seem that senior Nazi figures were well aware of them and even (almost certainly in the case of Himmler) happy to take later advantage if they could.

Moreover, none of the acts that were designed to suggest the back door to London for conservative nationalists need be interpreted in quite so noble terms as Bassett implies. After all, to conservative nationalists sacrificing some of their own hoi polloi might be regarded as a perfectly reasonable price to pay for political advantage,

Similarly, like good philosophers, spies can think two or more apparently inconsistent things at the same time and can over-reach themselves in doing so.

We must remember that this was a man who not merely collaborated with Heydrich, albeit as a bureaucratic rival, but who knew him well before he became a Party figure and who lived next door to the man and spent musical evenings with him.

Canaris' knowledge of the man may have helped to create seriously defensive moral principles in his more conventional Abwehr but it might easily be interpreted that Heydrich's SD was there to 'do the dirty work' so that the old guard could keep its hands clean.

What I cannot believe is that Canaris was so horrified by what Heydrich represented that he began to 'plot against the regime'. It really is not that simple. And whatever Canaris was, he was a highly intelligent and rational player who loved his career and being at the centre of things.

It is equally probable that, like Gehlen later, he saw the way things were going a bit earlier than most and simply wanted to hedge his bets so that he had a job later. In the end, he miscalculated. It has to be said that he accepted his fate (as far as we can understand) with enormous dignity.

In other words, the 'distance' of complicity and mentality between Canaris and Heydrich is simply not proven but is merely suggested by testimonies that owe a lot to the later need of his officer colleagues in the New Germany to distance themselves from the thugs with whom they had shared power. They are not liars but they are not telling the total truth.

I would have been more inclined to give Bassett, and so Canaris, the benefit of the doubt if there had not been the implicit ideological agenda in the Introduction to the book (and in the closing comments) and which begins to emerge in force in the account of matters after 1938.

Again, we must not go too far. My own view is that Bassett demonstrates sufficiently that Canaris did retain certain standards, did refuse to get down into the mud with his Nazi colleagues, was part of the German nationalist readiness to overthrow Hitler and did undertake a number of highly creditable acts in defiance of Nazi ideology and hegemony.

Where we seem to differ is that all this is not enough to exonerate him or his class because there is enough evidence even in this book that the conservative nationalists only started to take a serious interest in countering national socialism when it looked like defeat might bring crimes to account.

It is true that Canaris wisely saw Hitler's forward foreign policy as potentially disastrous but we should not make too much of this. After all, many loyal Party men (I have been there!) know that their party is heading for a disaster on the logic of the situation but continue to serve the party regardless.

Yes, we have evidence of private horror at Nazi behaviour but much of this is cast in almost aesthetic and cultural terms rather than in terms of the sort of 'outrage' that affects (or infects) contemporary international relations discourse.

The picture that Bassett seeks to paint is one where a noble class of conservative nationalists, implicitly transnational in their acceptance of chivalric values but proudly patriotic, are outmanoeuvred by a bunch of rabid gangsters and then nobly risk their lives to recover their country from the fiends' coming apocalypse.

This ideology is part of a wider European revisionism that is deeply conservative in mentality. It implies that if only the Catholic Church (Bassett is characteristically kind to the Pope), conservative gentlemen and public servants, especially the military and allied services, had retained power, then all would have been well.

The conservatism comes through even in the rather pointed (and actually true) references of the debasement of the gentlemanly breed of spies by Tony Blair and his 'dodgy dossier'.

One of Bassett's items of evidence for the defence is that Canaris, faced with a similar demand (to that demanded by New Labour) from Nazi officials (to assist the invasion of the Netherlands) simply refused. I

am afraid this does not make Canaris 'good' but merely reminds us just how dreadful Blair was!

Canaris is put into the same bracket of honour as 'C' - men of 'service who stood up to politicians and served their country with as much ethical consideration as the unethical trade of espionage permits.

This is, of course, romantic tosh but very much part of the self image of a particular element in the ruling order that will talk of the Christian West around High Table and at conservative European dinner parties much as they did in the age of the Kaiser and Edward.

Now let's put away this propaganda of a revival of a Christian-aristocratic vision of Europe with the politicians firmly under the control of the subtle counsellors in the bureaucracy who rely on the Vatican for moral succour and on an 'ethic of service' to give the masses the administrative rule they require.

In fact, the German conservative nationalists of the interwar period were wholly complicit in the rise of national socialism but were simply incompetent at managing it or in understanding its true nature. Far from effective, they were serially incompetent - no less than their imperial equivalents in the British Conservative Party before 1940.

To this day, Chamberlain's naive and stupid guarantee to Poland in 1939 must rank as one of the most stupid acts in British history - it cost millions of British and imperial lives and lost Britain its already weakening global hegemony.

To have allowed war elsewhere and national feeling (which was strong) to buy time for a major national rearmament programme designed to contain Germany and then ally with the Soviet Union at the 'right time' seems not to have occurred to the confused buffoon surrounded by incompetent 'service professionals'. One thanks someone for Churchill!

As for mainland Europe, the catholics, the aristocracy and the bureaucracy were so blinded by terror of Bolshevism that they gave carte blanche to populist gangsters who would kill their own as much as their enemies and they gave this carte blanche willingly in fear of worse.

Nor were they alone. Mussolini suggested a 'way forward' with his Papal Concordat that horrified his own radical pagan supporters such as Evola. The old revolutionary socialist marched on Rome and then made himself head of the biggest protection racket in history.

Franco was treated as the 'coming man' (and was clever enough not to concede ground to the Nazis) and the Church backed vicious dictators across Eastern Europe and 'quislings' in the West as the Wehrmacht moved towards Moscow.

In one of the silliest analytical tricks of the conservative revisionists, any crime is moderated because conservative nationalists were less anti-semitic than the Nazis - basically, they simply had none of the lust for extermination of their radical cousins.

This is like the justification of the old man bonking a fifteen year old school girl that he is not to be compared with a member of a ring that abuses five year olds - true but it rather misses the point.

Even Hitler compromised with the old guard once he had shown what he was capable of in hitting out at both conservative nationalists and his own 'Left' in the Night of the Long Knives.

Though historians love to suggest that the SS slaughter in 1934 created a sense of terror amongst conservative nationalists, we must not forget that the main purpose of the event was to create an understanding with the new Wehrmacht.

Von Papen himself was held back from the slaughter as a chess piece in case of need. He did not defect and (on the evidence of Bassett) even considered it possible that he might be reappointed Prime Minister by Hitler in order (we presume) to help broker a peace deal with the West against Stalin.

In other words, the conservative nationalists were cowed perhaps in 1934 and came to understand their role as junior partners with the radical nationalist state but they never gave up hope of being senior partners again.

They were still well in play within the system and they never truly revolted except in their own class interest (beautifully recast by the identification of that class and cultural interest with that of their own nation). The self-delusion here is almost magnificent.

Only at the end, to save their own skins for the consequences, not merely of aggression but of gross atrocities unmatched in war since the seventeenth century, did they seek any means possible to counter the decisive statement from FDR that German surrender had to be 'unconditional'.

Bassett seems to dislike this commitment to 'unconditionality' because he continues to have faith in this class and to share their view that the division of Europe between Anglo-Americans and Soviets was an unalloyed disaster.

I do not - not because I like sovietism (on the contrary) but because the true disaster for Europe would have been anything less than a decisive defeat for the undemocratic instincts of the old feudal classes and an opportunity to create new parties and new constitutions for the defeated 'ab initio' and regardless of their much vaunted 'tradition'.

In the end, though much later, Eastern Europe was enabled to join this new model with its own aristocratic and religious machinery collapsed and with traditionalism only able to return as a petit-bourgeois pale simulacrum of its previous claims to power. Even the fascistic Golden Dawn is no Iron Guard.

The real danger for Europe is of a Vatican resurgent (which it has been since its effective claim to have won the Cold War in Europe for the West) backed by a sentimental 'service ethos', to which a certain sort of conservative bourgeois is attracted, in order to control the masses.

This book acts as both a flawed history of an interesting figure in twentieth century history but also as an unintended warning of the new political romanticism that might suggest that a failed ruling order still has something to offer Europe. It does not.

Jeff Wombold says

This was a fascinating story about Admiral Canaris and some interesting never known facts about Hitler and Third Reich. You have to pay attention, because this book bounces around a bit and the lists of contacts is hard to keep track of! It is a pity that his plans never came to fruition, as most likely this would have changed history, but what he did was astonishing. A must read for history buffs.

Olethros says

-Sumergiéndose en los enigmas no siempre se logran resolver.-

Género. Biografía (más o menos).

Lo que nos cuenta. Acercamiento a la figura del Almirante Wilhelm Canaris, centrado en la época en la que llegó a la cúspide de la inteligencia militar alemana, una personalidad rodeada de misterio en cuanto a su verdadera contribución a la guerra de inteligencia y contrainteligencia que se libró, entre bastidores, durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial.

¿Quiere saber más de este libro, sin spoilers? Visite:

<http://librosdeolethros.blogspot.com....>

Kate Forsyth says

Wilhelm Canaris was the enigmatic head of the Abwehr, the German secret service. He was executed for treason in a Bavarian concentration camp only days before the Allies' reached the camp and liberated it. He had been involved in the failed assassination of Hitler immortalised in the movie 'Valkyrie', but many researchers believe that he had been working to undermine the Third Reich from before the beginning of the war. This detailed and in-depth examination of his life and work is not for the casual reader (it assumes a wide knowledge of the Nazi era and the Valkyrie plot), but it is utterly fascinating and convincingly argues that Canaris had been feeding secrets to the British for many years and was in fact protected to some extent by them.

Paul Below says

Interesting insight into the incredible world of Canaris. So sad to learn he gave us the means of preventing World War 2 and later of finishing it early but our politicians frittered the opportunities away....

Lewis Weinstein says

I am reading Bassett piece by piece, corresponding to where I am in writing the sequel to A FLOOD OF EVIL. It is an excellent portrayal of a complicated man with whom my fictional character Berthold Becker has a complicated relationship. I am intrigued by the fictional possibilities for Berthold suggested by these extracts from Bassett's book ...

... Menzies (head of British intelligence) reference to the conversation Churchill 'initiated' suggests that a meeting between Canaris (head of German intelligence) and Churchill cannot entirely be ruled out, perhaps through Hillgarth in Spain

... If Britain was ever to break with Soviet Russia it would need Canaris and the German opposition as an ally

... the dialogue (between Menzies & Canaris) was important not only for the strategic insights it gave London. It was essential if there was to be any chance of that Anglo-German 'understanding', which

Menzies hinted was the motivation for Canaris' actions

These quotes are all in reference to the possibility, allegedly pursued by Canaris, of an alliance between Germany and Britain against Russia, to become effective after the overthrow of Hitler and the Nazi regime by an opposition group of which Canaris was a vital part.

Michael Williams says

Thought provoking

Very intriguing thesis and plot. A little overdone and repetitive at times but well done. As a historian I recommend it
