

Hitler's Man in Havana: Heinz Lüning and Nazi Espionage in Latin America. By Thomas D. Schoonover. With a Foreword by Louis A. Perez, Jr. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press. 2008. Pp. xxiv + 218. Cloth \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-8131-2501-5.

Much of the ongoing struggle during World War II in Latin America between the intelligence organizations of the Axis and the Allies still remains veiled in secrecy. The single most important studies of the subject by Stanley Hilton and Ronald Newton concentrated on Brazil and Argentina, respectively. Thomas Schoonover's relatively short volume about a German spy in Cuba

supports the general scholarly view that often the Allies overestimated both the extent and effectiveness of Nazi intelligence activity in the Americas. Using extensive archival and other sources from Germany, Great Britain, Cuba, and the United States, Schoonover provides a meticulously documented account of the blundering and failed activity of the German *Abwehr* (intelligence) agent, Heinz Lüning, in Havana. Lüning, trained for six months at the *Abwehr* post in Hamburg, arrived in Cuba in September 1941 and, after routine and unsuccessful spying, was arrested in August 1942.

At the time of his capture by Cuban authorities, the Allies considered Lüning “a master spy and the most important spy captured in the Western Hemisphere” (p. 11). Initially, the FBI overseas, the Special Intelligence Service (SIS), believed that Lüning headed an espionage network that aided German U-boat successes in the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico. By late 1942, according to Schoonover, the submarine activity was devastating Allied shipping. The Allies, he notes, “had legitimate concerns about possible Axis agents in Cuba radioing U-boats in the area” (p. 96).

The author demonstrates, however, the true nature of Lüning’s activities, motivation, and past. Of limited intelligence and ability, Lüning had had a troubled youth growing up in northern Germany. Anti-Nazi, he had spent time in 1936 and 1937 outside Germany on commercial ventures in the Dominican Republic and the United States. He had well-to-do family and in-laws in the U.S., including the playwright, Philip Bartholomae, a longtime acquaintance of Fred Astaire. In 1941 Lüning had entered the *Abwehr* to escape conscription into the German army and to prevent his wife, child, and parents from suffering Nazi retribution. But even his *Abwehr* handlers had suspected their agent’s limitations—they sent him to Havana with no Caribbean contacts, few useful radio signals, no book code, and poor training in radio assembly and secret ink work. Once at his post, carrying the Honduran passport of a Jewish refugee, Lüning gathered from the local media and barrooms little information worth reporting. Also, he failed to build a working radio, improperly mixed his secret inks for messages sent to Nazi contacts in Portugal and Spain, and communicated sloppily and indirectly through cable with contacts in Chile and Argentina. In addition to his unsuitability for espionage work, Lüning had only modest language skills; his careless use of German words in Spanish cover letters alerted British postal censors in Bermuda to examine the letters more closely. This led to his arrest. While in custody, he cooperated fully with his captors.

What is especially revealing about the book is its portrayal of how German, British, U.S., and Cuban authorities dealt with Lüning and his “espionage” career. The *Abwehr* viewed him as a decoy whose arrest diverted extensive U.S., British, and Cuban counterintelligence resources and energy to tracking down his nonexistent contacts and acquaintances. But even Allied and Cuban authorities learned that their “master spy” was a minor and ineffective agent. He had never used a radio in his work and had no network of other agents providing

valuable information to U-boats operating in the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico. Nevertheless, according to Schoonover, U.S. and Cuban officials “made the most of the situation. They converted the capture [of Lüning] into personal prestige, recognition, and expanded power for their agencies” (p. 103).

In practical terms, U.S. and Cuban leaders—General Manuel Benítez, Cuban chief of police; Fulgencio Batista, Cuban president; Spruille Braden, the U.S. ambassador to Cuba; and J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI director—manipulated, distorted, and even fabricated evidence to link Lüning to the devastating German U-boat campaign of 1942. “Why,” Schoonover asks, “this duality—publicly projecting the image of a dangerous spy yet privately aware that he was ineffective?” (p. 140). The appearance of breaking up a major Axis intelligence and U-boat network in the Americas provided the U.S. and Cuban leaders, at a difficult time for the Allies in the war, with an opportunity to gain badly needed political influence and favor with their populations. Following a secret trial of Lüning, a Cuban firing squad shot him on November 10, 1942. He was the only German spy executed in Latin America during the war.

Lüning’s death did nothing to reduce German U-boat activity or successes in American waters. Instead, Schoonover notes, “vastly increased airplane patrolling and ship antisubmarine activity with better-trained air force and naval personnel and larger, better-trained and equipped convoys reduced U-boat effectiveness” (p. 135). This well-written volume concludes with a fascinating chapter on how Lüning was reincarnated in 1958 in the guise of James Wormold, the major figure in Graham Greene’s popular Cold War novel, *Our Man in Havana*. Greene, who served in British intelligence in World War II, had access to a large volume of material on Lüning. Unfortunately, other similar material on Lüning—vast portions of U.S. counterintelligence records pertaining to him—was available to Schoonover only in greatly censored form. In addition, official Cuban records on the Lüning affair were unavailable. Nevertheless, the author has reconstructed much of Lüning’s life that appears on the surface as comic and humorous—until it found a tragic and brutal end.

DONALD M. MCKALE
CLEMSON UNIVERSITY

doi:10.1017/S0008938909991464