H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James V. Milano, Patrick Brogan. *Soldiers, Spies, and the Rat Line: America's Undeclared War Against the Soviets.* Washington and London: Brassey's, 1995. xii + 242 pp. $17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57488-304-6; $14.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57488-050-2.

Reviewed by Kathryn S. Olmsted (Department of History, University of California, Davis)

Published on H-Diplo (January, 2002)

Spooks, Rats, and War Criminals

Spooks, Rats, and War Criminals

Jim Milano's memoir of his years as an Army intelligence officer in post-World War II Austria is a fast-paced, rollicking yarn of intrepid spooks and the assorted hookers, crooks, and informers they knew and used. The book is an engaging account of the trials and triumphs of intelligence professionals in the early, dangerous years of the cold war. However, Milano's glorification of secrecy and law-breaking–not to mention his outright contempt for elected and appointed U.S. officials–raises troubling questions about the rights and responsibilities of the American government's secret warriors.

Milano was a young Army intelligence officer in Salzburg during the early part of the Allied occupation of Austria. During the war, he had used his fluent Italian to debrief prisoners of war captured during the invasions of North Africa and Italy. In 1945, he was put in charge of American military intelligence efforts against the Soviets in occupied Austria. The "rat line" of the title refers to his efforts to smuggle deserters from the Red Army to South America. Later, after Milano left Europe, his successors used his rat line to smuggle another type of rat–Klaus Barbie, the infamous "Butcher of Lyons"–to safety in Bolivia. This book is Milano's memoir as told to Washington, D.C. writer Patrick Brogan. It is quickly apparent to the reader that Milano chose wisely when he selected Brogan to tell his story. The book is a quick and enjoyable read.

Milano initially arrived in Austria after the war planning to round up Nazis, but, he explains, he soon took up "other objectives" (p. 37). Very quickly, he shifted his attention from Nazis to Communists. Unfortunately, Milano is rather vague on why this shift occurred. He merely explains that the "hard-eyed colonels and generals in Intelligence" understood immediately that the Soviets posed a great threat to Western Europe, while the "stuffy officials" in the State Department did not realize this (pp. 38, 107). As a result, much of his time was spent keeping those weak, striped-pants liberals from finding out what he was doing.

One of his key methods was to recruit and debrief deserters from Red Army in Eastern Europe. He and his men would learn all that they could from these deserters, then find them new homes and identities. But the Army

did not want to send these men to the United States, because the State Department might discover their program. Likewise, they could not use Canada, Australia, or other open countries that might "squeal" to the State Department. Luckily for him, Milano found a Croatian fascist priest in the Vatican who obtained South American visas for Nazi war criminals. For the right price, he was willing to extend the same privilege to the Americans and their Soviet informers. To pay off this man, Milano obtained $25,000 from his superiors, who quite obviously did not want to know what he planned to do with it. He stretched his money by evading American currency controls: in other words, by trading on the black market. The currency restrictions were among several laws that Milano disregarded in the course of his program. He stole jeeps from the Army and created fake documentation for them, bribed uncounted numbers of Italian officials, and forged U.S. government documents.

Milano realized the potential moral drawbacks of paying great sums of money to his Croatian fascist–a man who presumably used the American money to spirit war criminals out of Europe to safety in South America. But he rationalized these problems. "The American intelligence agencies in Austria were not in the business of catching Yugoslav war criminals. Their job was gathering current intelligence on the Soviet armies, not exacting retribution for past crimes" (p. 53). To his credit, even he admits that this was a "rather specious" justification. Milano was no Nazi sympathizer: he was horrified when he visited the Nazis' former concentration camps, and he deliberately turned a blind eye to Jews who were organizing their own "rat line" of holocaust survivors to Palestine. But he always believed that the need to combat the Soviet threat outweighed any concerns about aiding fascist murderers.

There are two aspects of the book that are troubling for historians. First, it is a primary source of the most unreliable sort. Though Milano tells a jaunty and engaging tale, he has almost no documentation for it. He destroyed all of his files when he left Austria in 1950. The reader must trust his memories, including dialogue recreated from fifty years ago.

Second, Milano glorifies his willingness to break the rules in order to achieve a greater good. But the absolute secrecy in which he cloaked his program enabled his successors to help Klaus Barbie. As Milano explains, Barbie was a mass murderer who ferreted out the hiding places of hundreds of French Jews before sending them to their deaths. He personally beat to death one of the leaders of the French Resistance. Yet Barbie convinced American officials in postwar Germany that he could help them spy on the Soviets. When the French police began to close in on the "butcher of Lyons," Milano's successors used the rat line to send him to a new life in South America. After thirty years of comfortable living in Bolivia, Barbie was found by Nazi-hunters and sent to trial and eventual prison in France.

It was the Barbie case in 1983 that exposed Milano's super-secret program. Ronald Reagan's Justice Department investigated American complicity in Barbie's escape and raised some insightful questions about his rat line. The Justice Department could find no evidence that any war criminal besides Barbie had benefited from Milano's program. (It must be said, though, that all the files had been destroyed, so such evidence would have been hard to find.) But even if Barbie was the only Nazi "rat" smuggled to South America, the whole program "raises troubling questions of ethical and legal conduct," the Justice Department investigation concluded (p. 208). By keeping his rat line secret from most of the U.S. government, as well as from the Soviets, Milano created the possibility that it could one day be used for such loathsome purposes as the Barbie escape. When intelligence officials, even some as apparently well-intentioned as Jim Milano, start secret, illegal operations because they are convinced they know better than everyone else, they enable the Oliver Norths of the world to flourish. Milano's tale may be fascinating, but it is also a cautionary tale of the dangers of absolute secrecy in a democracy.