

The Expendable Spy



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<p>Original published in 1965, this thriller by the author best known for The Blue Max, draws heavily upon his experience as a U.S. counterintelligence officer during and after WWII. In particular, it draws upon his direction of "Operation Nursery" in 1946, a relatively obscure operation designed to curtail any kind of covert or overt postwar insurgency by Nazi loyalists. The story concerns a low-level American officer who is ordered to parachute into Germany near the end of the war to meet with a potentially useful German turncoat. However, complications ensue, and he is forced to assume the identity of a shady German, leading to an unexpected opportunity to penetrate an underground German network of some sort. Alone and untrained as a spy, the typically capable and gutsy officer manages to survive against the odds and wreak havoc. As the story unfolds, it is peppered with transcripts of cables and recorded phone calls between various plotters -- and it becomes apparent that the American is at risk of being sacrificed by his own side as part of some larger scheme. Some of this is very well done, especially the early chapters, in which the agent parachutes in and tries desperately to avoid detection when his initial assignment goes awry. However, once he settles into his new identity, the pace slows down significantly, and the story started to lose my interest. The twists and turns of just who was betraying whom, and all the layers of interests (German, Nazi, American, Soviet, etc.), while

perfectly plausible and realistically portrayed, simply failed to capture my imagination. It doesn't help that the protagonist is such a stock hero figure, with little personality. Things pick up slightly at the end, when the Macguffin of Nazi gold gets introduced, but it's too little too late. Perhaps I'm just not a big enough fan of spy thrillers (I do like the old Ambler books, and the newer Furst ones), but for whatever reason, this one just never got me in its grip. I certainly like the idea of taking this real-life situation and making a story out of it, but perhaps the author was just too close to the events to be able to fictionalize them to the extent necessary to make it work well as a thriller.

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