

# CIA Declassifies Its Records On Dealings With Ex-Nazis

*Documents May Give Clues About Obstacles in Hunt for War Criminals*

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The CIA is finally getting around to declassifying the records of its dealings with former Nazi spies after World War II.

It says it has found 251 boxes and 2,901 file folders of potentially relevant documents—apparently more than 250,000 pages—and that it will take about two years to complete work on them.

Carl Oglesby, a political writer and researcher, has been seeking the records since 1985 in connection with a study of Reinhard Gehlen, a German general who had been head of Nazi intelligence for the eastern front.

After the war, at the request of U.S. occupation forces in Europe, he set up "the Gehlen organization," a counterespionage network that supplied the Pentagon and the CIA with the bulk of their intelligence on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The organization, which employed thousands of people, many of them former Nazis, was the forerunner of West Germany's secret service, the BND. It was formally recognized in 1956 and Gehlen headed it until he retired in 1968.

When Oglesby got only a smattering of documents from the Army and the CIA, he sued in 1987, emphasizing meetings that Gehlen held in the summer of 1945 with U.S. officials at Fort Hunt, Va. He and some other researchers believe that the post-war hunt for Nazi war criminals was severely compromised by American intelligence demands for help in meeting the new Soviet menace.

A retired CIA official who dealt with Gehlen's organization for seven years says those suspicions have been exaggerated into conspiratorial nonsense and that Gehlen and his top aides came out of the German army general staff that tried, several times, to overthrow Adolf Hitler. But he, too, expressed frustration that so much of the true story remains classified.

"I've lived with this for 50 years," said James H. Critchfield, the CIA officer assigned to the Gehlen organization from 1949 to 1956. "Almost everything negative that has been written about Gehlen, in which he has been described as an ardent ex-Nazi, one of Hitler's war criminals—this is all far from the fact."

Critchfield said CIA records may turn up the names of six to 10 veterans of the SD, Gestapo chief Heinrich Himmler's intelligence service, who joined Gehlen's network in 1950. But he said Gehlen took them on reluctantly, under pressure from German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer to deal with "the avalanche of subversion hitting them from East Germany."

By contrast, Critchfield said, Gehlen's top command consisted of 30 to 40 young staff officers trained under Gen. Ludwig Beck, who was executed in 1944 for conspiring to assassinate Hitler, and Gen. Franz Halder, who was imprisoned until the war ended. "They weren't really a bunch of Nazis," he said.

Oglesby's lawsuit sputtered for 13 years with the CIA refusing to confirm or deny that it had any records reflecting a relationship with Gehlen. The litigation survived two trips to the U.S. Court of Appeals here, but last August, Chief U.S. District Judge Norma Holloway Johnson issued an order indicating she was about to dismiss it at the government's request. She rejected the idea that the CIA or any other agency had "unreasonably delayed" the case.

Weeks later, the CIA formally acknowledged that Gehlen had at the end of the war turned over what remained of his intelligence collection efforts against the Soviet Union and started spying for the United States; the Army "supervised" his work until 1949, when the CIA stepped in for a seven-year stint.

The CIA told the court it was compelled to speak up in response to the Nazi War Crimes Disclosure Act, which Congress passed in 1998 to require public release of U.S. records related to war criminals and crimes committed by the Nazi government and its allies between March 1933, when Hitler acquired dictatorial powers, and May 1945, when the war in Europe ended.

"General Gehlen himself is not considered an alleged Nazi war



FILE PHOTO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

**Gen. Reinhard Gehlen, shown in 1943, was the head of a Nazi intelligence organization and worked with the CIA.**

criminal," the CIA said in an affidavit, but records of its dealings with him and his group include documents that are covered by the law.

The Army's dealings with Gehlen's group were chaotic at first, with the Army's counterintelligence corps frozen out of the operation. Critchfield said there may have been some imprudent contacts with German war criminals early on, particularly while Gehlen was being debriefed in Virginia. In the fall of 1948, the CIA assigned Critchfield to report on whether to liquidate the operation or take it over.

With the Berlin airlift in full swing, Critchfield found a station Gehlen had organized near Wiesbaden, manned by 12 Germans intercepting Soviet Air Force voice traffic. U.S. Air Force officials told him that this was "the only real-time intelligence" they were getting about Soviet air operations during the tense period.

Critchfield told CIA headquarters "it would be absolutely irresponsible to terminate this" and urged that it be kept going. A cable came back telling him "your recommendations are approved."

Asked how many Nazi war criminals there were within Gehlen's organization at any point, Critchfield said the answer will depend on the definition used by the Interagency Working Group charged with administering the disclosure act. For instance, the Nuremberg war crimes tribunal declared the SD a criminal organization, making membership in it a crime, but Critchfield said German de-Nazification courts subsequently came to insist on evidence of individual criminal activity as well. However, he said he expects that the working group will want to keep the definition "as broad as they can."

*Staff researcher Karl Ewanz contributed to this report.*