

# German Intelligence during the Second World War: The Canary Islands as a Case Study\*

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As a global conflict, the Second World War severely disrupted worldwide economic, socio-cultural, political and strategic dynamics. The war directly affected the belligerent and occupied countries, but it also left a significant mark on strategic neutral territories such as Spain. Although Francisco Franco declared Spain neutral at the beginning of the conflict, his leanings towards the Axis side and his subsequent declaration of non-belligerence, rather than strict neutrality, made Spain, its colonies and its archipelagos alternative theatres for the conflict.

During the Second World War, the Canary Islands were a focus of foreign interest. Not only did the belligerent powers consider the islands in their military planning, but the archipelago also had a leading role in diplomatic manoeuvres, naval operations, commercial and navigation blockades, oil rationing campaigns, persuasive activities and, above all, intelligence and counterintelligence campaigns. In particular, the Third Reich deployed a careful clandestine activity both in the Canary Islands and in the north-western African strip for the protection of German submarines in the Atlantic and in support of smuggling, surveillance, sabotage and subversion.

Many scholars of war intelligence have explored the impact of espionage, intelligence, sabotage and counterintelligence activities during the Second World War. Studies of German intelligence services (political, military and naval) have been illuminating, but as yet there are few studies of the relationship between German intelligence, naval operations and port supplies.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, there is still room to research the German intelligence campaign in North Africa and the Atlantic, the implications for the war of German consular authorities abroad and the participation of foreign German communities in wartime intelligence activities.<sup>2</sup> Publications on German intelligence in

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<sup>1</sup> For existing scholarship see, for example, J. Bryden, *Fighting to Lose: How the German Secret Intelligence Service Helped the Allies Win the Second World War* (Toronto, 2014); J. Adams, *Historical Dictionary of German Intelligence* (London, 2009); D. Kahn, *Hitler's Spies: German Military Intelligence in World War II* (New York, 1978); G. C. Browder, *Foundations of the Nazi Police State: The Formation of the Sipo and SD* (Lexington, 2004); G. C. Browder, *Hitler's Enforcers: The Gestapo and the SS Security Service in the Nazi Revolution* (Oxford, 1996); K. Paehler, *The Third Reich's Intelligence Services: The Career of Walter Schellenberg* (Cambridge, 2017); N. West, *Hitler's Trojan Horse: The Fall of the Abwehr* (London, 2022), among many others.

<sup>2</sup> Some of these references are M. Faulkner, 'The Kriegsmarine, Signals Intelligence and the Development of the B-Dienst before the Second World War', *Intelligence and National Security*, 25, 4 (2010), pp. 521–46; D. Syrett,

occupied and Allied territories have been particularly revealing, but although studies of German intelligence and espionage in neutral locations have recently increased, they do not yet have the same standing.<sup>3</sup>

Recent research on foreign intelligence in Spain during the Second World War has largely been devoted to the study of Allied intelligence, but the activity of German intelligence in the interior and north of the Iberian peninsula has certainly not been ignored.<sup>4</sup> These works emphasize, for example, the strategic importance of the Franco-Spanish border and the dynamism of the ports located in the Basque Country and Galicia, as well as the role played by Spanish evacuation networks and smuggling operations that connected the north of Spain with Latin America. However, there remains room for further research, especially in relation to other strategic areas such as the south of the country, the Spanish archipelagos and the Spanish enclaves in Africa.

In the case of the Canary Islands, scholars have analysed the strategic importance of the Atlantic archipelago during the war principally in relation to Allied occupation and sabotage plans.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, some works have analysed the role played by Allied operational reports on the islands, which considered the islands tactically for military purposes.<sup>6</sup> Naval movements deployed by Germany, especially through port supplies

'German Meteorological Intelligence from the Arctic and North Atlantic, 1940–1945', *Mariner's Mirror*, 71, 3 (1985), pp. 325–33; R. Erskine, 'Eavesdropping on "Bodden": ISOS v. the Abwehr in the Straits of Gibraltar', *Intelligence and National Security*, 12, 3 (1997), pp. 110–29; and R. Erskine, 'From the Archives: A Bletchley Park Assessment of German Intelligence on Torch', *Cryptologia*, 13, 2 (1989), pp. 135–42.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, M. M. Hull, 'The Irish Interlude: German Intelligence in Ireland', *Journal of Military History*, 66, 3 (2002), pp. 695–717; H. L. Trefousse, 'Failure of German Intelligence in the United States, 1935–1945', *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 42, 1 (1955), pp. 84–100; S. E. Hilton, *Hitler's Secret War in South America, 1939–1945* (London, 1999); C. Vasey, *Nazi Intelligence Operations in Non-occupied Territories: Espionage Efforts in the United States, Britain, South America and Southern Africa* (London, 2016); S. Olsson, 'Beyond Diplomacy: German Military Intelligence in Sweden 1939–1945', *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, 24, 2 (2011), pp. 338–51.

<sup>4</sup> On Allied intelligence in Spain see, for example, J. Ponce Alberca, 'Espionaje en Gibraltar y su Campo (1936–1945)', *Revista Universitaria de Historia Militar*, 4, 8 (2015), pp. 35–54; S. Sueiro Seoane, 'La ciudad de los espías (1940–1945): Tánger español y la política británica', *Revista Universitaria de Historia Militar*, 4, 8 (2015), pp. 55–74; E. Grandío Seoane, *Hora Zero: la inteligencia británica en España durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial* (Madrid, 2021); E. Grandío Seoane, *A Balancing Act: British Intelligence in Spain during the Second World War* (Liverpool, 2018). On German intelligence see J. Rodríguez González, 'Los servicios secretos en el Norte de España durante la II Guerra Mundial: el Abwehr alemán y el SOE inglés', *Revista Universitaria de Historia Militar*, 4, 8 (2016), pp. 75–100; E. Grandío Seoane and J. Rodríguez González (eds), *War Zone: La Segunda Guerra Mundial en el Noroeste de la Península Ibérica* (Madrid, 2012); J. Juárez Camacho, *Madrid—Londres—Berlín: espías españoles al servicio de Hitler* (Madrid, 2005); C. Collado Seidel, 'España y los agentes alemanes 1944–1947: Intransigencia y pragmatismo político', *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma*, Serie V (1992), pp. 431–82. See also A. Escuadra Sánchez, 'El sabotaje de coaling island y la red del Abwehr II en el Campo de Gibraltar', *Almoraima: revista de estudios campogibraltareses*, 45 (2016), pp. 85–95, and D. Messenger, *La caza de nazis en la España de Franco* (Madrid, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> J. J. Díaz Benítez, *Canarias indefensa: los proyectos aliados de ocupación de las Islas durante la II Guerra Mundial* (Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 2008); J. J. Díaz Benítez, *Anglofilia y autarquía en Canarias durante la II Guerra Mundial* (Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 2008); J. J. Díaz Benítez, 'Los proyectos británicos para ocupar las Islas Atlánticas durante la no beligerancia española (1940–1943)', *Hispania Nova: Revista de Historia Contemporánea*, 11 (2013), pp. 1–28; M. García Cabrera, 'Operation Warden: British Sabotage Planning in the Canary Islands during the Second World War', *Intelligence and National Security*, 35, 2 (2020), pp. 252–68.

<sup>6</sup> M. García Cabrera, 'British Geographic Intelligence during the Second World War: A Case Study of the Canary Islands', *Intelligence and National Security*, 37 (2022), pp. 262–80; M. García Cabrera, 'Información operacional para una guerra internacional: la inteligencia militar norteamericana y la descripción de las islas Canarias', *Anuario de Estudios Atlánticos*, 69 (2023), pp. 1–22.

organized from the archipelago, have also garnered attention.<sup>7</sup> Recent studies note the role played by the German community in the Canary Islands during the war, exploring the impact of Nazism on the archipelago.<sup>8</sup> German intelligence, especially in relation to naval supply activities, espionage operations, and political surveillance, has not yet received similar treatment. This article considers the role played by German intelligence in the Canary Islands as a case study of wartime intelligence operations in the mid-Atlantic during the Second World War. It analyses leading agencies and agents, their objectives and their networks. The study also examines the Allied monitoring of the German intelligence campaigns and the dismantling of the Third Reich's secret services after the war.

## I. German Intelligence and Its Intervention in Spain

The clandestine activities of the Third Reich were conducted on the front lines and home front but also extended to Allied, occupied and neutral territories, including Spain. The *Abwehr*, literally 'defence', the intelligence agency of the Armed Forces High Command (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*, OKW) was responsible for military intelligence, sabotage, espionage and counterintelligence. Directly subordinate to the Armed Forces High Command, the *Abwehr* was one of the main German intelligence agencies.<sup>9</sup> After the summer of 1944, the organization was absorbed into the Reich police and security agencies and was under the SS Intelligence and Security Service (*Amt VI/Sicherheitsdienst*, SD), a security and political intelligence service of the Nazi Party created in 1931 that had been integrated into the Reich Security Main Office (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*, RSHA) in 1939. The SD had been regularly competing with Heinrich Himmler's Security Police (*Sicherheitspolizei*, SiPo), a state police agency that absorbed the police forces of the Gestapo from 1936 and had been integrated into the RSHA in 1939. The term 'SiPo' continued to be generally used to describe any police force that was part of the RSHA, and, in fact, the organization always managed to maintain significant independence within the security office.<sup>10</sup> The Third Reich also activated military intelligence units within each of the services, the Wehrmacht, Kriegsmarine and Luftwaffe. Thus, for example, the Secret Supply Service of the German Navy, known as the *Etappendienst*, or *Etappenorganisation*, also carried out intelligence work.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, J. J. Díaz Benítez, 'The Etappe Kanaren: A Case Study of the Secret Supply of the German Navy in Spain during the Second World War', *International Journal of Maritime History*, 30, 3 (2018), pp. 472–87.

<sup>8</sup> A. Almeida Aguiar, 'Adoctrinar con la palabra: prensa y propaganda nacionalsocialista en las islas Canarias durante la Guerra Civil', *Historia y Comunicación Social*, 25, 2 (2020), pp. 379–88, and M. García Cabrera, *Deutsche auf den Inseln! La colonia alemana de Canarias y la huella del nazismo (1930–1946)* (Madrid, 2023).

<sup>9</sup> On the *Abwehr* see, for example, N. Müller and H. Kaden, *Das Amt Ausland-Abwehr im Oberkommando der Wehrmacht: eine Dokumentation* (Berlin, 2007), and Paehler, *The Third Reich's Intelligence Services*. See also R. Hutchinson, *German Foreign Intelligence from Hitler's War to the Cold War: Flawed Assumptions and Faulty Analysis* (Lawrence, KS, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, Washington DC (henceforth NARA), Record Group (henceforth RG) 65/A1-136/122, FBI report on the organization of the *Abwehr* and Gestapo, 1944. See also A. Szanajda and D. Messenger, 'The German Secret State Police in Spain: Extending the Reach of National Socialism', *International History Review*, 40 (2018), pp. 398–407; M. Ros Agudo, *La Guerra Secreta de Franco* (Madrid, 2002), pp. 191–201, and B. Carruthers, *Handbook on German Military Forces* (London, 2013), pp. 179–210; Hutchinson, *German Foreign Intelligence*, pp. 9–13.

<sup>11</sup> Díaz Benítez, 'Etappe Kanaren', and N. E. Sopolsky, *The German Naval Etappendienst* (San José, 1976).

Spain was a prominent target of intelligence and espionage campaigns carried out by the Third Reich between 1939 and 1945. These not only received the collaboration of a long-standing German community established in the country since the mid-nineteenth century but also benefited from the growth of Nazism in Spain during the 1930s and the cooperation of the Franco regime after its victory in the Spanish Civil War. The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and the support of the Third Reich for Franco had further paved the way for the Nazi infiltration of Spain and laid the foundations for Spanish–German collaboration during the Second World War.<sup>12</sup> The actions of the Gestapo in Spain received a significant boost from 1936, especially with the appointment of Paul Winzer as police attaché to the German embassy in Madrid. The Gestapo operated through a subsidiary organization known as the Harbour Service (*Hafendienst*), which sought to monitor and control German citizens and businesses in the country.<sup>13</sup>

The strategic revaluation of Spain and its islands from 1939 turned the Spanish territory into an active alternative theatre of the Second World War. Although Franco decreed Spanish neutrality with the outbreak of war, his support of the Axis was more than evident, at least until 1943. Spain modified its war stance in June 1940, adopting a position of non-belligerence that allowed it to continue offering some support to the Axis without losing its neutral status. Spanish–German negotiations—carried out, for example, during the trips made by the Spanish minister Ramón Serrano Suñer to Berlin between 1940 and 1941 and the meeting between Franco and Hitler in Hendaye in October 1941—reinforced Spain's belligerent attitude, although they did not produce a definitive date for Spanish military involvement. Despite Spain's distancing itself from direct participation in the war, it was an active collaborator, as was evident in its cooperation with Axis trade operations, port supplies, intelligence and propaganda and its dispatch in mid-1941 of the Blue Division to fight against the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup>

During the global war, the Nazi Party Foreign Organization (*NSDAP Auslands-Organisation*, NSDAP/AO) in Spain extended its influence over the German community established in the country.<sup>15</sup> The Third Reich police forces collaborated directly with Franco's forces, especially after October 1940.<sup>16</sup> The Third Reich's diplomatic mission in Spain directed its wartime contribution through the activities of military and press attachés, which complemented the involvement of consuls and intelligence agents.

The *Abwehr* detachment in Spain (*Kriegsorganisation Spanien*, *KO-Spanien*) was one of the largest of such groups.<sup>17</sup> It was led by Captain Gustav Leissner, who acted under the alias 'Lenz', from 1939 until May 1944, when Lieutenant Colonel Arno Kleinstueber

<sup>12</sup> F. Haussmann, *Ernst-Wilhelm Bohle: Gauleiter im Dienst von Partei und Staat* (Berlin, 2009), pp. 115–16.

<sup>13</sup> Szanajda and Messenger, 'German Secret State Police', pp. 400–1. See also Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde (henceforth BA), NS 9/185, 'Intercepted intelligence material on Nazism in Spain', n.d.

<sup>14</sup> Much has been written on Spain's position in the Second World War; see here Ros Agudo, *La Guerra Secreta*, pp. 28–34; R. Wigg, *Churchill and Spain: The Survival of the Franco Regime, 1940–1945* (Liverpool, 2008), pp. 12–13; and D. W. Pike, *Franco and the Axis Stigma* (London, 2008), p. 50.

<sup>15</sup> Szanajda and Messenger, 'German Secret State Police', p. 398, and Ros Agudo, *La Guerra Secreta*, p. 183.

<sup>16</sup> NARA, RG 65/A1-136/122, FBI report on the organization of the *Abwehr* and Gestapo, 1944. See also Szanajda and Messenger, 'German Secret State Police', pp. 398–407.

<sup>17</sup> NARA, RG 226/A1-210/35, Organization and activity of *ABWEHR* in Spain, 1945. See also Szanajda and Messenger, 'German Secret State Police', p. 407.

replaced him.<sup>18</sup> *KO-Spanien* was made up of three subdivisions, known as *Gruppen* or *Abteilungen*. The first was an espionage section, Section I (Ab-I), which was controlled by Colonel Eberhard Kieckebusch and divided into specialized subsections. One of the main subdivisions was the naval intelligence section (Ab-I Marine, or Ab-I-M), which controlled subsidiary offices in Barcelona, Valencia, Cartagena, Malaga, Algeciras, Cádiz, Seville, Huelva, Vigo, La Coruña, Bilbao, Gijón, Tenerife and Las Palmas.<sup>19</sup> The military intelligence subdivision (Ab-I Heer, or Ab-I-H), directed by Kieckebusch and assisted by Joachim Canaris, gathered information on Allied troops and military units, armaments and strategic plans. The espionage section was made up of subdivisions for air intelligence (Ab-I-Luftwaffe, or Ab-I-L), communications (Ab-I-i-W/T), financial information (Ab-I-W), forgery (Ab-I-G) and photographic services (Ab-I-F).<sup>20</sup> Section II (Ab-II) of *KO-Spanien* was the sabotage section, which planned and executed sabotage against Allied vessels and facilities in both Spain and Morocco, but also sought to establish contacts with Moroccan nationalists in the Spanish Protectorate. The central office of the sabotage section in Madrid was made up of a large staff that included secretary Liselotte Niemann (also known as Lilo Nehrkorn, her original last name), the daughter of the leading intelligence agent in the Canary Islands, Edmund (Nehrkorn) Niemann.<sup>21</sup> Section III (Ab-III) of *KO-Spanien* was a counterintelligence section, dedicated to espionage and disinformation under the leadership of figures such as Colonel Kurt von Rohrscheidt. This section enjoyed close collaboration with the Franco regime's General Directorate of Security (*Dirección General de Seguridad*, DGS).<sup>22</sup>

*KO-Spanien* organized its campaigns from its headquarters in the German Embassy in Madrid.<sup>23</sup> It had regional branches (*Nebenstellen*) that were located mainly in San Sebastián, Barcelona, Madrid, Algeciras, Spanish Morocco and Las Palmas—the last of these with a substation in Tenerife.<sup>24</sup> However, the branches in the Canary Islands had relative independence and, according to US agents, their campaigns were especially active.<sup>25</sup>

Its position near the border between Spain and German-occupied France gave the San Sebastián office a particular role. Under the command of Karl Fritz Furch (alias 'Fuente'), it dealt primarily with the transit of *Abwehr* personnel across the border.<sup>26</sup> The headquarters of the *Abwehr* in Spanish Morocco were established in Tetouan and were under the control of Hans Joachim Rudolf (aliases 'Juan Recke', 'Moruno', 'Kalif' and 'Mueller').<sup>27</sup>

<sup>18</sup> NARA, RG 65/A1-136/124, Report on enemy intelligence in Spain, Oct. 1942. See also Rodríguez González, 'Los servicios secretos', p. 80.

<sup>19</sup> NARA, RG 59/Decimal File 45-49/6747, Organization of the ABWEHR in Spain, 12 Feb. 1946.

<sup>20</sup> NARA, RG 65/A1-136/124, Report on enemy intelligence in Spain, Oct. 1942.

<sup>21</sup> NARA, RG 238/M1270, Wolfgang Blaum interrogation, n.d.

<sup>22</sup> NARA, RG 226/A1-210/35, Organization and activity of ABWEHR in Spain, 1945, RG 59/Decimal File 45-49/6750, Colonel Kurt von Rohrscheidt, 17 July 1947, and RG 65/A1-136/124, FBI report on the German secret service, Aug. 1942. See also Szanajda and Messenger, 'German Secret State Police', p. 407.

<sup>23</sup> NARA, RG 65/A1-136/138, FBI Handbook Germany A-K, 10 Nov. 1944.

<sup>24</sup> NARA, RG 59/Decimal File 45-49/6747, Organization of the ABWEHR in Spain, 12 Feb. 1946.

<sup>25</sup> NARA, RG 65/A1-136/124, FBI report on the German secret service, Aug. 1942.

<sup>26</sup> N. West, *Hitler's Nest of Vipers: The Rise of the Abwehr* (Barnsley, 2022), pp. 113, 174–5; Rodríguez González, 'Los servicios secretos', p. 82, and D. Kahn, *Covert Warfare: The Final Solution of the Abwehr* (New York, 1989), p. 276. See also NARA, RG 65/A1-136/124, FBI report on the German secret service, Aug. 1942.

<sup>27</sup> NARA, RG 65/A1-136/124, FBI report, Aug. 1942, and The National Archives, London (henceforth TNA), KV 2/2654, Rudolf's report, n.d.

The office supervised the activities of subsidiary stations such as those in Tangier, Melilla, Cape Spartel and Ceuta.<sup>28</sup> German activity in the Spanish Sahara was particularly significant, especially in Villa Cisneros (Río de Oro). This area was under both *KO-Spanien* and the *Abwehr* in Paris. In Villa Cisneros, German intelligence was controlled through the figure of Pablo López Cantaro (alias 'Pila' and 'Don Pablo'), a cover name that probably hid his German nationality. Don Pablo established an important network of Spanish, German and Arab agents who facilitated the collection of information and the development of radiotelegraphic operations.<sup>29</sup>

*KO-Spanien* also had independent work groups (known as *Büros*) that carried out specific missions—*Recke, Runde, Zimmerschied, van Veersen, Seidel, Bodden* and *Plankert*.<sup>30</sup> *Büro Plankert*, which was directed by Heinz Plankert, was a military radio monitoring and interception service of the Wehrmacht High Command Communications Department in Berlin (OKW/WNV/Chi), under the official name Weather Service (*Wetterbeobachtungstelle*). It was responsible for capturing and deciphering Allied radio messages, both military and diplomatic, by monitoring fixed stations in France and Allied stations in North Africa as well as Anglo-American naval and diplomatic traffic between countries. The service, which was to serve all branches of the German armed forces, had three main areas of operation, in Madrid, Seville and Las Palmas, but also established other offices and secondary listening stations in Barcelona, Vigo and Valencia.<sup>31</sup>

Some of the *Abwehr* subdivisions in Germany also carried out work in Spain. For example, *Abwehrstelle (Ast) Hamburg* and its subsidiary branches (*Nebenstellen, Nest*) in Bremen and Kiel controlled a small network of independent agents in Spain.<sup>32</sup> The Iberian country was also used to train intelligence agents who were dispatched to the British Isles, the United States and South America. To send their intelligence reports from their respective destinations, they were forced to use the regular postal service as well as employ techniques such as invisible writing. These agents were assigned cover postal addresses in Spain and Portugal. Another method of communication involved secret messengers carried by Spanish merchant ships, especially those sailing to and from South America.<sup>33</sup> After the reorganization of the *Abwehr* in June 1944, the name *KO-Spanien* was replaced by *Kommando des Meldegebietes (KdM)*.<sup>34</sup>

The Germans also deployed significant naval intelligence in Spain that emanated from the *Etappendienst*, which collaborated with the *Abwehr*. The naval organization operated in regional areas such as the *Grossetappe Spanien-Portugal* (literally, 'large staging zone Spain and Portugal'), which Juan José Díaz Benítez has identified as one of

<sup>28</sup> TNA, KV 2/2654, French intelligence report on KO-Morocco, n.d.

<sup>29</sup> TNA, KV 2/207 and 208, British file on Hans Karl Scharf, 1945–1946.

<sup>30</sup> NARA, RG 65/A1-136/124, FBI report on the German secret service, Aug. 1942; RG 59/Decimal File 45-49/6748, Report on the German espionage organization in Spain and its material used during World War II, 4 June 1946; RG 226/A1-210/35, Officers, agents and employees of the Axis intelligence services in Spain, 1945; and RG 65/A1-136/124, FBI report on the German secret service, Aug. 1942. See also Rodríguez González, 'Los servicios secretos', pp. 87–8.

<sup>31</sup> NARA, RG 59/Decimal File 45-49/6748, Report on the German espionage organization in Spain, 4 June 1946.

<sup>32</sup> NARA, RG 59/Decimal File 45-49/6748, List of German intelligence agents in Spain, 26 Sept. 1946.

<sup>33</sup> NARA, RG 65/A1-136/124, FBI report on the German secret service, Aug. 1942.

<sup>34</sup> NARA, RG 59/Decimal File 45-49/6748, Report on the German espionage organization in Spain, 4 June 1946.



the most active supply services during the Second World War, in light, in particular, of the collection of strategic information for submarine supplying and the support of economic warfare, especially in coastal and strategic territories. The work of the *Etappendienst* in Spain was channelled through various agents: naval attachés, middle managers, known as ‘L (BE)’, trusted agents who collected strategic information and coordinated supply activities, referred to as *Vertrauensmänner* or ‘Vm (BE)’, and, finally, informants.<sup>35</sup>

## II. The Canary Islands: An Alternative Battleground in the Mid-Atlantic

Located in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, south-west of Spain, north-west of Africa and off the coast of Morocco, the Canary Islands have frequently been a frontier territory connected with international events, especially from the second half of the nineteenth century. Foreign capital, mainly British and German, contributed considerably to the development of the islands’ ports. For example, British companies such as Cory Brothers, Miller & Co., and Elder Dempster played a significant part in the islands’ history. Although the British firms had a greater role, German companies also had a presence in the archipelago, with Woermann Linie and the Deutsche Kohlen Depot Gesellschaft, for example.<sup>36</sup> The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 increased the value of the Canary Islands, but also heightened their dependency and vulnerability. The German submarine war reached the archipelago at the beginning of the conflict, together with the Allied blockade in response.<sup>37</sup>

Between 1939 and 1945, the islands were indirectly protagonists in a global conflict through intelligence and propaganda activities, naval movements and the planning of foreign campaigns.<sup>38</sup> In addition to unsuccessfully requesting the cession of one of the islands in 1940, Germany used the Atlantic archipelago in naval operations, especially between 1940 and 1943. German ships and tankers found refuge in Canary Islands ports before continuing their passages on to the Third Reich and occupied France. A second group of ships remained in the archipelago, especially between 1940 and 1941, in the service of the *Etappendienst*’s *Etappe Kanaren*, which was responsible for the supply service in the Canary Islands. The *Etappe Kanaren* had been established before the outbreak of the First World War but was dissolved after the end of that global conflict. According to Díaz Benítez, its reconstruction began in 1930, as part of the *Abwehr*, and in June 1938 it was transferred to the armed forces intelligence office of the Wehrmacht

<sup>35</sup> Díaz Benítez, ‘Etappe Kanaren’, pp. 6–8.

<sup>36</sup> J. Ponce Marrero, ‘Canarias y la expansión de los imperialismos: de la Europa Bismarckiana a la crisis finisecular, 1880–1899’, *Vegueta: Anuario de la Facultad de Geografía e Historia*, 1 (1993), pp. 167–77; J. Ponce Marrero, *Canarias en la Gran Guerra, 1914–1918: estrategia y diplomacia. Un estudio sobre la política exterior de España* (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 2006), among others.

<sup>37</sup> Ponce Marrero, *Canarias en la Gran Guerra*, pp. 35–98, and J. Ponce Marrero, ‘Allied Blockade in the Mid-East Atlantic during the First World War: Cruisers against Commerce-raiders’, *International Journal of Maritime History*, 32, 4 (2020), pp. 882–99.

<sup>38</sup> Díaz Benítez, *Canarias indefensa*; Díaz Benítez, *Anglofilia y autarquía en Canarias*; and Díaz Benítez, ‘Los proyectos británicos’. On British intelligence and propaganda in the islands, see M. García Cabrera and J. J. Díaz Benítez, ‘Organización y contenidos de la propaganda de guerra británica en Canarias durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial’, *Vegueta*, 19 (2019), pp. 513–33.

High Command (OKW/Ausl.), where it remained until July 1944, when it came directly under the Kriegsmarine.<sup>39</sup>

Some of the vessels docked in Canarian ports during the war were used to supply auxiliary cruisers in the Atlantic, and two of them, the *Corrientes* and the *Kersten Miles*, remained at the islands until the end of the war. *Corrientes* carried out five refuelling operations between March and July 1941.<sup>40</sup> The *Etappendienst* even organized the direct supply of fuel and food to Nazi submarines in one of the Canary Islands harbours, the Port of La Luz (Las Palmas).

Britain also recognized how the archipelago might aid its military activities. In the event of the loss of Gibraltar, a succession of secret invasion and occupation plans, such as operations *Chutney*, *Puma*, *Pilgrim*, *Adroit* and *Tonic*, would exploit the potential of the islands as a naval base.<sup>41</sup> Unlike its British ally, the United States did not contemplate a direct invasion of the Canary Islands, but it did not discount their significance and they remained a prominent objective of American pressure, diplomacy and intelligence.<sup>42</sup>

Allied intelligence on the Canary Islands was progressively organized to aid Allied military and strategic campaigns and hinder German influence in the islands. Britain mobilized all its intelligence services in the archipelago, from the Naval Intelligence Division to the Secret Intelligence Service and Special Operations Executive. The British compiled operational reports and volumes such as the *ISIS Report on the Canary Islands*, produced by the Naval Intelligence Division's Section 6, also known as the Interservice Topographical Department, between 1941 and 1942.<sup>43</sup> British intelligence directed part of its efforts at the decryption of enemy messages and observing German supply activities in the Port of La Luz. In 1941 the Naval Intelligence Division and the Special Operations Executive designed *Operation Warden*, a sabotage plan for the destruction of Axis ships anchored in that Canarian port. Although the plan was never executed, its existence highlights the strategic importance of the Canary Islands and the active involvement of British intelligence services.<sup>44</sup>

The US intelligence campaign in the Canaries was not established until late 1942, almost a year after the United States entered the war. However, American strategic involvement on the islands gradually grew during the second half of the conflict, culminating in the almost undisputed leadership of the United States in Allied intelligence on the Canary Islands. The US intelligence mission included a major oil rationing and control campaign, accompanied by monitoring of the enemy's port communications and smuggling system.<sup>45</sup> From 1943, the Allies undertook a counterintelligence campaign on the islands that was aimed in particular at unmasking Nazism and German intelligence agencies on the islands.

<sup>39</sup> Díaz Benítez, 'Etappe Kanaren', pp. 474–5, and J. J. Díaz Benítez, 'German Supply Ships and Blockade Runners in the Canary Islands in the Second World War', *Mariners Mirror*, 104, 3 (2008), pp. 318–29.

<sup>40</sup> Díaz Benítez, 'Etappe Kanaren', pp. 474–5, and Díaz Benítez, 'German Supply Ships'.

<sup>41</sup> Díaz Benítez, 'Los proyectos británicos'.

<sup>42</sup> J. J. Díaz Benítez, 'Canarias en la estrategia de EE.UU. durante la II Guerra Mundial y el comienzo de la Guerra Fria', *Boletín Millares Carló*, 29 (2010), pp. 221–38, here pp. 223–4.

<sup>43</sup> García Cabrera, 'British Geographic Intelligence', pp. 262–80.

<sup>44</sup> García Cabrera, 'Operation Warden'.

<sup>45</sup> García Cabrera, 'Información operacional', pp. 1–18, and M. García Cabrera, 'Espionage, Counterintelligence, and Naval Observation in the Middle of the Atlantic: A Case Study of US Intelligence in the Canary Islands (1939–1945)', *War in History*, 31, 3 (2024), pp. 246–67.



Germany's intelligence, counterintelligence, sabotage and subversive activities on the Canary Islands undertook secret operations that were often connected to Río de Oro, Cabo Juby and Ifni in Spanish Sahara. These clandestine campaigns were aided by the size of the German community on the islands since the nineteenth century, the infiltration of the Nazi regime in the archipelago during the 1930s and subsequent collusion and collaboration with the Francoist authorities. Studies have estimated that the German community in the Canary Islands comprised around 400 people, who lived throughout the islands but principally on Gran Canaria and Tenerife. The community was integrated into Spanish society, and its members were active in a range of professions and trades, including commerce, insurance, teaching, transport, port supply, hospitality and restaurants. However, they also maintained links with their German roots through economic and socio-cultural organizations such as German clubs, associations, schools and companies. A section of the community certainly exercised socio-cultural, political and military influence not only in German circles but also in Spanish circles, especially after the establishment of the Franco regime.

Although a significant part of the German community neither contributed to the German war effort nor shared the ideals of National Socialism, both the Third Reich and international warfare were a reality in the Canary Islands. Germany's ties to the islands and the popularity of Nazism among the German community were evident from the rapid establishment of local Nazi Party groups as early as 1932, the systematic mobilization of the German colony at the service of the Third Reich, the extension of socio-cultural activities, electoral support for Nazism, and its significant number of affiliates.<sup>46</sup> The Second World War affected the German community residing in the Canary Islands by reinforcing ideological ties to Nazism, encouraging patriotism and propaganda campaigns, and bringing about intelligence and counterintelligence activities.

### III. German Intelligence in the Canary Islands

The intelligence networks deployed by the Third Reich in the Canary Islands pursued four main objectives: collecting strategic information that would guarantee supply operations; monitoring naval and strategic movements by the Allies on the islands and in the Atlantic; operating information- and material-smuggling networks between South America, the Canary Islands and the Iberian Peninsula; and preparing sabotage activities against Allied vessels and the organization of subversive movements in French North Africa.<sup>47</sup>

The strategic and clandestine missions of the Third Reich in the Canary Islands were overseen by a variety of authorities. Consular and diplomatic bodies were already in place on the islands, especially in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, La Orotava and Las Palmas. During the war, the German consular corps was principally made up of influential German citizens who held honorary posts. In Las Palmas, the consular

<sup>46</sup> Almeida Aguiar, 'Adoctrinar con la palabra', pp. 379–88, and García Cabrera, *Deutsche auf den Inseln*!

<sup>47</sup> NARA, RG 226/97/34, Report on the enemy activity in the Canary Islands, n.d.; RG 165/77/1706, Volume on German activities in the Canary Islands, 15 Feb. 1942, and TNA, WO 204/12405, Report on the German intelligence in the Canaries and the Spanish Sahara, 1944.

mission was represented by Consul Walter Sauermann and Vice-Consul Harald Flick.<sup>48</sup> In Santa Cruz de Tenerife, the consulate was overseen by a well-known German citizen, Jacob Ahlers, who had held the position since 1905, along with Vice-Consul Ernst Albert Groth. Both men appear to have been carrying out intelligence activities since the First World War, including during the Spanish Civil War.<sup>49</sup> Germany also mobilized three interconnected intelligence branches to create (1) a military intelligence network derived from the *Etappe Kanaren* of the *Etappendienst*, (2) an intelligence organization and clandestine monitoring station linked to the *Abwehr*, and (3) surveillance campaigns run by the German political and police intelligence agencies.

Naval intelligence connected to the *Etappe Kanaren* was involved in collecting strategic information that supported the supplying of submarines and economic warfare. The *Etappe Kanaren*, which had been in operation long before the outbreak of the Second World War, mainly employed diplomatic agents, technicians and influential figures from the Canary Islands. The intermediate leader, termed 'L (BE)', of the *Etappe Kanaren* in 1938 was Jacob Ahlers, whom we have already encountered as honorary consul at Santa Cruz de Tenerife. His business, in which he represented German shipping companies and participated in the banking sector, was significant in the archipelago. He had ample experience in naval supply, including involvement in the supply of German auxiliary cruisers during the First World War, and also economic and social influence on the islands. Such was his importance to the *Etappendienst* that he regularly gained the support of the German High Command of the Navy (OKM) in his disagreements with the local head of the Nazi Party on the island, who was also his business rival. In April 1939, Wilhelm Rahn, an employee of Ahlers and another significant figure in the German community in Tenerife, became L (BE), a role that he held until the end of the war.<sup>50</sup>

In Las Palmas, the *Etappendienst* acted through the shipping company Woermann Linie, in particular through its director, Walter Vogel, and his employees Alfred Oehrens and Johann von Thun, who served as *Vertrauensmänner*. Other members of the organization were the radio operator Herbert Mertens in Tenerife and the honorary consul in Las Palmas, Walter Sauermann, who was recruited as Vm (BE) in 1942. Otto Bertram,

<sup>48</sup> Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Berlin (henceforth PAAA), RAV-Las Palmas 1 and RAV 163/847, Walter Sauermann's files, 1938–1944; NARA, RG 38/98B/413, Intelligence reports from the US consul in Las Palmas, 21 Sept. 1944, and Jordan intelligence report, 4 Aug. 1945. On Flick, see NARA, RG 38/98B/413, Jordan report, 26 July and 4 Aug. 1945; RG 226/19A/254, Report on Flick, 12 Sept. 1945, and PAAA, RAV-Las Palmas 2.

<sup>49</sup> On Ahlers, see PAAA, RAV 163/847, Ahlers' personal file, 8 Mar. 1944; NARA, RG 165/77/1706, Volume of strategic information on the Canary Islands, 15 Feb. 1942; RG 226/A1-210/35, Officials, agents and employees of the Axis in Spain, 1945; and RG 226/16/170, Report on the German colony in the Canary Islands, 1 Oct. 1942. On Groth, see NARA RG 59/Decimal File 45-49/6748, Report on Groth, 19 July 1946; RG 84/2245/30, Report on Consular Staff, n.d.; RG 165/77/1706, Volume of information about the Canary Islands, 15 Feb. 1942. See also Archivo General Militar de Ávila, Ávila (henceforth AGMA), Ministerio del Ejército, 2ª Sección, 'Espionaje Canarias, Ifni y Río de Oro', 1945. Also R. H. Whealey, *Hitler and Spain: The Nazi Role in the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939* (Lexington, KY, 2004), p. 144.

<sup>50</sup> Díaz Benítez, 'Etappe Kanaren', pp. 470–80. See also Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv, Freiburg (henceforth BA-MA), RM 7/1100, Captain Leopold Bürkner (OKW/Ausl IV) to OKM/M.Att., 31 Dec. 1938, and RM 7/1100, German naval attaché in Spain (M. Att.) to OKW/Ausl., 2 May 1939; also NARA, RG 38/98B/413, Report prepared by the ComMorSeaFronForces, 8 Dec. 1943.

head of Deutsche Lufthansa in the Canary Islands and head of the Nazi Party in Las Palmas during the war, also functioned as Vm (BE).<sup>51</sup>

The supplying of submarines carried out from the islands was recognized by the German Navy. The military chief of *Grossetappe Spanien*, who was the naval attaché in Madrid, requested in March 1941 that War Merit Crosses 2nd Class be awarded to three officers of the steamship *Corrientes*. He also requested this honour be given to the agents of the *Etappendienst* Walter Vogel, Alfred Öehrens and Johann von Thun, in recognition of their contribution to supplying carried out in La Luz in March 1941.<sup>52</sup>

In addition to guaranteeing and preparing the supply operations for German submarines, one of the many tasks carried out by *Etappendienst* agents was surveillance of enemy shipping around the islands. The consuls, German agents and regular informants in the service of the *Etappe Kanaren* were aided by the Spanish port authorities. For example, the day after the British collier *Empire Darwin* left the Port of Santa Cruz de Tenerife in May 1944, Ahlers contacted the commander of the port, Captain Arriaga, who passed on to him all available information about the ship.<sup>53</sup> The *Etappendienst* also received and transmitted clandestine information by radio and by hand: some of the German intelligence agents had shortwave radio sets and could also receive and send information via Spanish merchant ships.<sup>54</sup> Ahlers and German agents picked up a leather suitcase full of documents that had been taken from the *Monte Incharta*, which had arrived at Tenerife from Buenos Aires on the night of 6 July 1944.<sup>55</sup> Spanish merchant ships that arrived at the Canary Islands reported possible enemy sightings to the Germans through the office of the captain of the Spanish port. The stations of the Spanish Coast Guard in the Canary Islands and at Ifni and Río de Oro were also used for this purpose, and information was also provided by Spanish fishing boats.<sup>56</sup> Even before the outbreak of the war, the German navy had secured the direct collaboration of Deutsche Lufthansa and Spanish military aviation, which offered air services to support strategy and intelligence in the archipelago, primarily through the figure of Otto Bertram.<sup>57</sup>

The Third Reich established a complex intelligence, counterintelligence and sabotage network dependent on the *Abwehr* that stretched from the Canary Islands to Ifni, Cabo Juby and Río de Oro. According to Allied records, the network comprised thirty-six German residents on the islands and in North Africa and about thirty-five Spanish citizens. The network was led by Edmund Niemann (born Nehr Korn), head of the Las Palmas *KO-Spanien* section. Nehr Korn, known by the Allies as 'Edmund Niemann', was born on 16 January 1886 in Lüneburg. As a leading figure in the German community in the Canary Islands during the war, he exercised significant social and strategic

<sup>51</sup> Díaz Benítez, 'Etappe Kanaren', pp. 470–80. See also BA-MA, RM 7/1100, Captain Leopold Bürkner (OKW/Ausl. IV) to OKM/M.Att., 31 Dec. 1938; BA-MA, RM 7/1100, German naval attaché in Spain (M. Att.) to OKW/Ausl., 2 May 1939; and NARA, RG 38/98B/413, Report prepared by ComMorSeaFronForces, 8 Dec. 1943.

<sup>52</sup> BA-MA, RM 7/2483, OKW/Ausl to OKM, 11 Mar. 1941.

<sup>53</sup> NARA, RG 38/98A/4, Naval Intelligence report, 24 Aug. 1944.

<sup>54</sup> NARA, RG 38/98B/413, Hitchcock report, 8 Aug. 1944, and ComMorSeaFron Forces report, 17 Apr. 1944.

<sup>55</sup> NARA, RG 38/98B/413, Hitchcock report, 8 Aug. 1944.

<sup>56</sup> NARA, RG 226/97/34, Report on the enemy activity in the Canary Islands, n.d.

<sup>57</sup> A. Viñas Martín, *Franco, Hitler y el estallido de la Guerra Civil* (Madrid, 2014), pp. 336–7.

influence.<sup>58</sup> By March 1941, he had already been listed by the FBI as a suspicious person and possible intelligence agent in the Canary Islands.<sup>59</sup> He was always a direct target of Allied counterintelligence on the islands involving the French, British and Americans.<sup>60</sup>

Niemann had arrived in Las Palmas in 1939 after a long career in Morocco. He had resided in the African territory since 1907, together with his uncle-by-marriage Carl Ficke, a prominent merchant and businessman who had been in Morocco since 1899. During the First World War, Ficke and Niemann had been imprisoned in French Africa for inciting rebellion to drive the French out of Morocco.<sup>61</sup> Niemann was pardoned, and on his return to Germany in November 1916 he offered the German government his autobiographical book *Die Hölle von Casablanca* as a propaganda tool.<sup>62</sup> From 1925, he served as a director of the Mercator-Orloff Company, a colonial and commercial business based in Bremen that traded with Morocco. In 1932, Niemann entered the world of cinematography as the assistant director of AaFa-Film AG, a leading German silent-film company.<sup>63</sup> During the Spanish Civil War, he was a colonel in the German army and provided the Spanish Nationalist forces with significant support, which continued after the fratricidal war. Shortly before the end of the Spanish conflict, he opened in Ifni an establishment for the sale of cameras and lamps that is thought to have continued to operate throughout the Second World War. In 1939, he arrived in Las Palmas as a typewriter salesman. However, under the alias 'Nemo', Niemann was responsible for coordinating the different sections of the *Abwehr* in the Canary Islands. His organization sought to collect and transmit regular information on Allied movements at sea and on operations carried out by Anglo-American troops in the French territories of Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania and in areas adjacent to Río de Oro. In addition to monitoring the enemy and anticipating its movements, the network's main objective was the protection and organization of the supply of German submarines and cruisers in the Atlantic, carried out in collaboration with the *Elappendienst*.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>58</sup> PAAA, RAV-Las Palmas 5, BA, R/9361/II, Edmund Nehr Korn's file; AGMA, Ministerio del Ejército, 2ª Sección, 'Espionaje Canarias, Ifni y Río de Oro', 1945; NARA, RG 38/98A/4, ONI report, 24 Aug. 1944; 38/98B/413, Intelligence reports prepared by the consulate and the DNI, 1944; and RG 65/A1-136/125, List of suspected Axis agents, 1 June 1943.

<sup>59</sup> NARA, RG 65/A1-136/122, Files of suspected FBI agents, 9 Mar. 1942.

<sup>60</sup> A considerable part of the British and US sources are used throughout this study. Regarding the references collected by the French counterintelligence services, see X. Juncosa I Gurgui, *El contraespionaje francés en Madrid y Marruecos (1943–1945)* (Barcelona, 2021), p. 552.

<sup>61</sup> On his professional and personal career in Morocco, see G. Mai, *Die Marokko-Deutschen 1873–1918* (Göttingen, 2014), pp. 704–23, and G. Mai, *Die Marokko-Deutschen 1873–1918: Kurzbiographien* (Göttingen 2014), p. 78.

<sup>62</sup> BA, R 901/71769, *Die Hölle von Casablanca*, 1916–1917.

<sup>63</sup> Mai, *Die Marokko-Deutschen*, pp. 704–23, and Mai, *Die Marokko-Deutschen 1873–1918: Kurzbiographien*, p. 78.

<sup>64</sup> PAAA, RAV-Las Palmas 5, BA, R/9361/II, Edmund Nehr Korn's file; AGMA, Ministerio del Ejército, 2ª Sección, 'Espionaje Canarias, Ifni y Río de Oro', 1945; NARA, RG 38/98B/413, Intelligence reports prepared by the consulate and the DNI, 1944; RG 65/A1-136/125, List of suspected Axis agents, 1 June 1943; RG 38/98A/4, US Intelligence reports, Aug. 1944; and RG 59/Decimal File 45-49/6746, German agents in the Canary Islands, 13 Feb. 1945. On Nehr Korn's registration in Las Palmas, see PAAA, AB 2/330. On his cover name and mission, see NARA, RG 165/77/1707, naval intelligence report, 9 Jan. 1944; RG 238/M1270, Interrogation of Erwin Stubbs; and RG 65/A1-136/153, ABWEHR staff in Spain, 25 Jan. 1946. On the objectives and characteristics of

French counterintelligence agents also linked Niemann to the passage of refugees across the Hendaye border.<sup>65</sup> One of the hypotheses considered by the Allies was that 'Nemo' could have arrived at the German intelligence post in Hendaye in February 1943 to hold secret meetings with the head of the *Abwehr* in San Sebastián.<sup>66</sup> With his visits to the north of Spain, the German may have been trying to facilitate the communications between Berlin, the clandestine command posts on the Iberian Peninsula, and the intelligence networks based in the Canary Islands and Río de Oro. However, agents in these locations had an additional role on behalf of the Third Reich: the activation of transatlantic networks for the smuggling of secret material (coded documents, correspondence and propaganda material) between Germany, Spain and South America (mainly Argentina) on Spanish vessels crossing the Atlantic, operations probably run along with the naval *Etappendienst*.<sup>67</sup>

Niemann's organization also specialized in sabotage and subversive activities. His agents sought not only to attack Allied ships and inland facilities, but also to foment riot and rebellion in the Allied territories of North Africa. These subversive activities involved infiltration of the French colonies and the systematic delivery of weapons and ammunition to local residents.<sup>68</sup> According to Allied intelligence records, the Germans attempted to sabotage the SS *Hartington* while it was anchored at the Port of La Luz for repairs between June and July 1942. However, the plan was abandoned in light of the Allies' close watch over the ship while it was docked.<sup>69</sup> After the Italian surrender and under Allied pressure, the Spanish Government agreed to hand over the Italian ships anchored in Spanish ports to the Allies. The *KO-Spanien* tried to prevent this transfer and planned various sabotage actions in Spain. In Las Palmas and Tenerife, the crew of the Italian ships, acting either on their own initiative or under pressure from the German consulate, tried to destroy the ship's machinery. In addition, José Segura, a Spaniard who was part of *Gruppe II* of the *Abwehr* in Las Palmas, admitted to having placed explosive charges onboard one of the ships. None of these attempted acts of sabotage was successful.<sup>70</sup>

Niemann established a well-defined network of German agents and informants. According to Allied records, active agents on the island of Tenerife included Consul Jacob Ahlers (in addition to his role as a German naval intelligence agent, Ahlers was listed as an agent of I-M *KO-Spanien*); police agent Heinrich Bandholtz; biologist and teacher Friedrich Heinrich Wilhelm Behrens; Albert Fiess, the first head of the Nazi Party on the island; Vice-Consul Ernst Groth; members of the Herzog family (Heinrich, Oskar and Heinrich Paul); Dietrich Wilhelm Osterloh, an influential resident of Puerto

his intelligence network, see TNA, WO 204/12405, Report on German intelligence in the Canary Islands and the Spanish Sahara, n.d., and WO 204/12735, Report on enemy intelligence in French Morocco, 1944.

<sup>65</sup> Juncosa I Gurgui, *El contraespionaje francés*, p. 552.

<sup>66</sup> NARA, RG 165/77/1707, naval intelligence report, 9 Jan. 1944.

<sup>67</sup> Rodríguez González, 'Los servicios', pp. 80–91, and Grandio Seoane and Rodríguez González, *War Zone*. On the smuggling network established in the Canary Islands, see NARA, RG 226/88/621, OSS Messages from/to Washburn, 1 June 1943 – 30 Mar. 1944.

<sup>68</sup> TNA, WO 204/12405, Report on German intelligence, n.d., and WO 204/12735, Report on enemy intelligence in French Morocco, 1944.

<sup>69</sup> NARA, RG 65/A1-136/128, Supplement on the German Intelligence Service Report, Aug. 1942.

<sup>70</sup> NARA, RG 65/A1-136/143, FBI report on the Ref. II KO SPAIN, 12 Jan. 1946, and RG 226/A1-210/35, Registry of officers, agents and employees of the intelligence services of the Axis in Spain, 1945.

de La Cruz; merchants Wilhelm Bubi and Marius Wilhelm Janssen; Puerto de la Cruz businessman Oskar Lohe; Hans Friedrich Luhr; and the influential naval intelligence and surveillance agent Wilhelm Heinrich Rahn (also described as an agent of I-M *KdM Spanien*). According to records confiscated by the Allies, the German vice-consul in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Ernst Albert Groth, may have served as an agent of *Ast Hamburg*.<sup>71</sup> Amongst those in Las Palmas on whom Niemann could draw were the merchant Robert Andersen; Otto Bertram, manager of Deutsche Lufthansa; Franz Wilhelm Noelke, former vice-consul of Monrovia, in Liberia (described as an agent of the IM *KO-Spanien*); Otto Dietzold, merchant and head of the German Labour Front (*Deutsche Arbeitsfront*, DAF), also described as an agent of the IM *KO-Spanien*; businessmen Karl Grimm and Hans Klinge; Consul Walter Sauermann; and Walter Vogel, who was in charge of Woermann Linie. Vogel acted for the *Abwehr* and *Etappendienst* under the code name 'Walter Oldius', and his postal address was used as a contact address for an *Ast Hamburg* agent in August 1941.<sup>72</sup>

In Ifni, Fernando Poo (Bioko, a Spanish colony in in the Gulf of Guinea), Cabo Juby and Villa Cisneros, Niemann's network involved figures such as Hans Haunesse (aka Nicolás Etienne Simmer or Hans Heinrich) and Pablo Rensing (sometimes also referred to as Pablo García), among many others.<sup>73</sup> Niemann made frequent trips to Cabo Juby in Spanish military planes. He had a fairly permanent circle of trusted individuals in both French Morocco and Ifni that included Bernal (a bus operator who did not cross the border but always found reasons to stop close to it and make contact with individuals who came from the French zone), Luis Morón Martínez (a representative of Iberian insurance companies who had permission to enter French Morocco and had served as a messenger for the Germans), Aguirre and José Casas Canesa (both Spanish citizens who also entered French territory as messengers), and Gottfried von Waldheim (who had previously been the German consul in Monrovia and was living temporally in the Canary Islands).<sup>74</sup>

For his daily activities in Las Palmas, Niemann used the offices and the official telephone number of the Canary Islands and North West Africa Air Zone (*Zona Aérea de Canarias y del África Occidental*; one of the territorial divisions of the Spanish Air Force), which even appeared as associated with him in the telephone book at the local Nazi Party headquarters.<sup>75</sup> Evidently, between 1940 and 1942 Niemann constantly collaborated with the heads of the Spanish General Staff in the Canary Islands (military, air

<sup>71</sup> AGMA, Ministerio del Ejército, 2ª Sección, 'Espionaje Canarias, Ifni y Río de Oro', 1945, and NARA, RG 59/Decimal File 45-49/6748, Report on Ernst Groth, 19 July 1946. On Ahlers, see Díaz Benítez, 'Etappe Kanaren', pp. 470–80. On Osterloh, see NARA, RG 84/2248/3, Letter from the British consulate in Tenerife, 29 June 1945. On Rahn, see NARA, RG 226/A1-210/35, Officers, agents and employees of the intelligence services of the Axis in Spain, 1945.

<sup>72</sup> AGMA, Ministerio del Ejército, 2ª Sección, 'Espionaje Canarias, Ifni y Río de Oro', 1945, and NARA, Electronic Reading Room, German Intelligence Service (WWII), vol. 3, MI-5, report 'Etappenorganisation der Kriegsmarine', 30 July 1946. On Dietzold, see NARA, RG 226/19A/259, OP-16-FA-3 (ONI) report, 13 Sept. 1945. On Noelke, see NARA, RG 59/Decimal File 45-49/6748, Report of the US embassy in Madrid, 6 Sept. 1946.

<sup>73</sup> AGMA, Ministerio del Ejército, 2ª Sección, 'Espionaje Canarias, Ifni y Río de Oro', 1945.

<sup>74</sup> NARA, RG 226/16/842, ComMorSeaFron Forces naval intelligence report, 17 Apr. 1944, and RG 226/97/34, Extract from a report sent by the OSS agent on the islands, 8 Mar. 1944.

<sup>75</sup> NARA, RG 38/98B/413, Letter from Robert F. Fernald, 14 Apr. 1945, and Intelligence report on Niemann, 17 July 1945.



and naval), receiving a regular supply of information about the Allies. In exchange, Niemann included in his circle a large network of Spanish collaborators, especially military men and air force officers, among whom were Colonel Juan Hernández Aceituno, commander of the Spanish Sahara territories; Colonel Francisco Escribano Aguirre, chief of the Air Forces of the Atlantic and Saharan Possessions; Admiral Juan Pastor Tomaseti; and Más de Gaminde, regional commander of the Air Forces of the Canary Islands and the North West African Zone.<sup>76</sup>

Niemann knew how to play his cards as an intelligence agent. He appears to have used several cover names, such as Gustav Nehrkorn, Neubrecker, Neurrecher, Noherenbacher, Dr Onkel, and Niemeyer, pseudonyms, often combined, that could have served as aliases or were perhaps the result of Allied confusion.<sup>77</sup> Allied intelligence agents in Morocco and the Canaries had great difficulty verifying his identity during much of the war. Indeed, they even came to doubt his existence, associating his last name *Niemann* with the German word *niemand*, or ‘nobody’.<sup>78</sup>

In addition to Niemann’s intelligence network, the *Abwehr* also established in Las Palmas a section of the *Büro Plankert*, which, at least in 1942/43, had ten members.<sup>79</sup> This group specialized in monitoring the messages of the armies and Anglo-American diplomatic entities in Africa. According to records compiled by the Allies after they seized German buildings in the islands, the core of the network was formed by Germans Heinrich Maur (Mauer), Kurt Karl Soeder and Arthur Gebauer. Gebauer had arrived in Las Palmas at the beginning of the First World War, and according to the Allied intelligence services, he may have been acting as a telegraph operator and operator of naval wireless communications since then. Maur was born in 1893 and arrived in Las Palmas in 1935. He was a telegraph operator for the Lufthansa organization in Las Palmas and an employee of the Wehrmacht High Command Communications Department Interception-Cryptography unit in Las Palmas. Between February 1941 and November 1944, he also worked for the I-i *KO-Spanien*.<sup>80</sup> These men, listed as *Sonderkommando* agents, were military personnel dedicated to wireless telegraphy work in Spain who had a White Pass, a permit that gave regular access to diplomatic facilities.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>76</sup> NARA, RG 226/16/842, ComMorSeaFron Forces naval intelligence report, 17 Apr. 1944; RG 38/98A/4, Naval intelligence report, 24 Aug. 1944; RG 38/98B/413, Intelligence reports on Niemann’s network, 1944; RG 319/85/717, Naval intelligence report, 13 Feb. 1945; RG 84/2248/2, From Haven to Hayes, 2 Nov. 1943; RG 226/16/611, Naval intelligence report sent by the Naval Attaché in Madrid, 10 Nov. 1943; and RG 226/19A/24, Naval Intelligence report, 1 Nov. 1944. See also NARA, RG 226/A1-210/35, Officers, agents and employees of the Axis intelligence services in Spain, 1945, and TNA, WO 204/12405, Axis intelligence organization: Canary Islands and Spanish Sahara territories, 1943–1944.

<sup>77</sup> NARA, RG 38/98B/413, Intelligence reports prepared by H. C. Jordan, 21 Sept. 1944, and WO 204/12405, Report on German intelligence in the Canary Islands and the Spanish Sahara, 1944.

<sup>78</sup> NARA, RG 38/98B/413, Report prepared by the ComMorSeaFronForces, 8 Dec. 1943, and RG 226/127/32, General intelligence report on the Canary Islands, 26 June 1943.

<sup>79</sup> NARA, RG 59/Decimal File 45-49/6748, Report on German espionage in Spain, 4 June 1946. See also Díaz Benítez, ‘Etappe Kanaren’, p. 477.

<sup>80</sup> NARA, RG 59/Decimal File 45-49/6748, Report from the US embassy in Madrid, 6 Sept. 1946, and RG 65/A1-136/138, FBI Handbook Germany A-K, 10 Nov. 1944.

<sup>81</sup> NARA, RG 59/Decimal File 45-49/6748, Report on the composition of German radio groups in Spain, 24 July 1946, and List of German intelligence agents in Spain, 26 Sept. 1946; RG 65/A1-136/138, FBI Handbook Germany A-K, 10 Nov. 1944; RG 38/98B/413, Letter from Fernald, 28 Nov. 1944, and RG 226/A1-210/35, Axis intelligence agents in Spain, 1945. On Gebauer, in particular, PAAA, RAV-Las Palmas 2; NARA, RG 38/98B/413, Intelligence

According to US intelligence, Wilhelm Jenssen, a German resident of Tenerife, was also listed in the *Abwehr* records as a member of *Büro Plankert*.<sup>82</sup>

Some of the most prominent supporters of Nazism on the islands, especially those with influence within the local branches of the Nazi Party, also acted as political and police intelligence agents. Their principal goals were policing, maintaining order within the German community and deploying counterintelligence. Such movements were particularly active on the island of Tenerife, where a system for monitoring Allied intelligence was deployed in the port of Santa Cruz de Tenerife.<sup>83</sup> US intelligence forces highlighted the pressure and coercion carried out there by German residents such as Karl Heinrich Bandholtz (also Bandholz) and Bernard Diepenbrock. Both were described by the FBI as representatives of the SiPo (*Sicherheitspolizei*, Security Police) and SD (*Sicherheitsdienst*, Security Service) in Santa Cruz de Tenerife since at least December 1940.<sup>84</sup>

Bandholtz, born on 3 December 1899, arrived in the archipelago around 1941. According to Allied intelligence, he had acted under the cover of the German consulate since the summer of 1941 and had a safe conduct issued by the Spanish General Directorate of Security on 2 March 1943.<sup>85</sup> In its register of German subjects in Tenerife, the General Captaincy of the Canary Islands described Bandholtz as a professional in criminology and police matters with the title of a Gestapo / SiPo agent.<sup>86</sup> In postwar American records, Bandholtz was also listed as an SS police officer. After the war he was interned by the British, and during the Cold War he worked with US intelligence services: for example, from July 1965 his residence in Tannenbusch in Bonn, West Germany, was used by the CIA as a listening post in operations *Cavoice* and *Aetophat*.<sup>87</sup> Diepenbrock, born on 29 May 1900, was a prominent merchant in Tenerife. He had a close relationship with pro-German Spanish and Falange circles on the island, and according to the Allies he was directly associated with Bandholtz.<sup>88</sup>

#### IV. Allied Counterintelligence and German Disintegration

From 1943, Allied intelligence and diplomacy agencies in the Canary Islands concentrated their efforts on registering the German community residing on the islands and the deployment of counterintelligence. Niemann's network and his collaborators on the African continent became a focus for all the British and US intelligence divisions in the Canary Islands and Morocco. The head of naval operations for the US *Commander of the Moroccan Sea Frontier* (ComMorSeaFron) in Casablanca, Captain N. R. Hitchcock,

report sent by Jordan, 28 July 1945, and Letter from Fernald, 28 Nov. 1944; RG 226/A1-210/35, Agents of the intelligence services of the Axis in Spain, 1945.

<sup>82</sup> NARA, RG 59/Decimal File 45-49/6748, List of German intelligence agents in Spain, 26 Sept. 1946.

<sup>83</sup> NARA, RG 65/A1-136/138, FBI Handbook Germany A-K, 10 Nov. 1944.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* See also NARA, RG 226/A1-210/35, Axis intelligence agents in Spain, 1945 and AGMA, Ministerio del Ejército, 2ª Sección, 'Espionaje Canarias, Ifni y Río de Oro', 1945.

<sup>85</sup> NARA, RG 65/A1-136/138, FBI Handbook Germany A-K, 10 Nov. 1944. See also NARA, RG 84/2248/3, note without author, 15 July 1945; RG 226/A1-210/35, Officers, agents and employees of the Axis intelligence services in Spain, 1945.

<sup>86</sup> AGMA, Ministerio del Ejército, 2ª Sección, 'Espionaje Canarias, Ifni y Río de Oro', 1945.

<sup>87</sup> NARA, ZZ 18, CIA file on Bandholtz, 1971.

<sup>88</sup> NARA, RG 65/A1-136/138, FBI Handbook Germany A-K, 10 Nov. 1944.

was eager to capture Niemann and his collaborators after an alleged illegal crossing on the Spanish–French border in Morocco. This plan was integrated into *Operation Snatch*, designed by the African section of the Office of Strategic Services and other American and French military intelligence divisions between March and May 1944.<sup>89</sup> In spring and summer 1944, Allied military units and intelligence services in Morocco arrested members of several Spanish intelligence groups on the African border, but no evidence suggests that *Operation Snatch* was carried out against Niemann's network. From the summer of 1944, the Allies limited their efforts to presenting formal complaints to the Spanish government to have the most prominent German agents expelled from Spanish territory.<sup>90</sup>

With the conclusion of the conflict, the Allies began a slow process of dismantling Nazism in the Canary Islands, involving the economic control of the German population, the seizure of official assets and facilities, and the repatriation of German citizens. One of the first targets for repatriation was Edmund Niemann's intelligence network. The Americans complained about the situation to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Spanish Government between February and May 1945. The Allied complaints set in motion extended correspondence and official investigations involving the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, through the minister Félix de Lequerica, the General Directorate of Security of the Ministry of the Interior, and the Ministry of the Army, among other bodies. Although General Francisco García Escámez, chief of the military, naval and air forces of the Canary Islands, shared records on the German suspects compiled by Spanish military intelligence in the Canary Islands, the information they contained was limited and had been extensively redacted.<sup>91</sup> The largest number of German residents of the Canary Islands were repatriated on the SS *Marine Marlin*, which left Bilbao on 31 August 1946.<sup>92</sup> Departures of individuals, including Edmund Niemann, were carried out simultaneously, by plane and under police surveillance.<sup>93</sup> The repatriation or departure of German residents did not prevent a subsequent return to the archipelago: Edmund Niemann was on a list of Germans who had already returned to Spain by September 1948.

## V. Conclusions

The Second World War had significant impact on daily life in the Canary Islands, not only as a result of involvement in the war operations of Britain and Germany, but also as a result of foreign diplomacy, propaganda and intelligence carried out there. German intelligence agencies implemented significant operations in the Canary Islands, promoted in particular by the German Embassy in Madrid, consulates established in Las Palmas and Santa Cruz de Tenerife, and intelligence organizations including the

<sup>89</sup> NARA, RG 226/97/34, From David King to Edward W. J. Glavin, 17 Apr. 1944, and RG 226/97/34, Captain Greene's Report, 17 Apr. 1944.

<sup>90</sup> NARA, RG 226/97/34, From H. M. Hooker to Captain Chevalier, 18 July 1944.

<sup>91</sup> AGMA, Ministerio del Ejército, 2ª Sección, 'Espionaje Canarias, Ifni y Río de Oro', 1945, and NARA, RG 226/127/32, Communications with the Spanish Government, 25 Apr. and 7 May 1945.

<sup>92</sup> NARA, RG 59/Decimal File 45-49/6748, American embassy report, 6 Sept. 1946, and RG 226/127/3, List of repatriated German passengers, 31 Aug. 1946.

<sup>93</sup> NARA, RG 84/2245/37, Letter from Tower, 28 Aug. 1946, and RG 226/127/4, Repatriation by air, 23 Aug. 1946.

*Abwehr* and the information divisions of the *Etappendienst*. The military and strategic intelligence services of the Third Reich hid their clandestine actions under the cover of diplomatic and business activities. German agents used a range of covert and subversive channels, fostering the potential of strategic espionage.

Foreign powers connected their intelligence campaigns in the Canaries with their efforts in north-west Africa. The Third Reich, for example, deployed an intelligence network controlled by Edmund Niemann that stretched from the Canary Islands to Ifni and Río de Oro, with members involved in subversive action in French North Africa. The intelligence agencies of the Third Reich acted clandestinely to support the preparation and execution of supply operations, smuggling, sabotage and subversion. Like Britain, Germany had longstanding presence on the islands, an influence that had been consolidated since the end of the nineteenth century and was especially active in the 1930s. In addition, German intelligence had the approval of the Franco government and benefited from the cooperation of many Spanish citizens, not just from the most important military, political and socio-cultural sectors, but also from less prominent environments, such as the technical, fishing, port and commercial sectors.

Although comparatively these intelligence operations were on a small scale, they are a noteworthy element of Atlantic history and nissology, the study of islands on their own terms. This case study highlights ways in which the Canary Islands were significant, such as their strategic importance, their distinct wartime character, and the actions of foreign communities. It also contributes to the study of intelligence in the history of Germany, Spain and the Allies. This research demonstrates how transnational intelligence missions were possible in the Second World War, moving away from the greater discreteness typical of earlier conflicts with the assistance of technological advances and in light of the global reach of the war. The ties between the Canary Islands and clandestine activities in the African colonies of Spain and France also contribute to the history of north-west Africa during the war, a strategic scenario that repeatedly conditioned the outcome of the conflict.

The German mission in the Canary Islands demonstrates the relevance of neutral territories in international conflicts, in particular the strategic significance of Spain, its colonies and archipelagos. The activities described are examples of the relationships between war, diplomacy, intelligence and neutrality and demonstrate the great value of information for the planning and execution of military operations. The similarities and contrasts between military and naval intelligence, political espionage, sabotage and counterintelligence are revealing. This case also highlights how diplomatic, commercial, socio-political and military agents, who often adopted aliases, could complement ordinary informants and collaborators. Particularly fascinating is the recycling of intelligence agents and services across four contexts: the First World War, the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, and the Cold War.

German intelligence, espionage, sabotage and subversion operations during the Second World War were dynamic, evolving in the course of the conflict. The German community residing abroad could play a strategic role, bolstered, it appears, by the embrace of National Socialism beyond the borders of the Third Reich. This research has provided new examples of how German influence in Spain played out and of regular Spanish–German collaboration during this global war. It supports studies of the composition, organization and functioning of German intelligence services in

Spain, including the *Abwehr* (*KO-Spanien*), the *Sicherheitsdienst*, the *Sicherheitspolizei* and the *Etappendienst*. It also makes evident the international work carried out by local networks of the *Abwehr*, the use of cover addresses in neutral regions, and the activation of trans-oceanic smuggling networks for the exchange of secret material and coded documentation. German activities in the Canary Islands also provide examples of the conduits of *Abwehr* missions, with contacts between (1) the north and south of Spain, (2) the Canary Islands and north-west Africa, and (3) the Spanish archipelago and Latin America.

Both Germany and the Allies practised counterintelligence in the Canary Islands that built on earlier campaigns. The end of the war meant, however, the dismantling of the clandestine structures deployed by the Third Reich. While members of the German intelligence and espionage networks on the islands were repatriated to Germany, some never left and others returned, continuing or picking up again their prominent economic and socio-cultural role in the life of the islands.

### Abstract

Between 1939 and 1945, the Canary Islands, an important region of nominally neutral or non-belligerent Spain, were a site of military planning, diplomacy, propaganda, naval supply, and intelligence. Most practically, the Third Reich utilized the islands as a supply station for ships and submarines. It could also draw on the National Socialist sympathies of the large and integrated German community. It established intelligence-gathering campaigns in four forms: (1) naval intelligence gathered by the secret supply service of the German Navy, (2) a network of espionage, information, subversion and sabotage operations organized by the *Abwehr*, which connected the islands with Río de Oro, Ifni and Cabo Juby in Spanish Sahara, (3) a military radio monitoring and interception substation; and (4) surveillance and information-gathering undertaken by agents of police organizations. This article considers the role played by German intelligence in the Canary Islands as a case study of wartime intelligence operations.

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