

Astrology and British Military Intelligence during World War II:
The Strange Case of Louis De Wohl

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On September 1st, 1939, World War II began when German forces invaded Poland. Leaders in Western Europe, especially Great Britain, were shocked at what had happened and how effective German forces were. From the very beginning of the conflict, they consistently underestimated Germany's military capabilities because they knew little about the country's strategies and

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throughout the world. This record convinced some senior British military intelligence officials that his astrological predictions could predict Hitler's future military plans.⁹

In addition, high-ranking British officers believed that Hitler himself believed strongly in predictions based on astrology and numbers. De Wohl convinced the British that he had personal knowledge of Hitler's interest in astrology thanks to his friendship with V. V. Tilea, a former Romanian ambassador, and K. E. Kraft, who created Hitler's personal horoscopes. Recently, historians and several prominent Hitler's biographers claim that the German leader did not actually believe in astrology. One of these biographers, John Tolland, acknowledged that the German dictator once asked for a horoscope to be cast for him but that he never took this seriously.¹⁰ It is more likely, however, that Hitler relied on an expansive intelligence network which funneled him information. Indeed, German failures were more indicative of Hitler's inability to comprehend the strategic and tactical consequences of battles at the frontlines rather

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Nazi regime. In early 1940, de Wohl was given a temporary commission in the British Army at the rank of Captain, and he quickly began his work. He took his rank very seriously and was apparently unaware at the time that his commission was temporary and could be revoked when his services were no longer needed.¹² His early work included writing horoscopes for all the leaders of major countries involved in World War II; beyond writing their horoscopes, he also attempted to reveal the personal characters of these leaders. In addition, de Wohl tried to convince British military strategists that his horoscopes could provide additional information that would be useful in predicting how the German armies would move and the way their individual officers would respond when faced with an array of different situations. This created a tense situation within British intelligence. While some senior officials really believed that his information could be useful, others outright thought it ridiculous. This belief influenced some of the intelligence officers to begin pushing de Wohl toward a slightly different field of operation, such as propaganda work.

Many intelligence officers did not entirely trust

Ultimately, the British military intelligence officers began to use de Wohl's astrological writings to bolster public morale. The reasoning behind this move lay in the belief of the British military leadership that de Wohl's work would be more profitable if it concentrated on propaganda rather than horoscope intelligence gathering. In one of his predictions, he boldly announced that the Germans were, in fact, vulnerable and would lose the war in the long run. Later, in 1942, a proposal appeared within the Political Warfare Executive (P.W.E.)¹⁴, drafted by an unknown agent, to have de Wohl publish an astrological paper to be distributed in Germany.¹⁵

Some of these reports appeared shortly after he was hired by British intelligence and further cast doubts on de Wohl's character. Since de Wohl was a citizen of Hungary, a country allied with Germany, many British intelligence officers questioned his credibility as soon as he arrived in England. Few, such as Charles Hambro, liked de Wohl personally, and many British intelligence officers either found him useless or were upset at the fact that he was commissioned as an astrologer. As a result, his contacts were monitored and all his personal mail read under strict orders from S.O.E.²⁰ In addition, in 1941, an anonymous S.O.E. source stated that de Wohl had made dubious claims about his heritage that could not be proven.²¹ That report by itself was not enough to damage de Wohl's personal reputation; however, other reports about his life surfaced soon after. Upon de Wohl's return from his mission in the United States, some British officers entertained the possibility of placing de Wohl in an internment camp or confining him to his quarters; however, this idea was rejected for lack of proper cause.²² In April 1942, an unidentified source, probably another of his detractors within the intelligence community, described de Wohl as a dangerous person, whose loyalty to the Crown was questionable at best.²³ In June 1943, a report from an agent shadowing de Wohl surfaced. It stated that the astrologer

[The British] War Office were warned that with or without permission he is wearing uniform.²⁵

The officer's name was stricken from the official records and only his letter remains. Another anonymous source claimed to have personally known de Wohl in Germany and described him as “. . . a charlatan, well known in pre-war days in Germany as a Nazi.”²⁶ Such claims were not uncommon, but ultimately, no action was taken against de Wohl. This was due in large measure to his denouncers' inability to corroborate or verify these accusations. De Wohl's past appeared to have been called into again question in late 1943. An S.O.E. agent reported an incident in which de Wohl approached another Hungarian, unaware that the stranger was in fact Hungarian, presented himself as part of the Hungarian aristocracy. When the man replied in Hungarian, de Wohl could not speak or understand the language.²⁷

Why didn't British authorities arrest or punish de Wohl? Perhaps, many did not want to cause problems inside the intelligence community. Although condemned by some, he received some support, especially for his role in boosting support for the British war effort in the United States. Regardless of his predictions or whether one did or did not believe in astrology, de Wohl had a positive impact overall on the war effort. He certainly gained notoriety as an astrologer, especially in the United States. His fame grew when some of his predictions actually came true. In 1941, for instance, he predicted that General Wilhelm Keitel and General Walther von Brauchitsch, two of Hitler's leading generals in the “Operation Barbarossa”, would attempt to

²⁵ United Kingdom. National Archives, Catalogue Reference KV/2/2821, Image Reference 74, 1942.

²⁶ United Kingdom. National Archives, Catalogue Reference KV/2/2821, Image Reference 51, 1943.

assassinate Hitler. In fact, within a few days of the claim, reports surfaced that both men returned to Germany for unknown reasons.²⁸

However, overall, the last recorded predictions written by de Wohl for the S.O.E. are also questionable. At the end of 1942, he made a list of his past predictions that came true. This included a list of important dates for the following year. De Wohl vaguely predicted bad months for the Axis that occurred in 1942, but he submitted the report of his accurate findings after the events happened and therefore had time to shape these to cast himself in good light. For example, his predictions for 1943 merit another look. De Wohl stated that July is

. . . one of the most dangerous month of the entire war. German astrologers must pray, that enemy action does not force the Fuehrer into making important decisions within the first eight days of the month, as this would lead to great disaster.²⁹

De Wohl turned out to be correct; in July 1943, Germans suffered a bitter defeat at the Battle of Kursk on the Eastern Front, while an Anglo-American force made a landing in Sicily. On the other hand, de Wohl also predicted February would be a great month for Hitler, yet the Battle of Kasserine Pass turned the tide of the African Campaign in favor of the Allies.

Giving de Wohl the benefit of the doubt and assuming that some of his predictions came through, the question remained of how to apply such intelligence to actual front operations. The information that de Wohl allegedly predicted was far from useful. Intelligence officers concluded that predictions about particular days or months favoring particular military strategies lacked empirical evidence in support of such operations. They probed de Wohl about locations of attacks, specific troop movements, and numbers but were ultimately unsatisfied with his

²⁸ United Kingdom. National Archives, Catalogue Reference KV/2/2821, Image Reference 42, 1941. A rift occurred between Hitler and his generals when they failed to end the war with the Soviet Union by the end of summer. This angered Hitler, and he recalled both generals.

²⁹ United Kingdom. National Archives, Catalogue Reference KV/2/2821, Image Reference 68, 1942.

answers. No matter how accurate the predictions of de Wohl happened to be, they were never exact enough to be of any use until after the events occurred. Officials in the British Military Intelligence undoubtedly came to the same conclusion, which is evidenced by the fact that as the war progressed less attention was paid to de Wohl's predictions and more to his personal conduct. The S.O.E. deemed it more profitable to keep de Wohl employed and keep a close eye on him, rather than alienating him from his self-proposed usefulness. If de Wohl was unsatisfied and alienated by the S.O.E., he could do harm to the war effort in the eyes of the British, especially if he moved to the United States where he made connections during his earlier tour of duty. In fact, it appears that one of the reasons de Wohl received his citizenship, after the war had ended, was due to that sentiment just as much as it was due to his contributions.³⁰

De Wohl continued working for the British government throughout the war, but his importance to the war effort diminished dramatically toward the end of the war. One of the main reasons for his continuing employment was the decision by the intelligence officia

sustained monitoring had to be given. Shortly after, his application for British citizenship was approved, allegedly (and surprisingly) thanks to his former co-workers in British intelligence.³³

Louis de Wohl's strange career included the world of military intelligence during World War II. On the surface, he had a minimal impact on the intelligence community, and his contributions to intelligence gathering amounted to very little. His co

Bibliography

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