



Agent Jack: The True Story of MI5's Secret Nazi Hunter by Robert Hutton.

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Veteran journalist¹ Robert Hutton's *Agent Jack* concerns the man known as Jack King to the unwitting subjects of his investigations into Nazi espionage and sabotage in World War II Britain. Eric Roberts was a bored, underappreciated bank clerk, the sort of chap one might meet in a country pub on a Sunday afternoon espousing strong views on county cricket and little else. Social and political stealth being an essential trait of any aspiring spy, Roberts' talent for appearing the least interesting man in any room made him a priceless asset in MI5. Hutton has written an immensely entertaining study² of Roberts's quietly heroic service to his country.

In 1944, MI5's Double Cross system deceived the German Army's high command about the location of the D-Day landings. But that followed nearly five years of war. *Agent Jack* reminds us of the inept shift of intelligence agencies from the threat to the actual prosecution of military conflict early on. Roberts caught the attention of MI5 through his covert interwar work after his involvement with British fascism in the 1920s. His work infiltrating and reporting on fascist and communist organizations evinces a native love of risk rare in bank clerks; this was combined with a knack for putting strangers at ease to an extent that nurtured the habit of self-revelation. Posing as Nazi operative "Jack King," Roberts served in a bogus fifth-column organization that concentrated its efforts on recruiting British supporters of the German cause, infiltrating their networks, uncovering their plans, and feeding them misleading information. Roberts found Britain's Nazi sympathizers to be both shockingly numerous and wildly diverse in intelligence and ability.

Early on, Roberts was struck by the amateurism both of so many of the Britons working out of genuine though delusional sympathy for the German cause; the same was true of the social elites who ran the intelligence services tasked with catching them. He infiltrated a plot by a fascist group in Leeds to set fire to a warehouse, "to attract the attention of Jerry planes" (52) searching the blacked-out landscape for militarily relevant targets. The plot failed due to comic opera idiocy worthy of P.G. Wodehouse, revealing "that Leeds's fascists were apparently as bad at starting fires as the city's police were at setting traps" (56). Meanwhile, Roberts was surrounded at MI5 by university dons, lawyers, and former army officers who shared the snob culture of elite universities. They were unimpressed by a bank clerk who did not wear the school tie yet knew vastly more about undercover and surveillance work than they (102-3).

Hutton's treatment of the British men and women drawn to the Nazi cause is reminiscent of Richard Overy's account of the nominally intelligent individuals who wandered off into the rain forests of the extreme right and left during the morbid decades of the 1920s and 1930s.³ Robert sometimes found that a lack of mental acuity made given individuals useful ciphers for extracting

1. For, among others, Bloomberg UK and the *Daily Mirror*. Hutton is also the author of *Romps, Tots and Boffins* (London: Elliot and Thompson, 2013) and *Would They Lie to You?* (id., 2014).

2. Replete with 32 photographs and illustrations, a useful dramatis personae, notes, a bibliography, and an index.

3. See *The Morbid Age: Britain and the Crisis of Civilization, 1919-1939* (NY: Allen Lane, 2009).

information from more alert Nazi operatives. Among them was the lonely and neurotic Dorothy Wegener, the sister of an employee of Siemens, a company classified as an “enemy firm.” No serious German spy would suspect Wegener of being, knowingly or not, an agent for the British secret services, Roberts reasoned, “because she is so stupid and so obvious” (114).

Hutton’s portraits of key figures on both sides of Britain’s domestic wartime espionage jungle are superbly drawn. Roberts’s boss, Victor Rothschild, the Third Baron Rothschild, whose service to British security agencies extended to the government of Margaret Thatcher, was more able and interesting than much of Britain’s intelligence elite, owing to his family’s penchant for collecting. Before the war, Victor collected rare books, Hutton writes, but in 1940 turned to collecting fascists, pursuing “his new hobby with the same rigor his father and uncle had devoted to their butterflies” (164).

Roberts was invaluable in adding Marita Perigoe, born Mary Brahe in London in July 1914 and one of Britain’s more capable traitors, to the Rothschild’s hunting trophies. He described her as a “masterful and somewhat masculine” woman, both in appearance and mentality “a typical arrogant Hun” (135). She was also astute enough to suspect Roberts might be other than he seemed. A vicious anti-Semite, in 1944 she came closer than any of his dupes to realizing he had recruited her to the service of the British government’s most important Jew (236–37).

“Some men’s wars took them to the jungles of Burma, or the deserts of North Africa, or up the beaches of Normandy. Eric Roberts’s war took him from one end of Marylebone Road to the other,” yet he was no less a soldier for that fact (143). *Agent Jack* is not a scholarly work on British wartime intelligence. Rather, it offers a partial account of Eric Roberts’s tireless detection of Nazi cancer cells in Britain’s body politic during the existential struggle of 1939–45. But Robert Hutton has carried out an extraordinary investigation based on a myriad of transcripts, letters, testimonies, and declassified documents. His engrossing narrative has enriched our understanding of the unromantic nature of espionage.