

“Double Agents and Strategic Deception in the Second World War”  
Bruce Thompson, History Department, UC Santa Cruz  
summarized by [Stephen Pitcher](#)

Professor Thompson introduced the institute participants to the history of undercover travelers in WWII, focusing his presentation on the case study of Joan Pujol Garcia, arguably the most successful double agent in history. Garcia bore the British code name “Garbo,” in tribute to his chameleon-like acting ability. He lived up to the sobriquet — by the end of the war Garcia had invented and maintained a network of twenty-seven entirely non-existent spies stationed around the world, all dutifully remunerated by the Nazis.

A clip of the documentary film *Garbo the Spy* provided some sense of the man’s powers of deception. A Catalan Spaniard caught up in the Spanish Civil War, Joan Pujol Garcia conceived a loathing for the Nazi regime, and repeatedly offered his services in vain to British security agencies before finally began working as an independent double agent, creating for himself a false identity as a Nazi sympathizer in the Spanish government willing to spy for the Germans. The British finally discovered his worth when Garcia convinced the Germans of the existence of a fictitious convoy being dispatched from Liverpool to relieve the siege of Malta, thereby deflecting an enormous quantity of German military force toward an illusory target. The British agent Thomas Harris was appointed his “handler,” and the two of them went on to become one of espionage’s most brilliant acts, employing the time-tested technique of giving the Germans what they wanted to hear, with just enough accuracy to render the information credible, and just enough inaccuracy to render it useless. Garbo and his network of fictitious agents played a critical role the success of D-Day by supplying the German High Command with misinformation about the invasion’s planned location.

Undercover travel represented by both real and fictional spies holds a powerful place in popular imagination. Prof. Thompson presented a brief history of British espionage that preceded Garbo. There have been spies since, and probably before, the Bible, but in the 1500s the activity took a new turn with the development of the “resident ambassador” system, in which someone sent to represent his prince at foreign courts was given both diplomatic protection and access to a huge amount of information for spying on his hosts. Gradually the resident ambassador came to require assistance gathering this information and resorted to paying local informants, and therein arose a crux of modern espionage: if you’re paying someone for information, how can you be sure they’re not simply manufacturing tales to procure payment? It is an industry founded on the crucial paradox of having to trust people who are, by their very job descriptions, duplicitous.

The Protestant Reformation split Europe into two ideological blocs, somewhat similar to the Cold War dynamic of recent times, and resulting in some extremely dramatic espionage. The Spanish, Catholic King Philip proposed marriage to England’s Protestant Queen Elizabeth I, to whose (Catholic) half-sister he had previously been married, and upon being rebuffed resolved to assassinate her instead. Preventing Elizabeth’s murder became a primary concern of Sir Francis Walsingham, England’s ambassador to France

and one of the great spymasters of history. The St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, during which thousands of Protestants were slaughtered in Paris, increased Walsingham's vigilance. If religious violence could occur in France, it certainly could occur in England—as, of course, it already had, most recently in the incinerations of “Bloody Mary.” Walsingham's responsibility was now the prevention of his queen's death, and, failing that, the prevention of his country's being invaded by Spain. Antagonism toward Elizabeth was so great that the Pope Himself endorsed her removal from the planet, stating that the person who accomplished that feat would not suffer in the hereafter. Walsingham's job was therefore a matter of life and death, and he performed it using the means spies have used since time immemorial: the interception of communication. This, said Thompson, is notoriously the weakest link in any espionage endeavor, from antiquity to the present. The interception of letters, radio transmissions, or email remains the primary means by which potential assassins—and those spying on them—get caught.

We fast forward to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in which, in 1866, a Prussian army defeated Austria in six weeks, which was definitely not supposed to happen, given the relative strength of the forces involved. It was clear that the Prussians had employed espionage. The brilliant spy Wilhelm Stieber was a crucial contributor to this endeavor. His agenda, rather than preventing or assisting assassination as in the Renaissance, had to do essentially with logistical details—when military men or equipment arrived, what (crucially) it was, and where it would be deployed. The intensified paranoia infesting Europe contributed to the celebrated Dreyfus affair.

*Participant:* Was Dreyfus guilty?

*Thompson:* No. There are three or four reasons why people commit espionage: need of money (he had plenty of it); ideology (he was a superpatriot, in particular because of the German seizure of Alsace, his native land); and sex (he was very happily married). None of these motives pertained to him.

Detective fiction was born of this scenario. John Buchan, Conan Doyle, Alan Furst, and their ilk transformed the medieval heroic romance into the modern thriller: a hero undertakes a dangerous voyage into an enemy's lair and survives. But in the modern tradition, the protagonist is not chivalrous. He violates a considerable number of the Mosaic commandments, and is manifestly untrustworthy. Garbo seemed to have a foot in both the actual and fictional camps, sending his own fictional agents and double agents into the actual enemy's lair with uncanny skill.

Prof. Thompson ended his presentation with a brief discussion of the changes the Internet has brought to the espionage business. We may be moving into a time when the undercover traveler will be a very different sort of spy from Garbo or James Bond.