

Double Agent Snow: The Beginnings of the Double Cross Network

Mona Parra, PhD

Grenoble Alpes University – ILCEA4

mona.parra@univ-grenoble-alpes.fr

ABSTRACT

Double agent SNOW, who was described by British intelligence officers as an “underfed rat”, did not seem destined to play a significant part in Britain’s World War Two strategy. Before and during the war, he worked for both German and British intelligence. Where his true loyalty lay remains, to this day, unclear. He was the first member of “Double Cross”, a network which would go on to include more than 100 double agents under British control. The lack of compartmentalisation meant that this dubious agent could jeopardise many others. Despite his duplicity, he allowed British officials to discover the strengths and weaknesses of the German intelligence services and of their own agencies. He was a true asset who helped achieve cryptanalytic breakthroughs and who contributed to foiling numerous espionage attempts on British soil. Above all, his handling was a cornerstone for British intelligence in that it taught case officers how to run a double agent, the risks entailed, and the benefits they could draw from it.

L’agent double SNOW, décrit par les officiers traitants britannique comme « un rat sous-alimenté », ne semblait pas destiné à jouer un rôle significatif dans la stratégie de la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Avant et pendant la guerre, il travailla pour le renseignement allemand et britannique. Sa véritable allégeance demeure, de nos jours, incertaine. Il fut le premier membre du réseau « Double Cross » qui comprendrait plus de cent agents sous contrôle britannique. Le manque de cloisonnement signifiait que tout agent pouvait compromettre nombre de ses collègues. Malgré sa duplicité, il permit aux Britanniques de découvrir les forces et les faiblesses des services allemands de renseignement et de leurs propres agences. Il fut un véritable atout qui permit de réaliser des percées cryptanalytiques et qui contribua à déjouer de nombreuses tentatives d’espionnage sur le sol britannique. Surtout, cette expérience fut un élément clé pour le renseignement britannique car il permit à ses officiers traitants d’apprendre comment superviser un agent double, les risques encourus, et les avantages qu’ils pouvaient en tirer.

Keywords: Agent Snow, espionaje, HUMINT, MI5, World War Two, WWII

El doble agente Snow: los inicios de la red Double Cross

RESUMEN

A finales de octubre de 1939, tras una entrevista con un agente doble anónimo, un oficial de inteligencia británico escribió el siguiente informe sobre sus rivales alemanes: “[El nombre del agente se elimina para preservar su anonimato] dice que se referían a Snow como su hombre número uno. en Inglaterra. (Si esto no es un farol, lo que parece probable, ¡entonces están bastante mal!)”. Este pasaje escrito al comienzo de la guerra da fe del fracaso de la inteligencia alemana y es una indicación de los problemas que continuarían durante todo el conflicto; Por el contrario, los británicos lograron sus primeros éxitos en este campo ese mismo año.

Snow fue un súbdito canadiense nacido en Gales. Regresó al Reino Unido a principios de los años 1930. Como ingeniero eléctrico, viajaba regularmente a Europa en viajes de negocios. Reconociendo el valor estratégico de tales viajes, se acercó repetidamente a las agencias de inteligencia británicas para ofrecer sus servicios en los años previos a la guerra. Fue rechazado una y otra vez pero aun así persistió. Esta renuencia británica a reclutarlo se debió al descubrimiento de que Snow también trabajaba con los alemanes. Sin embargo, los británicos no lo detuvieron hasta la declaración de guerra. A partir de septiembre de 1939 se vio obligado a comunicarse con los alemanes bajo control británico. Operó de esta manera entre septiembre de 1939 y marzo de 1941. A lo largo de este período, las sospechas británicas sobre la verdadera lealtad de Snow se reavivaron con frecuencia. Sus dudas culminaron en marzo y abril de 1941, lo que les llevó a poner fin a sus actividades. Pasó el resto de la guerra en la cárcel.

Palabras clave: Agente Snow, espionaje, HUMINT, MI6

双重特工Snow：背叛网络的开端

摘要

1939年10月下旬，一位英国情报官员在采访一位未透露姓名的双重间谍后，写下了关于他的德国竞争对手的报告：“该特工（名字被删除以保持匿名）说他们将Snow称为他们在

英国的头号人物。（如果这不是虚张声势——虽然很可能是——那么他们的处境就相当糟糕了！）”。这段在战争开始时写下的段落证明了德国情报的失败，并表明了在整个冲突期间将持续存在的问题；相比之下，英国人于同年在该领域取得了首次成功。

Snow是出生于威尔士的加拿大人。他于1930年代初返回英国。作为一名电气工程师，他定期前往欧洲出差。认识到这类旅行的战略价值，他在战争开始之前的几年里多次与英国情报机构联系，希望为其提供服务。虽然他一次又一次地被拒绝，但仍然坚持了下来。英国人不愿意招募他是因为发现Snow也与德国人合作。然而，直到宣战时，英国人才阻止他。从1939年9月起，他被迫在英国的控制下与德国人联系。1939年9月至1941年3月期间，他就以这种方式进行操作。在此期间，英国方面经常怀疑Snow的真实效忠。这种怀疑在1941年3月和4月达到顶点，最终终止了Snow的活动。他在监狱里度过了接下来的战争时期。

关键词：Snow特工，间谍活动，人力情报，军情六处

In late October 1939, following an interview with an unnamed double agent, a British intelligence officer wrote the following report on his German rivals: “[The agent’s name is deleted to preserve his anonymity] says they referred to Snow as their No. 1 man in England. (If this isn’t bluff, which seems likely, then they are pretty badly off!)”¹. This passage written at the start of the war attests to the failure of German intelligence, and is an indication of

problems that would continue throughout the conflict; in contrast, the British achieved their first successes in this field in the same year.

Snow² was a Canadian subject born in Wales. He returned to the UK in the early 1930s. As an electrical engineer, he regularly travelled to Europe for business trips. Recognising the strategic value of such travel, he repeatedly approached British intelligence agencies to offer his services in the years

1 The National Archives, Kew, London (henceforth NA), NA/KV/2/468, report dated 20 October 1939. The rest of the account of the discussion with this anonymous agent provides several elements suggesting that this person is probably Gwilym Williams, called “G.W.” by the British services.

2 The name Snow is very frequently capitalised in MI5 files, and I will adopt this convention in the article.

leading up to the war. He was turned down again and again but nevertheless persisted. This British reluctance to recruit him was due to the discovery that Snow also worked with the Germans. However, the British did not stop him until the declaration of war. From September 1939 he was forced to communicate with the Germans under British control. He operated in this way between September 1939 and March 1941. Throughout this period, British suspicions about Snow's true allegiance were frequently reignited. Their doubts culminated in March and April 1941, which led them to put an end to his activities. He spent the rest of the war in jail.

Despite all the doubts about Snow's sincerity, he holds a unique place in the history of British espionage. He was the first agent in the Double Cross network of double agents which was set up during the Second World War. This British network included more than a hundred double agents. During the war, Double Cross was able to foil espionage projects on British soil, to collect information on German intelligence and to "feed" the Germans with disinformation, culminating in Operation Fortitude, which convinced them that the landings would take place in the Pas-de-Calais and not in Normandy. These agents played a central role in the allied strategy. Despite the immense risks, relying on Snow had a triple benefit for the British. It allowed them to gather information on Germany, to better understand the spy network of the

Third Reich, and also to draw up rules for dealing with double agents. We can therefore ask how the risky collaboration with Snow allowed the British to build an invaluable network of double agents.

In a first part we will study the way in which Snow was recruited before analysing his activities under British control. This will then allow us to address his crucial role in the genesis of Double Cross.

Snow, whose real name was Arthur Graham Owens, was born in Wales in 1899. His business trips frequently led him to German ports, which he supplied with submarine batteries. This is why the British Admiralty approached him in the mid 1930s³. This is the first step in the agent acquisition process: "spotting". At the end of 1936, the British services quickly realised that Snow was also providing information to Germany, at a time when tensions between the two countries were escalating. They announced to Owens that they were ending all contact with him. Inevitably, his talks with them allowed him to learn details about the British services that could be damaging to them. The British judged that the potential gain was not worth the risk. The files on Snow, which were only declassified in 2001, are full of evidence to this effect.

In April 1938, Lieutenant-Colonel Edward Hinchley-Cooke (MI5) reminded him of a September 1937 warning that British intelligence re-

³ Hayward, James, *Double Agent Snow. The True Story of Arthur Owens, Hitler's Chief Spy in England*, London, Simon and Schuster, 2013, locations 221-227 (Kindle edition).

fused to have any contact with him⁴. A few months later, on 24 September 1938, Hinchley-Cooke, now a Colonel, interrogated Snow and reiterated this warning. He warned him that his words could be used against him if he was sued for espionage⁵.

There are many reasons for this lack of confidence in Snow. His answers were evasive, to say the least, and frequently contradictory, which made it very difficult to trust him⁶. He was portrayed as a “bad lot, requiring very discreet handling”⁷. Snow is “about 5 feet tall and of thin build”⁸. One file describes him as “the typical Welsh ‘underfed’ type, very short, bony face, ill-shaped ears”⁹. The British also used the term “underfed rat”¹⁰, the word “rat” having of course a strong negative connotation. Snow is presented as a shady individual. This judgement is perhaps partly coloured by the ancestral rivalry between the English and the Welsh.

However, throughout this period, Snow provided valuable information to the British services which nevertheless frequently insisted he should

stop contacting them, or at least refused to acknowledge their association with him. Snow revealed the identity of members of the German secret service, as well as the addresses used for communications. The British officers took care to meticulously record all these names and contact details in the hope of getting a fairly clear picture of the German organisation, as evidenced by the multiple annotations on the interrogation reports¹¹.

It was through the classification procedure established by MI5 that Snow’s double-dealing was initially brought to the attention of the British. Snow sent his correspondence to an address in Germany known to the British. A pre-war double agent, Christopher Draper, had informed them that it was used by the Abwehr, Germany’s most notorious military intelligence service¹². These suspicions about Snow were corroborated by Snow’s wife. Shortly before the war, after he left her, she decided to reveal his activities to the authorities¹³.

She claimed that he was very ac-

4 NA/KV/2/445, note dated 7 April 1938.

5 NA/KV/2/445, transcript of an interrogation of Snow by Colonel Hinchley-Cooke in the presence of two other persons whose names are deleted, on 24 September 1938 at Scotland House.

6 NA/KV/2/445, report entitled “Snow. Report of Interview with D.E.E.”, dated mid-March 1938.

7 NA/KV/2/446, letter to Major Boyle, 2 February 1939.

8 NA/KV/2/445, note dated 5 September 1938 entitled “re Snow”.

9 Andrew, Christopher, *Defend the Realm. The Authorized History of MI5* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), p. 212, based on NA/KV/2/444.

10 NA/KV/2/445, note dated 5 September 1938 entitled “re Snow”.

11 NA/KV/2/445, Snow’s interrogation, 24 September 1938.

12 Andrew, *op. cit.* p. 212.

13 NA/KV/2/446, report of Mrs Snow’s testimony (18 August 1939) to the Special Branch of the Metropolitan Police.

tively helping the Germans. He tried to force several of their relatives to provide information to the secret agencies of the Reich, and even threatened to kill her if she revealed his activities to the police¹⁴. He used his profession as a cover for his illegal activities, for example referring to “samples” to discuss the information he sent to Germany¹⁵. His wife testified that he gave them details of British airfields. She added that she had destroyed codes used by the Royal Air Force so that he could not pass them on to the Germans, but that he may still have some¹⁶.

The British studied the motives behind Snow’s ambiguous stance. The assessment of Snow’s trustworthiness, a key element in the recruitment cycle, was carried out repeatedly in order to understand how best to use this individual. Owens explained that his resentment of the UK stemmed from the fact that he, his half-brother and his father had designed a shell to shoot down German Zeppelins during the First World War. He claimed that the British authorities did not admit that he and his relatives were the inventors, and that his family had lost hundreds of thousands of pounds as a result¹⁷. The money the Germans paid him for his

services largely explains the ambivalent attitude of this frequently cash-strapped man¹⁸. His motivations seem to be in line with the MICE model listing the reasons why a spy serves an intelligence agency (Money, Ideology, Coercion or Compromise and Ego or Excitement), a model which has been questioned¹⁹ but which provides a relevant theoretical framework here. Money and ego prevailed in his relationship with the Germans, whereas when working with the British he probably sought the excitement associated with this clandestine activity and wanted to put himself forward. On the other hand, coercion soon became the rule in his relationship with the British authorities, who forced him to continue working for them. At no time did ideology come into play, a factor which is the best guarantee of a source’s reliability. Snow was never seen as a reliable asset. The first stage of Snow’s activities came to an end in September 1939, when Snow’s operations reached unprecedented levels, making him the first British double agent of the Second World War.

On 3 September 1939, the UK declared war on Germany. The secret services had decided that Snow would be imprisoned for espionage. He contact-

14 *Ibid.*

15 NA/KV/2/445, letter from Snow (who signs “Johnny”, the nickname the Germans gave him) to ‘Dr. Rantau’, his German handler, 7 October 1937.

16 NA/KV/2/446, report of Mrs Snow’s testimony (18 August 1939) to the Special Branch of the Metropolitan Police.

17 NA/KV/2/446, letter to Hinchley-Cooke, 24 March 1939.

18 West, Nigel, Roberts, Madoc, Snow. *The Double Life of a World War II Spy*, London, Biteback, 2011, locations 233 and 362 (Kindle edition).

19 Among others in Burkett, Randy, “An Alternative Framework for Agent Recruitment: From MICE to RASCLS”, *Studies in Intelligence*, vol. 57, no. 1, pp.7-17, 2013.

ed them and a meeting was organised on September 4th at Waterloo station. Snow wanted to give further information to his British contacts, but they immediately arrested him and he was sent to Wandsworth Prison²⁰. The house where he was staying was searched and a radio transmitter was found. It had been buried in the garden to conceal its presence²¹. The British thought that Snow could be an asset and, despite the risks, they finally decided to treat him as a double agent in his own right, and to allow him to communicate with the Germans as if he were not under British control.

The first test took place on 8 September. On this occasion, Snow blew a fuse while manipulating the transmitter. The next day, the British finally managed to send their first message: "All ready. Have repaired radio. Send instructions. Now awaiting reply"²². Snow gave contradictory answers to his British interrogators about the procedure for communicating with the Germans, which fuelled their suspicions²³. He was initially criticised for his lack of cooperation, but after some veiled threats he seemed to

change his attitude²⁴. On 11 September, he was transferred to Kingston police station. The archival record of this move contains Snow's real surname, which the staff preparing the documents for declassification normally erase. His surname, Owens, is therefore revealed²⁵. The code name assigned to him by the British, Snow, is a partial anagram of his surname. Gradually, the British gained confidence in Snow, and in mid-September they decided to allow him to travel to Holland to meet his German contacts²⁶. However Snow and his lover, Lily, were under surveillance²⁷.

An incident almost put a premature end to Snow's activities. In May 1940, he was invited to rendezvous with his Abwehr handler, Ritter, in the North Sea. Owens was accompanied by a new recruit, "BISCUIT". During the trawler trip, the two men became increasingly suspicious of each other. In this climate of suspicion, BISCUIT panicked, imprisoned Snow, and ordered the boat to turn back. To justify their absence at the agreed place and date, they gave the excuse of meteorological difficulties²⁸. The Germans expressed some doubts

20 NA/KV/2/446, letter from the Special Branch of the Metropolitan Police, 6 September 1939.

21 *Ibid.*

22 West, Nigel, Roberts, Madoc, *op. cit.*, location 818.

23 *Ibid.*, location 818.

24 NA/KV/2/446, report on "Snow", dated early September 1939.

25 NA/KV/2/446, report on "Snow" by T.A. Robertson, 14 September 1939.

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Ibid.*

28 Andrew, Christopher, *op. cit.*, pp. 248-249. Masterman, John Cecil, *The Double Cross System in the War of 1939 to 1945*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1972, pp.42-44. J.C. Masterman played an active role in the control of Snow. He became the chairman of the Twenty

but finally seemed convinced. This episode illustrates the difficulties inherent in the cooperation of several double agents. However, such associations are common in the case of Snow, which is contrary to the elementary rules of security for spies. Shortly afterwards, another trip with a double agent dealt a fatal blow to Snow's activities. In each case, the agent's true allegiance, and suspicions about it, led to potentially tragic developments.

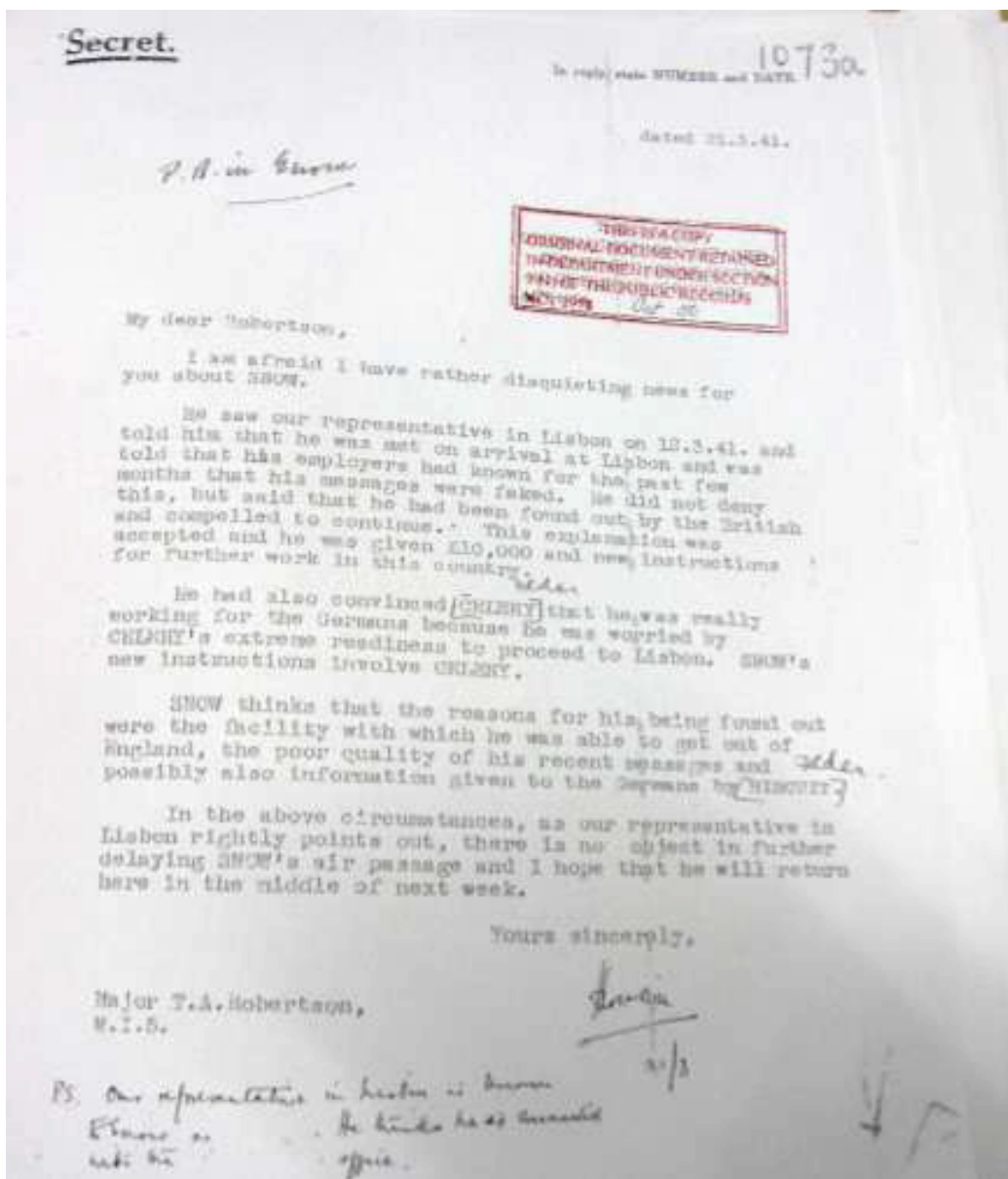
In October 1940, in order to ensure that Snow could continue to communicate with the Germans, his handlers decided he should leave London, in the context of the *blitz*. Rather cynically, J.H. Marriott, the officer who suggested this move, explained that it would prevent "Snow's wireless transmitter [from] being destroyed in an air raid"²⁹.

Although Snow was a crucial source of information, doubts about his honesty were never fully resolved. Regularly, new incidents alerted his British handlers. A letter to Robertson, Snow's handler, announced a final twist on 21 March 1941 : the Germans had discovered that Snow was operating under British control, which he confessed to when they told him of their suspicions in Lisbon³⁰:

Committee established to supervise double agents from January 1941.

29 NA/KV/2/449, letter from J.H. Marriott, 1 October 1940.

30 NA/KV/2/449, letter to T.A. Robertson, 21 March 1941.



On his return to the UK after his fateful stay in Portugal, Snow was subjected to multiple interrogations, during which MI5 officers repeatedly asked him to explain the exact circumstances in which the Germans revealed to him that they knew of his connection to the British. His entire stay was the subject of extensive questioning, to which Snow answered at length, but in a confused and contradictory manner. The British did not know if they could trust him. Many things remained unclear despite the long interviews. The British were not even sure this confrontation had actually taken

31 NA/KV/2/449, letter to T.A. Robertson, 21 March 1941.

place. Indeed, Snow claimed to have warned “Celery”, another double agent who was with him in Lisbon, that the Germans knew about his collaboration with the British. But the details provided by Snow as to the circumstances of this discussion were very vague, and he never gave the same answer to his interrogators. Celery denied that Snow had warned him that the Germans knew about this double-dealing³². Celery and Snow constantly accused the other of treason. This caused deep concern for the British. All the other double agents who had been in contact with them were potentially compromised. Snow did not give a clear answer to help determine if the Germans suspected the other double agents. If the British asked them to “feed” the Germans with disinformation about the strategy of the Allies, this might backfire on the Allies at a time when a German invasion of Britain was feared. There is much evidence to suggest that Snow’s account of this Abwehr interview was unfounded. How else can we explain that, without extensive interrogation, the Germans agreed to believe him, and even entrusted him with 10,000 pounds and sabotage material before he left Portugal³³? MI5 officer J.H. Marriott concluded his account of one of Snow’s interrogations with the following sentence, a clear indication of his annoyance: “I am more than ever

convinced that Snow’s is a case not for the Security Service, but for a brain specialist”³⁴.

MI5 was unable to decide on Snow’s future, and decided to call in a doctor to get an opinion on his medical condition, which he regularly complained about, but also on the patient’s mental disposition. The clinician took Snow for an X-ray to see if his ailments were real. The result was clear: there seemed to be no medical ground for Snow’s complaints, but more importantly, the doctor’s verdict was that Snow “[...] was a consummate liar and that his word could not be trusted in anything that he said [...] he would try to deceive us in any way that suited his purpose”³⁵. This judgement seems to go beyond a strictly medical framework. After these lengthy investigations, MI 5 decided to incarcerate Snow. On 10 April 1941, T.A. Robertson and his colleague J.C. Masterman asked him to send a message to the Germans, explaining that his psychological state and his health forced him to stop his activity³⁶. Coded German radio communications, in particular a message sent by Ritter and deciphered by the British, revealed the German authorities’ disbelief in Snow’s sudden illness, and proved that they suspected he was not telling them the whole truth³⁷.

32 NA/KV/2/450, interrogation of Snow and Celery.

33 NA/KV/2/450, interrogation of Snow, 31 March 1941.

34 NA/KV/2/450, “Note on the Interrogation of Snow” by J.H. Marriott, 3 April 1941.

35 NA/KV/2/450, letter dated 18 April 1941.

36 NA/KV/2/450, interrogation of Snow by Major Robertson and Captain Masterman on 10 April 1941.

37 NA/KV/2/450, transcript of a German communication between Cyrenaica and Hamburg dated 1

A report on Snow dated 31 July 1941 gives yet another interpretation of what happened. In it, Snow's German handler Ritter stated that on arriving in Lisbon Snow had doubts about the reliability of Celery, whom he suspected of being a British intelligence agent³⁸. Snow was finally put in prison on 23 April 1941³⁹. However, the twists and turns did not stop there. In August 1941, MI5 learned from a fellow prisoner that Snow was trying to escape, and that his preparations were well under way thanks to the complicity of one of the guards⁴⁰. Measures were taken to thwart these plans. When Ritter fell into Allied hands after the German surrender, he was interrogated and stated in 1946 that he knew from the events in Lisbon that Snow was serving the British but took no action⁴¹. This would confirm Snow's account. However, Ritter's son-in-law maintained after his death that these confessions were probably false and intended to portray him in a favourable light to the victors in order to secure him lenient treatment⁴². None of the three main protagonists of this incident offers a definitive authoritative version.

Throughout Snow's period of operation, the UK's military prospects were highly uncertain. For example, in early 1941, its inhabitants still feared that their island would be invaded by the Germans⁴³. The British planners therefore defined procedures to be put in place in this eventuality, under the code name "Hegira". They decided that should this situation arise, an MI5 officer, Mr Marriott, would take "Mrs Snow and the baby" to Wales. "Mrs Snow" actually referred to Snow's lover Lily Bade, not his wife. Snow's adult son from his first marriage would also be taken to Wales. He was aware of his father's activities. All incriminating documents would be destroyed and the transmitter would be taken to Wales in the hope of continuing communications with the Germans. In the event of their capture by the enemy, Marriott and his colleague Reed were instructed to take "all necessary steps" to ensure that Lily and Snow's son did not fall into German hands⁴⁴. Similar instructions were given for other double agents. Christopher Andrew, one of the UK's leading intelligence experts who has had exceptional access to classified material, points out that this is the only known occasion when a director of MI5

June 1941. The page is marked, "Top Secret U. Snow", "U" being a symbol for "Ultra", the result of the British decryption of the most elaborate Axis codes. "3504" is the code name assigned to Snow by the Abwehr.

38 West, Nigel, Roberts, Madoc, *op. cit.*, location 3709.

39 NA/KV/2/450, "note on the case of Snow Junior", 19 August 1941.

40 NA/KV/2/450, report by Captain J.C Masterman, 14 August 1941.

41 West, Nigel, Roberts, Madoc, *op. cit.*, location 4041.

42 *Ibid*, location 4103.

43 Andrew, Christopher, *op. cit.* p. 257.

44 NA/KV/2/450, "Orders in the Event of an Invasion", for Mr Marriott. This typed document bears a handwritten date: 3 April 1941.

has condoned such executions; this decision was based on the belief that if a double agent tried to help the invading army, he or she could be seen as enemy combatants⁴⁵. The invasion never took place, so these instructions were never followed. These orders concerning Lily were reiterated at the end of 1941⁴⁶. Summary executions, without trial, of individuals whose guilt was not proven (in the case of Lily Bade) were considered.

The problems raised by Snow's activities allowed British officers to discover how to ensure that such operations were successful and to draw up a certain number of rules for carrying them out. These rules then guided them in their handling of the other double agents of the *Double Cross* network.

The first rule was to remain suspicious at all times because a double agent is likely to change sides. Vigilance is the order of the day. In December 1939, Snow was warned that his flat would be under surveillance, as well as his movements, which he accepted. He did not mention the reasons why the British were taking this step, but added that this would enable them to obtain information on his German contacts⁴⁷. He had often been watched on previous

occasions, as in October 1939⁴⁸.

Another principle which was often emphasised, by both the British and the Germans, is to ensure that contacts between double agents are kept to a minimum. Each should only know a few details about the others⁴⁹. The files in the Snow archives show that this rule was hardly followed. More than a dozen other double agents are regularly mentioned alongside Snow in the MI5 archives. To protect Snow and TATE, another double agent, the British decided to "eliminate" a third spy called SUMMER, making the Germans believe that he had not had time to reveal any information to the British⁵⁰. He was arrested and ceased all exchanges with the Germans⁵¹.

Finally, another example of the principles which were discovered or re-discovered through Snow's handling it that it is important to ensure that a spy leads the life he would have if he had not switched sides. For example, British officers asked Snow to travel to collect information requested by the Germans, even when it was given to him by his British handlers. This was a security measure to ensure that he was prepared to give convincing answers to any questions about his intelligence sources. He

45 Andrew, Christopher, *op. cit.* pp. 258-259.

46 NA/KV/4/211, "Orders in the Event of an Invasion", for Mr Marriott. This typed document bears a handwritten date: 3 December 1941.

47 NA/KV/2/446 letter dated 2 December 1939 with no signature.

48 NA/KV/2/446, report dated 25 October 1939, on the watch on Snow organised by the Special Branch of the Metropolitan Police.

49 NA/KV/2/449, report dated 15 January 1941 signed by J.C. Masterman.

50 *Ibid.*

51 Masterman, John Cecil, *op. cit.* pp. 50-52.

went near several airfields; however, the information he obtained was subject to approval by the British authorities before being passed on to the Germans⁵².

Snow's career as a double agent raised many questions among MI5 officers. In order not to reveal to the Germans that he was under British control, Snow had to provide them with information as if he were operating normally in the UK. This information could be risky from a military point of view, with potential loss of life. For example, Snow's German handlers asked him for weather information. Nowadays it is hard to imagine that a lot of data that is immediately available to us, thanks to the media and the Internet, was difficult to obtain at the time. Weather conditions belong to this category. It may seem irrelevant in a military context, but in fact it is crucial information which is necessary to direct aircraft and missiles towards their targets and to determine whether they can fly at all. Snow received detailed questionnaires on everything from meteorology to the composition of bomber squadrons⁵³. The dilemma was even greater when the Germans asked for data on a specific city in preparation for an air attack. How could it be protected without compromising the agent? What answer should be given?

For the sake of credibility, it was decided that the meteorological information to be provided to Snow should not come from a meteorological expert, but rather from a simple observer. The files dating from October 1939 are proof that the details given to the Germans were not limited to this type of data. For example, his handlers prepared information on troop movements⁵⁴, as well as precise details of British airfields⁵⁵. To be credible, the information provided by the different agents had to be consistent. Some data was considered too sensitive to be communicated to the Germans. Thus, in October 1940, it was decided that it was not possible to answer the Germans' questions about the bridges crossing the Royal Military Canal⁵⁶ in the south-east of England. It is however essential that an agent should provide enough credible or true information to be believed by his handlers without revealing that he has betrayed them. In December 1939, Snow was reprimanded by Nikolaus Ritter, his German handler, because the weather data he had provided was unsatisfactory⁵⁷.

The problems with Snow were recurrent. After a stay in Holland in September 1939, Snow went to Brussels in October. He came back with several detonators hidden in a piece of

52 NA/KV/2/446, report of an interview with Snow, no date or signature, dated mid-November 1939.

53 NA/KV/2/449, letter dated 5 October 1940.

54 NA/KV/2/446, note by T.A. Robertson dated 11 October 1939.

55 NA/KV/2/446, note by T.A. Robertson dated 15 October 1939.

56 NA/KV/2/449, note dated 1 October 1940, unsigned.

57 NA/KV/2/446, report of an interview with Snow on 20 December 1939.

wood, and 470 pounds⁵⁸. He worked with another double agent, G.W. The Germans had indeed asked him to put them in contact with the Welsh nationalist movement, in order to organise sabotage on British soil. The Germans offered to train Snow and G.W. in sabotage and intelligence⁵⁹. The handling of these two agents obviously created formidable dilemmas. How far could their British handlers go to establish their credibility?

It took a long time to establish the procedures for the control of agents. In December 1940 and January 1941, more than a year after Snow's activities had begun, measures were taken to ensure that the section that controlled double agents, MI5's B1a branch (which worked closely with MI6), could cooperate smoothly with the other branches which were involved. The Twenty Committee was set up in order to have the support of the highest authorities in British civilian and military intelligence. Its mission was as follows: through it, B1a could be allowed to give information to the Germans and the Directors of Intelligence sought its help to mislead the enemy⁶⁰. The choice of the term "Twenty Committee" is linked to the name of the network, "Double Cross". In Roman numerals, the double cross, "XX", means twenty, which gave the commit-

tee its name. The first meeting was held in January 1941, and thereafter it met weekly. The issues to be dealt with were indeed both numerous and urgent. Masterman, the head of this operation, claimed there was "harmonious collaboration between a large number of different services and departments"⁶¹.

Despite all the risks, the benefits were enormous. Snow gained invaluable information about the enemy's methods. He revealed the methods used by the German services to send instructions to their spies by reducing an entire page of text to a tiny dot using "micro-photography" and then hiding this dot, for example, on the back of a stamp⁶², or within an innocuous-looking document. Through Snow, the British obtained valuable information about the codes that the Abwehr had asked him to use⁶³. The pre-war interviews which the British services conducted with Snow also revealed deep flaws in the UK's preparation for a potential war and in the preparation of its secret services. Snow revealed that the Germans knew that "Major Kennedy" had helped British intelligence discover a spy. He revealed that the Germans had a great deal of information about British military forces⁶⁴. Archival records show the interest of the officers in the information given by Snow when he

58 NA/KV/4/185, Guy Liddell's diary, entry for 26 October 1939.

59 NA/KV/4/185, Guy Liddell's diary, entry for 27 October 1939.

60 "Traffic and deception", note dated 21 July 1942, TNA KV 4/213.

61 Masterman, John Cecil, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

62 NA/KV/4/185, diary of Guy Liddell, entries for 27 and 31 October 1939.

63 NA/KV/2/445, Snow interrogation, 24 September 1938.

64 NA/KV/2/445, report on an interview with Snow on 28 September 1938.

told them, in September 1938, that he would be notified of the first British towns to be bombed so that he could provide the Germans with the coordinates of the power stations and steelworks. A large handwritten line runs along this entire paragraph of the interrogation report, emphasising the attention that was paid to it. Such information could help limit the loss of life and property, by strengthening the defences of the intended targets, and by providing false data to the attackers. However, one had to avoid compromising one's agent. This proves how complex the handling of double agents was, as this document⁶⁵ shows.

After these eventful years, Snow spent the rest of the war behind bars. Although the handling of the first double agent of such magnitude was not without its flaws, the Snow case was a success story. It helped to arrest many Abwehr spies as soon as they arrived on British soil. Masterman states that after the fall of France in 1940, and until 1944, all spies sent by Germany fell into British hands, and a significant proportion of them came under British control⁶⁶. This was an invaluable asset for the UK in the context of the war. The British feared that a Fifth Column operating on their territory would do serious harm to the country. British intelligence prevented this from happening. The control of Snow also led to sig-

nificant progress in decrypting German ciphers: messages sent by Snow to his handlers were then coded using the famous Enigma, which led to major cryptanalytical breakthroughs which were crucial to the Allies⁶⁷. The process of trial and error in Snow's handling allowed the British to discover how to take advantage of their double agents throughout the Second World War. Some of those associated with Snow were able to continue their activities after his final arrest, like G.W. who continued to operate until February 1942⁶⁸. This proves that MI5 was able to protect these very special agents as best it could. The Snow archives show that in every country, but especially in the UK, the secret services have always occupied a special place: the Snow files were only made public in 2001⁶⁹, more than fifty years after the end of the conflict. The redaction of declassified documents by the British authorities makes the work of researchers even more complicated: names are erased, portions of sentences and even entire pages are obliterated, leaving entire spaces empty, to preserve the secrecy of this world. Ironically, in 1972 MI5 and SIS even considered the imprisonment of J. C. Masterman, the former director of the Twenty Committee who played such a key role during the war, when he published *The Double-Cross System*, which shed light on the British double-agent network,

65 NA/KV/2/445, Snow interrogation, 24 September 1938.

66 Masterman, John Cecil, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

67 West, Nigel, Roberts, Madoc, *op. cit.*, location 845.

68 Masterman, John Cecil, *op. cit.*, Appendix 1: "Double-Cross Agents in the United Kingdom".

69 As the catalogue of the National Archives of Kew proves: <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk>.

creating a real historiographical turning point. The Official Secrets Act, which silences anyone with a state secret, still holds sway.

Mona Parra, an ENS Cachan alumna, is an Associate Professor at Grenoble University and is a member of the ILCEA4 research team. Her 2015 PhD dissertation investigated the protection of British, American and German intelligence during the Second World War. Her research focuses on the British intelligence services, on their cooperation with their foreign counterparts, in particular within the UK-US special relationship, and on the connexion between intelligence and international relations.

Selected bibliography

Archives

The National Archives, Kew, London, Great Britain.

KV 2/445-KV 2/450

KV 2/468

KV 2/674

KV 4/1-KV 4/3

KV 4/16

KV 4/65

KV 4/170

KV 4/185

KV 4/211

Secondary sources

Andrew, Christopher, *Defend the Realm. The Authorized History of MI5*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2009.

Batey, Mavis, "Dilly Knox - A Reminiscence of this Pioneer Enigma Cryptanalyst", *Cryptologia*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2008.

Burkett, Randy, "An Alternative Framework for Agent Recruitment: From MICE to RASCLS", *Studies in Intelligence*, vol. 57, no. 1, pp.7-17, 2013.

Churchill, Winston, *War Speeches*, Paris, Tallandier, 2009.

Erskine, Ralph, Smith, Michael (eds), *Action This Day*, London, Bantam Press, 2001.

Farago, Ladislav, *The Game of the Foxes: the Untold Story of German Espionage in the United States and in Great Britain During World War II*, New York, D. McKay, 1971.

Hayward, James, *Double Agent Snow. The True Story of Arthur Owens, Hitler's Chief Spy in England*, London, Simon and Schuster, 2013.

Hinsley, F.H., Simkins, C.A.G., *British intelligence in the Second World War. Vol.4, Security and counter-intelligence*, London, H.M.S.O, 1990.

Holt, Thaddeus, *The Deceivers. Allied Military Deception in the Second World War*, New York, Scribner, 2004.

Kahn, David, *Hitler's Spies*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1978.

Macintyre, Ben, *Agent Zigzag, The True Wartime Story of Eddie Chapman. Lover, Traitor, Hero, Spy*, London, Bloomsbury, 2007.

Macintyre, Ben, *Double Cross. The True Story of the D-Day Spies*, London, Bloomsbury, 2012.

Masterman, John Cecil, *The Double Cross System in the War of 1939 to 1945*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1972.

Peis, Günter, Wighton, Charles Wighton, *Hitler's Spies and Saboteurs, Based on the German Secret Service War Diary of General Lahousen*, New York, Holt, 1958.

Stephens, Robin, *Camp 020: MI5 and the Nazi Spies. The Official History of MI5's Wartime Interrogation Centre*, Richmond, PRO, 2000.

West, Nigel, Roberts, Madoc, *Snow. The Double Life of a World War II Spy*, London, Biteback, 2011.

West, Nigel, *MI5: British Security Service Operations, 1909-45*, London, Bodley Head, 1981.