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Eli Rosenbaum, director of the Department of Justice's Office of Special Investigations and a member of the Interagency Working Group, discusses the declassified documents on June 6.

Declassified documents shed new light on U.S. relations with former Nazi criminals

By Ron Kampeas

WASHINGTON, June 7 (JTA) — A former Nazi rose to the highest ranks of a Western intelligence agency — and was a Soviet mole. A lead to Adolf Eichmann was ignored. A spy whose pathological lies made him useless, but who still escaped prosecution for war crimes.

These are among the revelations found among some 8 million pages of documents released here Tuesday that deal with German and Japanese war crimes, including 27,000 pages that detail the relationship after World War II between U.S. government agencies and suspected Nazis war criminals.

The message threading the documents was clear: The price one pays for consorting with evil men far outweighs the return.

"Using very bad people can have very bad consequences," Elizabeth Holtzman, a former U.S. congresswoman and a member of the Interagency Working Group that released the documents, said at a news conference Tuesday at the National Archives. The group was established in 1999 to declassify rooms full of documents related to Nazi war crimes. The mandate was later extended to Japanese war crimes.

There is a pointed message as well for a United States currently at war with a terrorist enemy, speakers said.

Considering human rights issues in recruiting spies "may not only be the right thing to do, but the wise thing to do," Holtzman said. "We may want to understand this as a nation before we plunge ahead to repeat the mistakes of the past."

This week's release of documents came eight years after the U.S. Congress passed a law, the Nazi War Crimes Disclosure Act, requiring agencies to provide the information. Among other things, it was intended to paint a full picture of U.S. involvement with ex-Nazis after the war.

Four historians who examined the documents outlined cases in which the active U.S. and Western recruitment of former Nazis was questionable at best and disastrous at worst.

One of the most outstanding failures, outlined by historian Norman Goda of Ohio University, was Heinz Felfe, an SS officer who rose through the ranks of West Germany's Gehlen organization to become its counterintelligence chief in 1955.

The Gehlen organization, an anti-Soviet spy agency headed by Richard Gehlen, a former German general during World War II, was a magnet for ex-Nazis who wanted U.S. sanction; the organization was sponsored by the United States.

Felfe was exposed as a Soviet spy in 1961, but not before he had done considerable damage, some revealed for the first time in the papers released Tuesday. For instance, Felfe successfully advocated for greater cooperation between the Gehlen group and the CIA, which made him "the West German official most knowledgeable about CIA operations in Eastern Europe," according to Goda.

He was consequently able to sabotage one of the CIA's most important spy operations, against the KGB base in East Germany. The CIA subsequently estimated that Felfe had compromised 15,000 items.

In another instance documented by Timothy Naftali of the University of Virginia, the CIA learned as early as 1958 that Eichmann, the architect of the destruction of European Jewry, was living in Argentina under the alias "Clemens."

In fact, Eichmann's alias was "Klement," but that was close enough to have led to his capture, Naftali concludes in his study.

The CIA refrained from action because of its policy of not pursuing Nazi war criminals.

In addition, BND, the West German spy agency that had reported the information to the CIA, feared repercussions for Hans Globke, the West German national security adviser who had been close to Eichmann when both men were Nazis; Globke had assisted in drafting the notorious 1935 Nuremberg laws, which effectively removed Jews from German public life.

In fact, once Eichmann was captured by Israel in 1960 — with no help from the CIA or other agencies — the CIA went the extra mile for Globke.

Eichmann paid for his defense by selling his autobiography to Life Magazine. Documents show that the CIA persuaded Life to drop references to Globke.

Another case, reported by Richard Breitman of American University, involved Tscherim Soobzokov, an SS agent recruited from the Circassian community in the Caucasus, and who recruited other Circassians to the most brutal of Nazi

enforcement agencies.

The CIA recruited Soobzokov to spy in Jordan, which has a substantial Circassian community, and then brought him to New Jersey to seek out possible Soviet spies in the Circassian community there.

A CIA examiner eventually concluded that Soobzokov was an "incorrigible fabricator," but that did not stop Soobzokov from obtaining U.S. citizenship in 1960, with CIA assent. In the 1970s, the CIA dissuaded immigration services from pursuing a war crimes deportation against him, although its own documentation suggested he was guilty of such crimes.

Most telling, Breitman said, was that Soobzokov's Nazi past was seen by his CIA handlers as a boon, at least initially.

In 1953, a CIA official suggested that a war crimes record could be used to keep the spy in line. "Clear evidence of a war crimes record might also serve as a possible control," the official said.

Some members of the working group, which in addition to historians, includes presidential appointees and representatives of law enforcement and intelligence agencies, said there was another message in the release of the materials that was relevant for the current government: the price of keeping too many secrets.

"It is my view that there is far too much secrecy in government," said a member of the group, Richard Ben-Veniste, a Clinton administration appointee.

"The trend of overclassification is inimical to the requirements of maintaining robust institutions," said Ben-Veniste, a Democrat famous for his tough questioning as a member of the 9/11 commission, which investigated circumstances leading up to the 2001 terrorist attacks.

The release of the documents took six years after the law was passed in part because the working group entrusted with making the files available to the public encountered difficulties with the CIA starting around 2002.

The CIA was insisting on a literal interpretation of the law, and wanted to confine requests for papers to known war criminals, and not to others suspected of Nazi affiliation. Intervention from Sen. Mike DeWine (R-Ohio) and Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-N.Y.), who had sponsored the legislation creating the working group, persuaded the agency to back down last year.

Another factor in the release was the appointment in 2004 of Rep. Porter Goss as CIA director, who mandated greater openness in this case. Goss just recently resigned, but the working group officials said his successor, Michael Hayden, had pledged cooperation until the group ends its work next March.

Its next report, due by the end of summer, is to deal with Japanese war crimes.

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