

Ian Mitchell's Russia-related BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

04 – Colonel Z – Read & Fisher

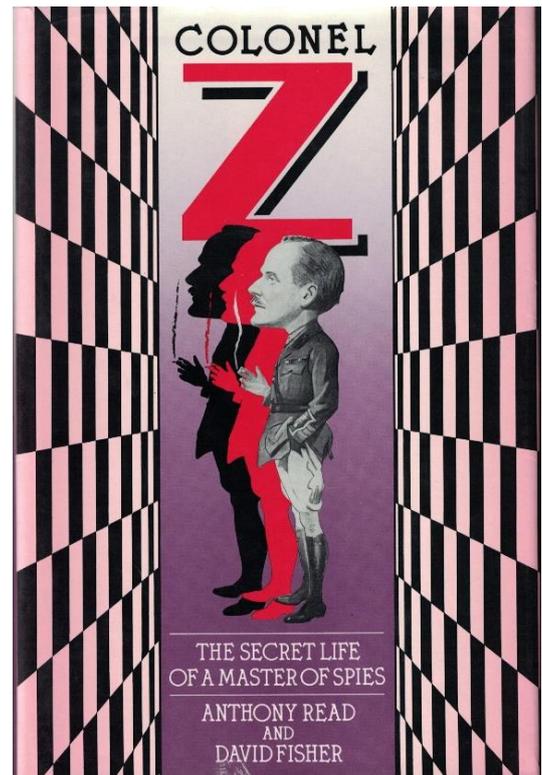
Title: COLONEL Z – The Secret Life of a Master of Spies

Author: Anthony Read and David Fisher

Publication info: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984
(available second-hand on Amazon, click on cover image for link)

Keywords: MI6, OSS, WWI, WWII, Boer War, British Imperialism

Reviewer: Ian Mitchell, 18 January 2018



Reason to read: This is the autobiography of the most important person in the first half of the twentieth century of whom you have never heard. He was the effective head of the British Secret Service in the Second World War, but he was so adept at staying in the shadows that hardly anyone knows much more than his name: Claude Dansey. It was he who organised, by incredibly devious means, the delivery of intelligence to the Soviet Union, which these authors say tipped the balance in many key battles, most notably Kursk. All this was done through the mysterious Z Organisation which Dansey set up in Switzerland in the 1930s, and which was the base of British Intelligence's presence on the continent of Europe for most of the War. Though more than thirty years old, this book still has a considerable relevance today, especially due to the continuing need for international rogue-state control.

Main talking points:

1. For all its successes, and for all that authoritarians from Himmler to the NKVD thought that it a dark caste of invisible magicians, the British Secret Service was in fact a desperately improvised effort. But it worked successfully in the two German wars because, first, it was controlled by realists; secondly, because it was not hag-ridden by government and uninformed "public opinion"; and, thirdly, because it was able to draw upon the resources of a nation whose people travelled widely and deeply and could produce individuals with profound knowledge of unusual parts of the world.
2. Dansey's own story is interesting but even his biographers, working in co-operation with his widow, and with full access to his papers, could find out remarkably little about him. He believed

in secrecy, which is probably one reason he did so well in the *secret* service. He never wanted recognition; what he wanted, and got, was results.

3. It was Dansey, not the better-known official chief, Sir Stewart Menzies (“C”), who really ran MI6 from 1939-45. Menzies did not know much about how practical spying worked, unlike Dansey who was involved in espionage for most of his working life. So Menzies willingly depended on a man who had once been his superior officer.

Incidental interest: Dansey was partly responsible for briefing “Wild Bill” Donovan, Roosevelt’s emissary who was sent over the Atlantic in the summer of 1940 to try to find out why France had fallen and whether there was any point in helping Britain. Dansey showed him what Britain was doing to save itself. He also explained about France, which he knew well. Donovan’s resulting report said that the country had “cracked morally” because its leading elements “were disenchanted with the Republic and democracy” and “had become attracted to the authoritarianism of the Fascist regimes. Donovan believed that French politicians, industrialists and many senior army officers had been more interested in defending their privileges of wealth and power than in defending their country.” (p. 309) (How very modern of them!)

Dansey’s “Z Organisation” (hence the title of the book) played a crucial part in feeding information to the Soviet Union because anything coming from Britain was automatically suspect, as the warnings of the German attack on 22 June 1941 had been. So Dansey used a group he had previously established in neutral Switzerland as a way of disguising the source of the invaluable intelligence that was being handed to the Soviets. Some of this was derived from British spies in Germany (most of them volunteer anti-Nazis), but most of it came from Ultra decrypts. These authors have written a whole book about this, called Operation Lucy. The most important single result was Soviet pre-knowledge of the German battle plan and weapons available at Kursk in 1943. Another reason for disguising the source of the information was that “Churchill, in common with Dansey, had a very low opinion of Soviet security methods and feared quite rightly that the quickest way to inform the enemy that the British were able to decipher his messages was to tell the Russians.” (p. 245)

Dansey’s reputation has suffered from the misleading portrait of him painted by Kim Philby in his book, *My Silent War*. The authors of this book rather amusingly deconstruct Philby’s account of Dansey’s eccentricity and insignificance. Yet they also quote Philby on the last page as saying that, when he heard that Dansey had died, in 1947, it came to him that he had rather liked his “crusty spirit”.

Style: Journalistic, with some narrative hiccups.

Surprising points: Dansey spent a lot of time in the United States before the First World War. Officially, he worked as Secretary of the staggeringly elitist Sleepy Hollow Country Club in upstate New York, though it would seem that his real job was to keep an eye on Irish American millionaires who were feeding money to the IRA. Amongst the richest patrons of the Club was one Harrison Williams. He was so rich that it was said of his family at the time that “the only reason the Harrison Williamses don’t live like princes is because princes cannot afford to live like the Harrison Williamses.” (p. 78)

A decade before that, in 1896, Dansey had fought as a junior officer in the campaign against the Matabele in present-day Zimbabwe (before that Southern Rhodesia). Eventually, the British pinned the natives back to a redoubt in the Matopo Hills. They did not have enough men to storm it, so stalemate seemed likely. Then Cecil Rhodes himself intervened. “His country might be in ruins, his health failing, his political influence destroyed beyond repair [by the Jameson Raid] but he was still Rhodes. He went unarmed into the Matopos, met the chiefs of the Matabele, and demonstrated once again the incredible strength of his personality by emerging not with an assegai between his ribs, as many had feared, but with an agreement for peace. He also had a new name, given to him by the Matabele: Lamula ’Mkunzi, Separator of the Fighting Bulls. It was a truly astonishing demonstration of his personal charisma.” (p. 33)

Link(s): None; Dansey was too secretive, though there appears to have been a French biography.

Negative issue(s): Not enough is known about Dansey to make a book of conventional length without some padding.

Overall recommendation level: Medium-high – if you like the byways of intelligence history.