The Role that Electronic Media Played in Psychological Warfare During the Second World War: Interview with Professor Guy Stern

Celia Romm Livermore, Wayne State University, USA

Professor Guy Stern was born in 1922 in Hildesheim, Germany. He immigrated to the US in 1937, received his high school diploma in St. Louis, Missouri, then attended St. Louis University before the war and got his B.A. at Hofstra University after WWII. He served from 1942 to 1945 in the US Army, Military Intelligence Service (rank of Master Sergeant). He was decorated with the Bronze Star. He received his Ph.D. from Columbia University in 1953. He taught at various U.S. universities (most recently at Wayne State University) and as guest professor at five German institutions. He was Interim Director of the Holocaust Memorial Center Zekelman Family Campus in Farmington Hills, MI, and is currently Director of its Institute of the Righteous. Beyond his numerous publications on German history and literature, he has translated dramas by Brecht and poems by contemporary German authors. He received the Grand Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany (Großes Verdienstkreuz der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1987), and the Goethe Medal (1989). Hofstra University bestowed on him an honorary doctorate, and both the University of Cincinnati and Wayne State University selected him as “Outstanding Teacher,” during his tenure at those institutions.

Celia Romm Livermore: Can you share with IJEP readers how you became a member of the Ritchie Boys? What preceded your joining this group and how you were selected to be part of it? Can you also tell us some of the background of this unit, how it came to be and what the members of the unit did during the war?

Guy Stern: I truly welcome your question, because my wartime experience is currently very much on my mind, since I am in the midst of writing my autobiography, which of course also features a chapter or two on World War II.
The book is entitled, Chance Encounters. As to your question: I had been inducted into the US Army in 1943 and had just about finished my basic training at Camp Barkeley, Texas. When I was suddenly called to Company Headquarters and quickly told by the sergeant in charge: “Private Stern, you’re being transferred.” I asked, “Where to?” But, I was given only an evasive answer that I could open my orders after being on the train for three hours. My destination was Camp Ritchie, Maryland. Upon arriving, I saw a gateway sign, “US Military Intelligence Training Camp.” I later found out that it had been called into being about half a year before by General Strong, commander of US Intelligence. The camp itself was well hidden.

Our activities can be gleaned from an article I wrote recently for the Holocaust Memorial Center’s January newsletter:

Did the US Army mobilize a unit during WWII, consisting mostly of Jewish soldiers? And if so, why was so little known of them until more than 60 years later? And why was it a German, not an American film maker who, for the first time, documented their activities during training on the battlefield.

On July 28, 2011, the Holocaust Memorial Center will answer those questions and more through a large-scale exhibit entitled “The Ritchie Boys.” It will couple the exhibit with a reunion, the first ever, of the surviving veterans of the outfit, all of them now in their eighties and nineties.

The Ritchie Boys, a nickname borrowed from Camp Ritchie, Maryland, their training center, were chosen from all branches of service to see duty with US Military Intelligence. They were selected for this top-secret assignment on the basis of linguistic skills and their knowledge of the enemy’s psychology and culture.

Their work began in earnest with Germany’s declaration of war on the US. The Ritchie Boys conducted their own type of warfare in Africa and Italy and, then most extensively, during and after the invasion of Normandy. They continued their work till Victory-Europe Day—and some then joined Military Government and war crimes tribunals.

They interrogated prisoners, intercepted enemy communications, broadcasted propaganda messages via radio—or from the front lines. They engaged in psychological warfare and a few did espionage work behind enemy lines. Several of their outfits received unit citations and many individuals were decorated.

In fact, one was Walter Midener, who received the Silver Star and who, after the war, became president of Detroit’s College of Art and Design. Another post-war resident of Michigan is former Ritchie Boy Guy Stern, for 25 years Distinguished Professor at Wayne State University and now a staff member of the HMC.

The exploits and achievements of the Ritchie Boys are demonstrated at the exhibit through their war-time photographs, the reports they authored, the letters they wrote home, the medals and uniforms they wore—and the weapons they carried. In addition, the Ritchie Boys appear in a film by the same name, produced and directed by the Munich film maker Christian Bauer. He was inspired to do so by his mother, who as a child was the schoolmate of Jewish children who would become part of those dedicated Ritchie Boys.

Romm Livermore: What specific roles did you play in the Ritchie Boys unit? Were you directly involved in activities that utilized technology for psychological warfare? What were these activities and what technologies were utilized?

Stern: For the most part, I was an interrogator of prisoners-of-war. I was appointed the head of the survey section of our detachment, serving directly under the command of First Army Headquarters, Commanding General Courtney
Hodges. I began serving with my team under the aegis of the First Army in Bristol, England, where we, after a second rigorous security clearance, had a minor part in planning the invasion in Normandy. Survey section meant answering questionnaires from higher headquarters by piecing together information from selected knowledgeable prisoners.

Further information on my activities can be gleaned from the decoration seen in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Bronze Star Medal declaration**

![Image of Bronze Star Medal declaration]

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**Romm Livermore:** What messages did you and the other Ritchie Boys try to convey and in what ways?

**Stern:** I was occasionally involved in editing and evaluating leaflets that were either dropped through airplane or artillery rounds to the enemy. They were meant to convey to the enemy forces that their war was lost and that they should cease fighting and, if possible, surrender to us. Even if they did not do the latter,...
we hoped to demoralize enemy forces. Other Ritchie Boys sent spoken messages to the enemy via loudspeakers, and still others used the conquered radio Luxemburg for propaganda broadcasts to the home front, trying to affect workers in the war industry.

Romm Livermore: How did your knowledge of the German culture help with the design and delivery of the messages?

Stern: We used known German characteristics such as their belief in official documents in our leaflets. We catered to that by sending them, for example, an official-looking document, guaranteeing fair treatment and good food and having General Eisenhower affix his signature. I personally used my knowledge of German art and music and also of soccer teams to start a neutral conversation (buddy-buddy system) before launching into the relevant questions. Sergeant Fred Howard and I also used our knowledge of German fears of Russian captivity by me impersonating a Russian Commissar, ready to transfer a reluctant German prisoner, to reveal needed information.

Romm Livermore: Did you encounter conflicts or disagreements with other members of the unit (perhaps with your commanders) on the content and mode of delivery of the messages? How were the conflicts or disagreements resolved? Were there instances where you were forced to design or deliver messages that you disagreed with?

Stern: There was not one instance of disagreement; perhaps because our American-born commander and then our fellow refugee commander were both attuned to our convictions.

Romm Livermore: Did you have any moral or ethical dilemmas about the messages that you were designing or delivering? What were they about? How did you resolve them?

Stern: The only ethical or moral dilemma I had came after Victory Europe Day. General McCloy ordered the burning of National Socialist books and pamphlets. At first, I cheered the decision to burn material that had caused such unspeakable horror, but then I recalled my dislike of censorship and the destruction of books. And, I ultimately was opposed to that procedure which stopped finally because of the intercession of the American Library Association and some US senators (e.g., Owen Brewster, R. of Maine). I personally had no influence on that decision.

Romm Livermore: Once you became aware of the magnitude of the Holocaust and the role that the US played (or did not play) in it, did your perception of your role in the Ritchie Boys change? What new insights about the Ritchie Boys unit did you gain?

Stern: Until the last year of the war in Europe, 1945, our task was to gather strictly military information, tactical and strategic; hence, our knowledge of the Holocaust came sporadically and was greatly incomplete. In 1945, we were also told to interrogate for information on war crimes and crimes against humanity. Fred Howard and I uncovered one of the first large-scale war criminals, Dr. Schuebbe. Our report constitutes the only time our top secret operations were shared with the media. I include the account (“Out of the Pit”) given in TIME Magazine of May 7, 1945:

The first shock of horror had been absorbed, but this week came news of a monstrosity that appeared to top all previous tales of Nazi inhumanity.

To U.S. Army questioners a captured German doctor, Gustav Wilhelm Schuebbe, casually admitted that the Nazi Annihilation Institute at Kiev had killed from 110,000 to 140,000 persons “unworthy to live” during the nine months he had worked there. Dr. Schuebbe, a crippled drug
addict who was head of the Institute, added coolly that he himself had killed 21,000 people.

The Nazi medico was very candid. The Institute had been established after the Germans took Kiev in 1941. Its human material included schizophrenics, Jews, foreigners, gypsies. Each doctor on the staff “processed” about 100 persons per working day with injections of morphine tartrate. Explained Dr. Schuebbe: the subject showed “breathing difficulties and a shrinking of the eye pupils; the face assumed a blue color; there was sporadic breathing; then a breathing stoppage and a heart stoppage. Exitus lethalis.”

Dr. Schuebbe was scientifically detached in his motives. Said he:

“Of course, we, the circle of German physicians at Kiev, were aware of the importance of this job. Aside from certain devious phases of this action I still maintain that, just as one prunes a tree—by removing old, undesirable branches in the spring, so for its own interest a certain hygienical supervision of the body of a people is necessary from time to time.” (Read more at http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,797476,00.html#ixzz1DxMkEdHq)

I was one of the interrogators on the Schuebbe case. In retrospect, I would have wished that we had been assigned to this kind of investigation much before.

Romm Livermore: If you continued to work in this unit once the war was over, what did you do? Did you perform your job differently than before? What were your major dilemmas then?

Stern: For half a year after the war, before being mustered out, I was sequentially attached to a counter-intelligence unit, trying to find out whether there was any resistance or sabotage planned against our Army of Occupation (we found none). Then, I was assigned to military government in Karlsruhe, Germany. Neither assignment matched our war-time duties in importance.

Romm Livermore: How do you see what you and the other Ritchie Boys did today? How would you have done your job differently if the technologies available to you were more sophisticated than what they were at the time?

Stern: With modern technology, such as computer and email, we could have disseminated our information much more quickly and, perhaps, sometimes at greater detail. Our information on the planned German counterattack during the winter of 1944-45, might have appeared more credible if we had attached further documentary evidence pointing to a German counter-attack. As it was, our information was given short-shrift, and we were taken by surprise, resulting in heavy losses of our forces.

Romm Livermore: What lessons do you think that today’s generation can learn from your experiences about psychological warfare and the role that technology can play to support it? How can these lessons be implemented today with the wars that the US is facing at this time?

Stern: Intelligence work is a battle of ruse and counter-ruse. What we can learn from our experience is that torture is, not only ethically abhorrent, but also much less effective than putting psychological pressure on prisoners, and thereby gaining information. This requires a profound knowledge of the enemy’s psychology. For example, if Fred Howard and I were to put psychological pressures on captured terrorists, we would make it appear, falsely of course, that the prisoner was collaborating with us and would threaten the prisoner with having that deceptive information leak out. This would truly scare the prisoner; because in many cultures, not only his safety would be threatened but that of his extended family.
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