

Friedrich II, King of Prussia, “Spies and Their Use and How One Obtains News about the Enemy” (1748)

Abstract

Friedrich II, King of Prussia (r. 1740–1786), briefly discusses the types of spies that could be employed for military intelligence. Common citizens and peasants, he notes, might not possess much useful information, and enemy soldiers likely had only limited knowledge of the camp and the position of the opposing army. Double agents could be used to spread false information. Frederick reminds his officers to pay spies generously, for a man who “risks his neck” to serve them deserves to be rewarded.

Source

If one always knew the enemy’s intentions in advance, one would have an edge on him, even with a weaker army. All military leaders seek to obtain this advantage, but they are not always successful. There are four types of spies: common citizens who indulge in this craft, double agents, spies in important positions, and, finally, those who are forced into this unpleasant business.

The common people—that is, burghers—who are sent into the enemy’s camp, peasants, priests, and so on, can be used for nothing more than determining the location of the enemy camp. Their reports are mostly so confusing and incomprehensible that one is even more uncertain than one would have been in the greatest ignorance of the enemy. Statements from deserters are usually no longer useful. A soldier certainly knows what is going on in his regiment, but nothing more, and the hussars who always patrol in front of the army often do not even know where its camp is located. Still, their statements are recorded; that is still the only way to get any use out of them.

Double spies are used to spread false information to the enemy. In Schmiedberg, there was an Italian who served the Austrians as a spy. We made him believe that we would retreat to Breslau when the enemy approached. He brought this news to the Prince of Lorraine, and he was betrayed.

Prince Eugen had the postmaster of Versailles on his payroll for a long time. That wretch opened all dispatches from the court to the generals and sent copies to the Prince, who usually received them sooner than the French military leaders. The Marshall of Luxembourg had recruited a secretary from King Wilhelm, who gave him news of everything. The King learned of that and derived every possible advantage from this delicate situation. He forced the traitor to write to Luxembourg that the allies would undertake a large foraging expedition the next day. As a result, the French were taken by surprise at Steenkerken would have been almost completely defeated, had they not fought with exceptional bravery.

It would be difficult for us to maintain these kinds of spies in a war against Austria. Not that there are fewer bribable people among the Austrians than among other nations, but rather because their light troops surround their army like a cloud and let no one pass without searching him. I therefore thought of bribing a few of their hussar officers, through whom one could maintain the exchange of letters, since it is the customary that, when the hussars skirmish with each other, they sometimes make a truce and talk to one another. At that time, letters could be easily handed over.

If one wants to convey false information on to the enemy or receive news from him, then one lets a trustworthy soldier defect to him. There he reports what they want, or secretly disperses slips of paper to encourage the troops to desert. Then he takes a circuitous route back to his own camp.

If one has no other means in hostile territory to procure news of the enemy, there remains only one option, even though it is harsh and cruel. You take a well-off citizen, who has house and home, wife and children, and you give him a clever man, whom you disguise as a servant, but who must understand the local language. The citizen must take him along as a coachman and go into the enemy camp, under the pretext of complaining about some injustice he has suffered. At the same time, you threaten him: if he does not bring back your man after a sufficient time in the enemy camp, then his wife and children will be beaten and his house will be ransacked and set on fire. I had to use this method when we were in the camp at Chlum, and I was successful with it.

It should be added that one must pay spies generously, indeed, extravagantly. A person who risks his neck to serve you deserves to be rewarded for it.

Source: Friedrich II, "Spione und ihre Anwendung und wie man sich Nachrichten vom Feinde verschafft," in *Die Generalprinzipien des Krieges und ihre Anwendung auf die Taktik und Disziplin der preußischen Truppen* (1748), in Gustav Berthold Volz, Friedrich von Oppeln-Bronikowski, and Adolph von Menzel, eds., *Die Werke Friedrichs des Grossen in deutscher Übersetzung*. Vol. 6: *Militärische Schriften*. Berlin: Hobbning, 1913, pp. 38–40.

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