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OPERATION SALAM. LÁSZLÓ ALMÁSY'S MOST DARING MISSION IN THE DESERT WAR. By Kuno Gross, Michael Rolke and András Zboray. *Belleville Verlag Michale Farin, München, 2013. Introduction by Dr Rudolph Kuper. ISBN 978-3-943157-34-5, pp. 410, index, appendices, glossary, maps, photographs. Price: £36.33. doi:10.1017/lis.2014.15*

I had always hoped, after I wrote my *Hunt for Zerzura. The Lost Oasis and the Desert War* (John Murray, London, 2002), that some enterprising desert-wallahs would search for the answers to the remaining points concerning that epic of desert exploration: László Almásy's wartime crossing of the Libyan Desert in May 1942 to deliver Rommel's spies to the Nile. Although I had searched far and wide for sources on this remarkable story, and had recovered and used a fair few, I had a hunch that more material was out there waiting to be discovered, material that would fill in the gaps relating to the German side of the story. Now my wish has been granted by the three authors of this book, two of whom (Kuno Gross and András Zboray) I know as experienced travellers of the Libyan Desert. They have put their deep geographical knowledge of the desert, and their unrelenting search for source material, to good use in this magnificently produced volume. It is a delight to peruse its well-designed pages, with beautifully reproduced photographs and maps, an essential accompaniment to the text. They have achieved what no one else has managed, which is to retrace Almásy's routes across the desert in 1942. This has allowed them to identify and illustrate, often with their own photographs, the places cited by Almásy in his manuscript diary of Operation Salam and other key documents, such as the recollections of other members of his war-party. They have not only unearthed the unpublished memoirs of one of Rommel's spies but have discovered a hitherto hidden cache of photographs taken by members of the Salam commando. This has enabled them to fill in much of the missing detail of Operation Salam, especially with regard to the personality conflicts which nearly wrecked the commando. It has also led

them to find the remains of one of the commando's vehicles in a re-entrant wadi in the Gilf Kebir, which has eluded previous explorers. The quest to find the exact route that Almásy took to the Nile from Libya and back in 1942 has now ended.

There will still, however, be a continuing debate over the exact nature of Almásy's role or roles in the Libyan Desert before and during the Second World War. Gross, Rolke and Zboray, as well as Kuper in his introduction, are keen to acquit Almásy of being a 'Nazi spy', which they see as a slur put about to sell the 'true story of *The English Patient*', based on the Michael Ondaatje novel which was turned into a Hollywood blockbuster. In particular Kuper insists that Almásy was an honest, straightforward fellow who just enjoyed knocking around the desert. The authors also cite the example of Almásy handing over photographs of the Italian military base at Kufra in 1934 to the British in Cairo, presumably as evidence of his lack of guile. What they do not reveal, but which is made clear by Italian military and diplomatic documents, is that Almásy also told the Italians at Kufra and in Cairo about British military activities around Jabal Uweinat and provided details on the route across the Selimia sand flat to Wadi Halfa at a time of heightened Anglo-Italian tensions over disputed territory on the Libya-Sudan-Egypt borders. There were to be further pre-war examples of Almásy trying to be useful to all parties vying for influence in Egypt in order to fund his desert expeditions. This is the classic *modus operandi* of a would-be double or even triple agent or spy. There is also evidence that Almásy was pro-Fascist, as he announced to the assembled Italian officers in their mess in Kufra in 1934 (cf. *The Hunt for Zerzura*, Kelly 2003, 59–61, 92). There is no denying the fact, however, that Almásy's knowledge of the Libyan Desert and both the pro-Axis members within the Egyptian Royal Family and the Nationalist movement made him very useful to German Military Intelligence, the *Abwehr*, after the outbreak of war in North Africa in 1940. It is no surprise then that he should have been recruited to advise on and lead intelligence operations against the British position in Egypt. He acted more like an intelligence officer who ran spies rather than being a spy himself during the war. The former role may be regarded as more honourable than the latter, but spying is a dirty game and no one's hands are untarnished.

This book also reveals for the first time an earlier planned Operation Salam which was never launched because the key personnel were killed in a British air raid. There is also some useful new detail on the Sonderkommando Dora, of which there is very little evidence in the British records. All this is based on material found in the German military archives at Freiburg. It is also amusing to learn that the references to 'tobacco' in the British intercepts of the Salam commando's wireless traffic refer not to the smokable variety but to money, since 'tobacco' is a slang-word in Hungarian for money! All in all, this book is a major contribution to our knowledge of Almásy's adventures in the Libyan Desert, for which the authors should be congratulated.

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