



**Audio essayist: Alan Furst**

**Title: When countries dismiss good intelligence**

**Duration: 6 minutes, 39 seconds**

### **About this transcript**

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### **Introduction**

If you were a French military attaché, pre-war Poland was a perfectly legal staging area for your espionage activities against the Nazis.

In this episode of Bookpod, Alan Furst reflects on the characters and politics of *The Spies of Warsaw*, his 2008 novel about Jean-François Mercier, a Charles de Gaulle-like colonel, who tries to speak truth to power.

### **Presentation**

Mercier is a classic. He is kind of a lower aristocrat from central France with a family that's been fighting in France's wars for a thousand years. He has medals – *Virtuti Militari*, the Polish military medal. He's probably also got



some French medals. He was in the First World War; was captured. A lot of his life runs parallel to de Gaulle's, so that he basically went to military academy – Saint-Cyr – around the same time de Gaulle did and had similar kinds of assignments early in his career.

And I guess the real function of Mercier, Colonel Mercier, is that he, like in the real French military attachés in Warsaw in 1937 or so, perfectly well determines what the Germans are intending to do. But of course the French higher military will not listen to him as they did not listen to their own military attachés and thereby lost the country.

It's the Cassandra complex. You know, the people who saw 9/11 coming and couldn't get anybody's attention. You know, the people who said, "We have these Muslims who are trying to take flight lessons and one of them is not concerned with landing, only with taking off." There were signs, but nobody listened or nobody put it all together in a way. It was hard to put together at the time.

And in the same way, Mercier is the military attaché at the French embassy in Warsaw, and so he should be listened to.



Gamelan, who became the chief of staff basically of the French Army, the lead general – Petain wouldn't listen to him. And the irony at the end of the book is the irony of history itself because Petain wound up as the Vichy ruler of France at the age of 85, possibly somewhat senile, and was part of the tragedy of France's occupation, which was a tragedy.

I think the real issue is that if you appoint to high office people with a certain kind of bias, then you're going to get ultimately a biased point of view. Petain said, "I'm not worried about them [the Germans] coming through the forest up in Belgium because we'll have barbed wire and machine guns." And Mercier's answer to this, as it was de Gaulle's answer to this was, "Well, what about tanks?" And they brushed it off. They said, "Oh, no, we're not worried about the tanks."

But in the book, Mercier himself, in the part of the book that's dedicated to real military stuff, he figures out that, not only are they building tanks in Germany, but what kind and what their intention is.



When the German engineer Uhl is recruited, the recruiting French officer says to him, "I see you as a man who is smart enough to look out for himself in these times. No matter what your country does, you're more concerned with your family, your life, your love affair, which he doesn't mention, etc., that what you're going to do for us is for Uhl. It isn't for Germany. It isn't for France. It's for yourself and that's what smart people are doing these days."

If you have a slightly weak person to begin with, that's a rather smart way to get them into a condition where they're going to be honorable and report what you need to know.

It's easy to have moral commitments in times of peace. But when the world starts to go really wrong, an awful lot of people become unhinged. I don't mean crazy. I mean unconnected from what they're supposed to believe, what they're supposed to do.

If you look at the history of the period, things began to happen very quickly in 1933 with the ascent of Hitler. You get the purges in the Soviet Union. The next thing that



happens is Spain, which just tore Europe to pieces with what went on there.

Immediately when Spain begins to wind down, you get Munich, and following Munich, you get the Night of the Broken Glass, *Kristallnacht*, and at which point it became very clear what the future of the Jews, not only in Germany but in any other place that Hitler might invade, what that was going to be. So people knew more and more, and none of it was good.

They started out by thinking of Hitler as a buffoon, as a crank, and that the German authority structure – the Army, the bankers, all the people – would never accept him. But those who didn't accept him were removed and the rest of them went along for the ride, because they knew they had to.

If you like the people in the book, and I hope you do, then you simply begin to worry, "What is to become of them," much as they said, "What is to become of us? What will happen to us?"



This is just what people think now, as catastrophe comes:  
"What will happen to us? What will we do?"

You know that the reader knows what happens. So the novel is about how did this happen. And that generally the reader doesn't know. So that it's kind of the equivalent in a stage play where somebody puts a pistol in a drawer of a desk on the stage. The audience knows it's there. But the audience doesn't know at what point the drawer is going to be open and the pistol's going to be taken out and used.

### **Valedictory**

For more information about Alan Furst and his ten wartime novels, visit [alanfurst.net](http://alanfurst.net).

Bookpod producer is Barbara Finkelstein. Music is by Kevin McLeod.

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