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Tom Bower, Klaus Barbie, the Butcher of Lyons (Pantheon Books, New York 255 pp., \$15.95.)

Four decades after the collapse of the Nazi empire, new developments and accounts of the era continue to electrify the world. This definitive story of Klaus Barbie demonstrates some of the reasons for this fascination.

Klaus Barbie was one of the outstanding Nazi bureaucrats of butchery. He tortured people personally, and had them tortured and killed in the mass. He started his career of brutality in Berlin, continued it in Holland and elsewhere, but became most renowned as the head of the Gestapo in Lyons. Shortly after the end of the war, in 1945, Lyons's military tribunal issued a warrant for his arrest on multiple charges of illegal imprisonment, arson and murder.

The French authorities could not locate Barbie. In 1971, he was discovered in Bolivia, mainly through the efforts of Beate and Serge Klarsfeld, who then spent a dozen frustrating years trying to get him extradited to France to face charges. That finally happened in 1983, and Barbie awaits trial.

However, the most startling aspect of this case was the revelation that Barbie had worked for American intelligence agencies from 1947 to 1951, when he escaped to Bolivia with the help of those agencies. During those years, Barbie was protected and his whereabouts hidden from the French by those American agencies.

This is a factual and well-written account of the whole abominable story. Tom Bower is a journalist and historian of the fate and treatment of Nazi war criminals. He is the author of "The Pledge Betrayed," a definitive account of what happened to war criminals; and the producer of a number of BBC documentaries on the subject, on one of which the Klaus Barbie story was first aired.

Bower incisively lays out two different levels of evil: the sadism of Barbie and the opportunism of American intelligence agencies. Barbie was not one of those Nazis who did his job dispassionately, "just following orders." He enjoyed it. As one of his French victims pointed out, "Fundamentally, he was a sadist who enjoyed causing pain and proving his power. He had an extraordinary fund of violence." Barbie (diminutive for "barbarian"?) directed his unspeakable brutality impartially against the French, Dutch, Russians, homosexuals and Jews. Nazism gave sadists like him free rein; he would have brutalized any designated target.

Another kind of amorality was exhibited by the American intelligence agencies, the CIA and the CIC. As Bower comments, "Morality is not a known commodity in the intelligence world." World politics took a swift turn after the war ended. American intelligence felt that they had better get a handle on what the Communist world had

on its mind, as a matter of protection for the U.S. They would have been derelict in their job otherwise. But some things can be done in the name of liberty which will finally subvert the cause of liberty. It was clearly beyond the pale to hire and hide from justice known Nazi war criminals for any purpose.

Bower does point out the difference between the more recent behavior of the American government and that of the British government, which was also involved in the Barbie matter. When the acts of the American agencies came to light, the U.S. government ordered an investigation, and published the results of the investigation, including the declassification of hundreds of "top secret" documents. The government report bluntly pointed out the shameful behavior of American agencies -- and the White House sent a formal note of apology to France. In contrast, the British government refused to reveal its documents and just said "no comment."

There are a couple of lessons in the Barbie affair, which is not yet over and will predictably stir even more cover-up within the French community itself. One lesson is relatively simple to learn: the opportunity that a Nazi-like political system gives to the barbarian impulse will probably always be with us. The other lesson is a harder one: the complicity that well-meaning people can have in that barbarism when they lay all their morality on the shelf for the sake of even a moral cause. The story of Barbie, in which these lessons are embedded, is well told by Tom Bower.