

Into the Lion's Mouth: The True Story of Dusko Popov: World War II Spy, Patriot, and the Real Life Inspiration for James Bond

Larry Loftis (Dutton Caliber, 2016), 384 pp., map, dramatis personae, appendices, notes, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by David A. Foy

"Espionage, like rugby, is a ruffian's game, played by gentlemen." (267)

The quotation above, from author Larry Loftis, is an appropriate commentary on the life and times of double agent Dusko Popov, whose incredible career is the focus of *Into the Lion's Mouth* and the model for the fictional James Bond, the creation of a man with whom Popov was somewhat acquainted, Royal Navy Commander and intelligence officer Ian Fleming. Popov, described by the author as, "above all, a showman," (3) was born into a well-to-do Serbian family in 1912 and seemed destined to enjoy a lucrative and luxurious career as a lawyer. However, his penchant for speaking his mind, paired with his hatred of Nazism, resulted in a temporary stay in Freiburg prison courtesy of the Gestapo, followed by expulsion to Switzerland.

Returning to his law practice in Dubrovnik in 1937, his subsequent life was dramatically changed by a telegram from his closest friend and fellow member of the elite, Johnny Jebsen, who informed Popov that he had decided to join the Abwehr, German military intelligence, which he considered the best alternative available for him at the time.

Love for his friend prompted Popov to help Johnny—and thereby German intelligence—with an operational tasking, but his fondness for democracy prompted him to simultaneously inform British foreign intelligence, MI6, which encouraged Dusko to play along with German intelligence, feeding them information the British service provided. As an Abwehr agent, Popov was assigned to Lisbon, Portugal, a key neutral allied with the British since 1373. The chief of MI6 (Secret Intelligence Service), Maj. Gen. Stewart Menzies—better-known as "C"—also sought information on his opposite number, Abwehr Director Adm. Wilhelm Canaris. Furthermore, Popov's linguistic capabilities, law degree, wealth, and highly-placed contacts made him invaluable to MI5 (Security Intelligence Service) as well, enabling him to

travel freely. Thus, in a smooth, brief transition, Popov simultaneously became a double agent—TRICYCLE to the British, SKOOT to the Germans—while also parading as a Yugoslav businessman genuinely preoccupied with the fate of his family members.

By the end of 1940, Popov had flown to England and met his MI5 handler, Col. T.A. "Tar" Robertson, head of the Double Agents section. He also had a memorable, if disturbing, private meeting with Menzies, who provided a brutally frank assessment of his new agent, telling Popov, "You have too many devices on your banner." (45) The author never fully explains this bizarre comment, presumably a reference to the fact that Popov was too flamboyant a character to be successful at the deadly game of intrigue and espionage—as Loftis describes him, Popov was "an incorrigible playboy who dated enough women to make even Bond blush." (85–86) Once again by helping Johnny, Popov backed his way into one of the great intelligence coups of World War II, tragically appreciated only after the fact.

In November 1940, the British Royal Air Force and Royal Navy launched a nighttime, pre-emptive raid on the Italian naval base at Taranto, the world's first aerial assault against a defended port. Japanese military strategists were interested in how the attack occurred, and Popov's German minders opined that the Japanese would enter the war by attacking the United States in similar fashion. Intent upon helping their Pacific ally and themselves as well, the Germans tasked Popov with getting the answers to a host of questions on US defensive measures, including a page-long list on Pearl Harbor defenses alone. They conveyed the questionnaire to Popov using the latest technique in espionage, the microdot.

Finally convincing the British Double-Cross (XX) Committee that he was not a triple agent, Popov was dispatched by his Abwehr handlers to the United States to set up an agent network there, a proposal which the British and the American FBI were willing to accept. The change

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

of venue for Popov prompted FBI demands to control him while in the United States, to which the British only warily agreed; as Popov soon learned, the Bureau wanted him to help catch German spies, not conduct espionage while in the country. Dusko arrived in New York in August 1941 and set about answering the questions he had memorized, sharing the information with the Bureau. He thus acquainted US officials with the high-level German and Japanese interest in Pearl Harbor four months before the “Day of Infamy” attack; however, no warning of this interest was ever passed to the US military.

This failure, combined with FBI chief Hoover’s irascibility and Popov’s determination to go toe-to-toe with the law enforcement legend, resulted in what Loftis accurately characterizes as “a scandalously dysfunctional relationship” (93) between TRICYCLE and the Bureau. Of the eight formal investigations of the Pearl Harbor attack, not one mentions either Popov or the questionnaire. When the captain of the ship on which Popov was traveling on 7 December announced the Pearl Harbor attack, Popov felt proud—but only until he heard the tragic results, wondering how such a disaster could have occurred when he had already provided the critical defense information.

With his relationship with the FBI worsening, he was recalled to London, where he continued to feed false information to the Germans, including in two famous deception operations—misleading the Germans into believing a planned Allied landing in southern Europe was to take place in Greece and Sardinia and that the Western Front would be opened well north of Normandy. Such acts helped earn him the Order of the British Empire. After the liberation of France, he went to Paris to establish a new British intelligence network. After the war ended, he lived there and prospered and eventually acquired British citizenship.

In the estimation of Loftis, Popov’s greatest accomplishments during his astonishing life as a double agent

consisted of the information that he provided on Pearl Harbor and his involvement in the D-Day deception. He also characterizes Popov as “Britain’s greatest World War II double agent and perhaps history’s best spy.” (261) While the first assertion will likely go unchallenged, the second could engender heated discussion over many years. It is worth noting, however, that most biographers are enamored of their subjects, and Loftis is no exception in that regard.

Into the Lion's Mouth is generally well-written and is aided greatly by the *Dramatis Personae* section—which readers will be consulting often—and by the helpful appendices, particularly the one that lists all the intelligence operations in which Popov was involved. The volume reflects the wide use of primary source materials, in various foreign languages, as well as standard US sources. Although Loftis does his best as a lawyer and accomplished writer to explain the tangled web of intrigue that characterizes the life and operations of TRICYCLE, portions of the narrative are challenging to follow, such as the British laundering of German funds to support their intelligence operations. Besides providing details of German and British intelligence activities during the war, Loftis also provides important, albeit disturbing, information about J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI, their general missteps in the unfamiliar larger world of intelligence, and their particularly misguided assessment of Popov and his motives. Bureau champions will find little to cheer about in these pages.

On the other hand, *Into the Lion's Mouth*—the title taken from Montagu’s description of Popov’s career—is the able telling of an important and generally overlooked story, as the only other book-length survey of Popov’s life is that by British journalist Russell Miller, author of *Codename Tricycle* (Pimlico, 2005). Readers who pick up Loftis’s work will be impressed anew with the dexterity, daring, and skill needed to be an intelligence operative, much less a double agent.

