

The Bookshelf

When British Spies Operated in New York

CPYRGHT

Every country at war maintains an elaborate secret service to advance its cause by penetrating the enemy's military, political, economic and diplomatic positions — while guarding its own.

The functions of such an agency are far-flung and varied, from stealing ciphers and piecing together information about enemy agents by intercepting mail to cultivating influential persons in allied and neutral countries and passing out selected tidbits of propaganda and information to friendly journalists and commentators.

"Room 3603" is a frank account of how Great Britain carried out one phase of such a clandestine operation from a base in New York during World War II. The director was Canada-born Sir William Stephenson, who had been a combat pilot in World War I and subsequently acquired a fortune in the field of telegraphic transmission of pictures.

The author, a Briton named H. Montgomery Hyde, is a former member of Stephenson's organization and seems to proceed on the "now it can be told" basis. The result is a story of considerable intrinsic fascination which casts a number of sidelights on the purely nominal character of American neutrality, as interpreted by President Roosevelt.

As Mr. Hyde recognizes, Stephenson's growing organization "represented an obvious threat to United States neutrality." But J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI could not have been more cooperative. Hoover suggested its camouflage name, British Security Coordination. He placed at Stephenson's disposal the FBI wireless channel which provided the only safe means of communication with London. And, as Mr. Hyde puts it:

"On a personal basis he (Hoover) worked very closely with Stephenson to further what was then the wholly unneutral purpose of protecting and furthering British interest in the war against Germany and Italy, and he instructed his officers to assist BSC in every way open to them."

Help from "Wild Bill"

Gen. William ("Wild Bill") Donovan was a tower of strength to the British cause in the U.S. during the period of America's formal neutrality. When Donovan went on a fact-finding mission to the Balkans and the Mediterranean area in the spring of 1941 he was accompanied by this enthusiastic recommendation from Stephenson:

"Donovan exercises controlling influence over Knox, strong influence over Stimson, friendly advisory influence over President and Hull. . . . Being a Republican, a Catholic and of Irish descent, he has following of the strongest opposition to the Administration. . . . It was Donovan who was responsible for getting us the destroyers, the bomb-sight and other urgent requirements. . . . There is no man there who has been so infinitely more through Donovan than through any other individual. . . . He is very re-

ceptive and should be made fully aware of our requirements and deficiencies and can be trusted to represent our needs in the right quarters and in the right way in the U.S.A."

No wonder Donovan received an overwhelming red carpet reception from the British authorities. And according to Mr. Hyde, Donovan was instrumental in bringing about an anti-Axis coup in Yugoslavia which may have affected the later course of the war by delaying Hitler's invasion of Russia by some six weeks.

On November 27, 1941, James Roosevelt visited Stephenson with a message from his father which Stephenson telegraphed as follows to London: "Japanese negotiations off. Services expect action within two weeks." Pearl Harbor occurred ten days after this message was delivered, which makes the question of U.S. unpreparedness for this blow still more puzzling.

In the intervals of playing the perpetual game of hide-and-seek with Nazi agents (a task facilitated by the fact that the British opened mail destined for Europe in Bermuda), Stephenson found time to keep a close watch on interventionist and isolationist organizations in the U.S., and prepared several harassment for America First, among others counterfeiting tickets for a rally of that organization in the hope of causing confusion.

Among other bizarre episodes the author describes a quick-witted woman operative of his organization who made a nocturnal rendezvous with a confederate in the Vichy French Embassy for the purpose of stealing a naval code and diverted the suspicion of a watchman by taking off her clothes and giving the impression that nothing more politically significant than a liaison was in prospect.

Way for a Columnist

There are some interesting data on influencing the American press. In the case of the popular columnist, Stephenson, according to the author, was not only able to place items in his column, but "on occasion to supply him with 'copy' for a part or even the whole of the column itself." Even with this lapse of time it may come as a little surprise to readers of this columnist that they were being offered not his independent views but those of a foreign government. Of another named columnist Mr. Hyde writes:

"(He) kept extensive records, both in his head and on his files, of the misdemeanors of important public men, mainly of politicians in Washington. He knew which Senators and Representatives had been financially 'taken care of' by big business lobbyists, and which had been unfaithful to their wives. Moreover, he was said to be adroit at hinting that he would not use the information, if they made a point of telling him now and again what was going on in their offices and departments."

Mr. Hyde explains to the uninitiated the advantages and disadvantages of using the services of "double agents" and gives a lurid account of the training in mayhem, assault and battery, assassination and sabotage given to operatives prepared for work behind enemy lines.

His book offers convincing proof that the British Secret Service in America, in World War II, as in World War I, was a smooth-running and efficient operation. And he supplies considerable support for those historians who believe that the decision to enter the war against the Axis was, for all practical purposes, taken long before Pearl Har-