Intelligence in Recent Public Literature: Espionage & Counterespionage

THE PANTHER'S FEAST. By Robert Asprey. (New York: Putnam. 1959. Pp. 317. $5.00. Also London: Jonathan Cape. 1959.)

Robert Asprey's fictionalized life of Colonel Alfred Redl, Austrian counterintelligence genius and Russian agent within the Imperial General Staff before the first world war, make little contribution to a professional understanding of this famous espionage case long cited, without detailed or adequate study, as a classic instance of the recruitment of a homosexual under threat of exposure. Yet if the jacket of the book (not an unbiased source) can be believed, Asprey has studied the files that survived Austrian efforts to suppress the Redl case as well as the inadequate and sensational literature that has grown up around it. He claims to have talked to survivors, including Redl's paramour Stefan, who were familiar with details. The end result should have been worthy of all this work.

Possibly it was. Asprey's first draft, a serious biography of Redl, was rewritten in its present form at the behest of his publishing agent, and the original manuscript destroyed. The result is neither sound biography nor good fiction, and it is essentially dishonest: it misleads the reader by combining fact and fantasy without discrimination. This deception is heightened by the inclusion of occasional footnote references to authorities (without citing specific pages) and a truly imposing bibliography. Unsuspecting readers may well accept as verified fact such sequences as Redl's meeting with the Italian military attaché in Vienna, completely fictional although Redl may indeed have sold information to both Italy and France. The "interpretive" invention of live dialogue protects the casual reader from boredom at the expense of the student who needs to get at the truth. Since the book market, to be sure, consists of many casual readers and relatively few students, writers and publishers who conspire to inflict "interpretive" biography on the public are not commercially at fault.

In common with earlier writers on the case, Asprey trips over the hard fact that Redl, himself a Russian agent, continued to uncover and neutralize other Russian agents in Austria-Hungary. Asprey solves this problem through an imaginary face-to-face bargaining session between Redl and Batyushin, the Russian officer who is thought to have handled

him. At this invented meeting Redl and Batyushin are shown arranging to sacrifice Russian agents in Austria as part of the payment to Redl. Asprey here follows without acknowledging his source a theory first developed by Tristan Busch in his Secret Service Unmasked, [1] but goes beyond Busch to suggest that more than one meeting was held. Only the German edition of Busch's work is listed in Asprey's bibliography. Busch, who claims a career in Austrian intelligence before and during the first world war, cites no authority for this doubtful story.

The true reason for this seeming inconsistency in Redl's actions was probably more prosaic: what better cover could he have than an active career as a catcher of Russian spies? Arrangements to sacrifice occasional Russian agents, if they were in fact made, could have been set up through whatever normal channels Redl had for passing messages and photographs to the Russians. (We know virtually nothing of these.) The Russian case officer, whatever his personal feelings, undoubtedly reconciled himself to the loss of a few minor agents if he could keep the big one securely hooked. Until evidence becomes available--and we know nothing of the Russian side of this case--the face-to-face meeting of Redl and Batyushin must be regarded as a myth. Indeed, until Russian files are opened, we can only speculate about Redl's motivation, the operational techniques he employed, and his true relationship to his Russian case officer.

At this late date, two great wars and half a troubled century later, why should overburdened American intelligence officers interest themselves in the uncertain career of a dimly remembered Austrian officer who was trapped into espionage by his homosexuality and a passion for luxurious living? What can the tragic story of Alfred Redl mean to us?

We should remember, first of all, that the case of Alfred Redl forms part of the intelligence tradition of our Soviet adversary. The recruitment and direction of Redl shows a skill and daring that modern intelligence officers in their ignorance rarely grant to the services of Imperial Russia. The Soviets inherited no mean tradition in intelligence, and it is our business to know this background thoroughly. If this means a study of history--anathema among many American intelligence officers--we must make the best of it. How can we know the character of the enemy if we do not know his background and tradition?

It is a common American practice, one that shows through all our history, to judge events and activities primarily as successes or failures.

This narrow pragmatic view is applied to our intelligence operations in an abnormal degree. If it succeeded, fine; if it failed, try something else. Almost no one bothers to ask why it succeeded or failed. The result is considerable groping in the murk. When the English indulge in this same practice we laugh and say they "muddle through." Success and failure, however, are really not so simple. In every successful operation there are elements of failure, in each failure some success. If the Redl case can teach us anything, it teaches us the danger of brushing failures under the rug. No evidence now available indicates that Austrian counterintelligence ever tried to explore the ramifications of the case. Its criminal failure to interrogate Redl thoroughly before he was allowed to kill himself shows how eager it was to bury the case along with Redl and forget it. No vested interest should ever stand in the way of the investigation of operational failures.

The story of Colonel Redl is a magnificent case history in the seizure and manipulation of one human personality by another. Human motivation and the manipulation of personality to achieve desired ends is our eternal study. It is precisely here that Asprey fails us. When his book is finished we know something of Redl's glittering facade, but little of the man himself. Asprey was simply not up to this task. The career of Redl, in truth, is the subject for a great novelist. Any perceptive reader of Darkness at Noon is helped to fuller comprehension of the great Soviet purge trials, though Koestler's book is frankly fiction. It is a pity that no novelist of Koestler's stature has been attracted to Alfred Redl.

Redl's career illustrates for us once again the supreme irony of espionage: it is the unsuccessful agent who gains lasting fame. Nathan Hale and John André, both notoriously unsuccessful, are the two best remembered operatives of our own Revolutionary age. Alfred Redl has given his name to the classic case in which Colonel Batyushin, his supposed case officer, the truly successful man, is hardly remembered. Indeed, Colonel Batyushin was so successful that we cannot be certain he ever existed!

COMPETITIVE INTELLIGENCE: Information, Espionage, and Decision Making. Research report prepared by nine students at the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration under the direction of Georges F. Doriot, Professor of Industrial Management. (Watertown, Mass.: C. I. Associates. 1959. Pp. 78. $10.)

For all its arresting title and respectable sponsorship this brochure

contributes little information not generally known about commercial espionage, and it treats its interesting subject in a gauche and superficial manner. The authors assume at the outset that the field of business intelligence systems is largely unexplored, and they appear to accept businessmen's own comments on their use of espionage at face value and without serious challenge.

The report, which tends to present espionage as a phenomenon peculiar to the postwar period of business in the United States, is based on interviews with business executives and responses to questionnaires sent U.S. industrial firms. The corporate responses suggest that all competitive intelligence systems were begot by the threat of penetration by other commercial espionage organizations, and that self-defense, being best served by a good offense, eventually required the introduction of the demobilized OSS officer or FBI agent as a professional commercial spy.

The brochure concludes with a recommended program of action which embraces the preparation of requirements, the exploitation of collection opportunities, collation and evaluation, the dissemination of finished intelligence, and its use in the decision-making process. The report contains no information of significance to the professional intelligence officer.

1 Tristan Busch (pen name for Arthur Schuetz), Secret Service Unmasked (London: Hutchinson & Co., Ltd.), pages 35-36.

Posted: May 08, 2007 07:26 AM