

The Detonators: The Secret Plot to Destroy America and an Epic Hunt for Justice

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

Chad Millman. New York: Little, Brown, 2006. 352 pages.

Reviewed by Thomas Boghardt

Foreign assaults on American soil have been few and far between, but each act has been devastating and consequential. The Japanese raid on Pearl Harbor as well as the terrorist attacks of 9/11 triggered major reorientations of US foreign policy, and in both cases congressional investigations delved deep into the question of whether the attacks were preventable. Another event, less famous but equally momentous, occurred in the early morning hours of 30 July 1916 in New York Harbor, when a series of powerful explosions obliterated a munitions depot on a spit of land named Black Tom. The blasts rocked the Brooklyn Bridge, killed several people and destroyed over 1,000 tons of TNT destined for Allied forces in Europe. Unlike Pearl Harbor and 9/11, the cause of the Black Tom disaster was not immediately evident, but German sabotage was quickly suspected—a weighty charge since the United States was still neutral in

the war in Europe—and after the war a German-American Mixed Claims Commission sought to assess Berlin's responsibility and adjudicate possible indemnities. The subject of imperial German sabotage in the United States has been addressed before, notably by Reinhard Doerries and Jules Witcover,^[1] but Chad Millman's book takes the story a step further. Although the *The Detonators* includes a discussion of the Black Tom explosions, its main focus is on the equally intriguing and politically significant legal battles of the Mixed Claims Commission that clouded German-American relations for much of the interwar period.

Mr. Millman is a journalist by trade, and it shows. *The Detonators* reads like a legal thriller. Millman effortlessly brings his protagonists—saboteurs, investigators, lawyers, and politicians—to life, and he manages to keep the reader on the edge of his seat throughout the complex legal proceedings of the Mixed Claims Commission. Initially, the German lawyers, arguing that no evidence incontrovertibly linked Black Tom to German agents, had the better of their American colleagues, and in 1930 the commission ruled in their favor. The verdict was supposed to be final, but the German side allowed the Americans to reopen the case on the basis of new evidence. When the commission began leaning towards the US point of view, Germany's representative resigned. In his absence, the commission in 1939 pronounced Germany guilty and ordered Berlin to pay \$50 million in damages.

Of particular interest from an intelligence perspective is Millman's elucidation of the fluid German secret service networks that operated in the United States throughout the period of American neutrality. The German agents were a mixed bunch—military officers sent from Germany, immigrants loyal to the fatherland, and adventurers who signed up “just for kicks,” as one of them put it. Partially controlled by the German service attachés in New York City, these agents had some discretion over their missions, and investigators frequently found it difficult to determine who bore ultimate responsibility for a particular act.

Unfortunately, the book's readability occasionally comes at the expense of accuracy and nuance. For example, Rudolf Nadolny directed Sektion P, the German military's sabotage department, and not Sektion IIIb, the military intelligence service, as Millman claims. Also, the Secret Service was not America's “sole national police force” on the eve of World War I. In fact, the Bureau of Investigation (precursor to the FBI) did much of the counterintelligence legwork.^[2] Furthermore, Millman tends to blame each and every suspicious explosion on German operatives, but he fails to

mention that accidents in the rapidly expanding US munitions industry were fairly common and that hardly any explosion could be conclusively attributed to sabotage.

Central to the proceedings of the Mixed Claims Commission was, of course, the question of who or what caused the Black Tom explosions. Millman flatly assigns guilt to three German saboteurs—Kurt Jahnke, Lothar Witzke, and Michael Kristoff. Investigators and historians have suggested these names before, and Millman does not produce any new evidence against them. He does, however, ignore the many questions about these men. Kristoff was later diagnosed as mentally retarded and was therefore probably incapable of committing a major act of sabotage.^[3] Jahnke and Witzke, on the other hand, were seasoned secret agents, but their operational base was on the West coast. Whether they could have dashed secretly to New York, blown up Black Tom, and returned to San Francisco in time to uphold their alibis, is the subject of an ongoing debate, but Millman never addresses this controversy.

Millman's lack of nuance is partially due to the fact that he ignores German sources and scholarship. It is particularly unfortunate that he did not consult Burkhard Jähncke's 2003 study of the Mixed Claims Commission, which would have added detail and depth to *The Detonators*. For instance, the reader may have been interested to learn that the Mixed Claims Commission's 1939 verdict was not the end of the story. Hitler's Germany refused to comply, and the final installment of \$4 million was not paid until 1 April 1978 by the West German government.^[4]

Still, these reservations should not obscure the fact that Millman tells an exciting story and captures the big picture. His is a very readable and informative study that goes beyond the mere question of who blew up Black Tom. By inference, *The Detonators* is a cautionary tale of covert action. Although German saboteurs doubtlessly managed to destroy a certain amount of Allied war materiel, American suspicions about German involvement poisoned German-American relations and pushed the United States closer to war. Millman's book chronicles how Germany paid the price—literally—for her covert action folly for over half a century thereafter.

Footnotes:

[1] Reinhard Doerries' works on this subject remain in a class of their own. See, for instance, his superb study, *Imperial Challenge: Ambassador Count*

Bernstorff and German-American Relations, 1908-1917 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989). See also Jules Witcover's very readable account, *Sabotage at Black Tom: Imperial Germany's Secret War in America, 1914-1917* (New York: Algonquin Books, 1989).

[2] For more on the organizations of the time, see John F. Fox Jr., "Bureaucratic Wrangling over Counterintelligence, 1917-18," *Studies in Intelligence* 49, no. 1 (2005).

[3] Burkhard Jähncke, *Washington und Berlin zwischen den Kriegen: Die Mixed Claims Commission in den transatlantischen Beziehungen* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2003), 240.

[4] *Ibid.*, 309.

The views, opinions and findings of the author expressed in this article should not be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations or representing the official positions of any component of the United States government.