

The Kaiser Sows Destruction

Protecting the Homeland the First Time Around

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Intelligence officers responding to the attacks on 11 September 2001 perhaps had little inkling that they were following paths trod long ago by their forebears. On a summer night in New York City in 1916, a pier laden with a thousand tons of munitions destined for Britain, France, and Russia in their war against Imperial Germany suddenly caught fire and exploded with a force that scarred the Statue of Liberty with shrapnel, shattered windows in Times Square, rocked the Brooklyn Bridge, and woke sleepers as far away as Maryland. Within days, local authorities had concluded that the blasts at "Black Tom" pier were the work of German saboteurs seeking to destroy supplies headed from neutral America to Germany's enemies.



Black Tom pier, after the explosion

Black Tom was neither the first nor the costliest incident in the two-year German sabotage campaign in America, but it made perhaps the deepest impression. Although this campaign was the work not of terrorists but of German agents—and despite the fact that it took comparatively few lives—it marked the national psyche, as well as America's laws and institutions. Indeed, some of the very organizations and processes being tested today in the war on terrorism were created to deal with the German sabotage campaign, or to prevent a repetition. A quick look at the campaign and the American response provides some striking parallels between our time and an earlier age.

Germany Attacks

World War I erupted in July 1914, with Britain soon joining the French and Russians against the Germans and Austrians. The Royal Navy quickly blockaded Germany's ports and swept the seas of the Kaiser's ships, more than a hundred of which scurried for refuge in the harbors of neutral America. The British blockade made it impossible for Germany and Austria to import war materiel and foodstuffs from overseas, while leaving the British, French, and Russians at their leisure to buy the products of America's farms and factories. American businessmen welcomed the foreign customers who bought huge quantities and paid cash when necessary.



German Ambassador,
Count Johann von Bernstorff

The government of the United States and most Americans regarded the war as an Old World squabble best avoided. The German ambassador, Count Johann von Bernstorff, protested the fact that the British, French,

and Russians were buying armaments in America, but he received no satisfaction from official Washington. The United States was neutral, and willing to sell to anyone who could pay. President Woodrow Wilson sympathized with the British, despite his advice to Americans to remain neutral "in fact as well as in name during these days that are to try men's souls."¹ Politicians and editorialists lamented the war in Europe and complained of the British blockade, but increasing exports to the Allies (swiftly turning America from a debtor to a creditor nation) gradually and surely yoked the nation's economy to the Allied cause.²

After months of fruitless complaints, Germany decided to take bold action to stem the flow of American arms and supplies to its enemies. On 4 February 1915, Berlin ordered its submarines to sink any vessels—even those flying the flags of neutrals—sailing within an exclusion zone around Great Britain. At roughly the same time, the General Staff confirmed its prior authorization to Germany's military attache in Washington to mount sabotage operations against "every kind of factory for supplying munitions of war."³ Despite this sweeping grant of authority, however, the attaché, Franz von Papen, had no training in clandestine activities, and accomplished little over the next few months.

Berlin sent von Papen some help in April 1915. An aristocratic naval officer, Captain Franz von Rintelen, arrived in New York carrying a Swiss passport and orders to run a sabotage campaign under illegal cover. Rintelen spoke fluent English and knew Manhattan's banking and social milieus. He was as unschooled in covert action as his Embassy counterparts, but was more innovative and seemingly inexhaustible. Within weeks of his arrival, he had enlisted sailors and officers from the 80-odd German ships languishing in New York harbor, turning a workshop on one of the ships into a bomb factory. He convinced a German-born chemist across the river in New Jersey to fill cigar-shaped firebombs, and claims to have used Irish dockworkers to plant the devices on Allied ships in American ports. The shipping news soon noted a rash of mysterious accidents at sea; ships carrying munitions from America were damaged and their cargoes ruined by fires.

America Responds

Until this point, the Americans had been baffled and fumbling in their response to German secret activities. The United States had no national intelligence service beyond its diplomats and a few military and naval attaches. There was no codebreaking agency and only rudimentary communications security. Still more remarkable, no federal statute forbade peacetime espionage and sabotage. Planting bombs and committing passport fraud—to name only two of the transgressions already perpetrated by German agents—had to be investigated piecemeal by federal, state, and local authorities. No federal agency had either the power or the resources to follow leads that hinted at a foreign-directed conspiracy to violate the laws of multiple jurisdictions. That soon began to change, however, thanks to Captain Rintelen's colleagues in the German navy.



The sabotage cable of 26 January 1915, intercepted by the British: German text, left; actual message with decoding, right.

In May 1915, a U-boat off the coast of Ireland sank the British liner Lusitania with appalling loss of life, including 128 Americans. The sinking turned public opinion against Germany and angered President Wilson, who ordered the Secret Service—previously confined to protecting presidents and hunting counterfeiters—to watch German diplomats. Although the Secret Service officers did not spot Rintelen, they filched the briefcase of the German commercial attaché on a New York streetcar in July 1915, and found in his papers several leads to the sabotage campaign. Officials in Washington began to see what was afoot.



German bombs seized in New Jersey.

Not long afterward, Captain Rintelen was ordered to Berlin for consultations and boarded a Dutch steamer for the long trip. He never made it. Tipped by a decoded German message, the British stopped his ship in the English Channel and detained him. His Swiss passport only delayed the inevitable, and soon Rintelen admitted to his captors that he was an enemy officer.⁴

American authorities by late 1915 had enough evidence to expel other German diplomats. Military Attache Franz von Papen held diplomatic immunity and thus could not be arrested by the British when they stopped his ship in the Channel, but His Majesty's officers decided that von Papen's immunity did not extend to his luggage. The British found various incriminating documents, some of which they turned over to the Americans to assist their growing investigation of German activities.



Wanted Poster issued for suspected German agent.

The departure of the key diplomats corresponded with a shift in the center of gravity of the investigations. With no obvious targets left to investigate, federal authorities could do little to help. The trail of the ship bombers thus shifted to the Bomb Squad of the New York Police Department, which found itself for a time hamstrung by the inefficiency of coordinating with police and authorities in New Jersey. The NYPD also discovered that it needed Germans to catch German saboteurs. America in 1915 was home to more than 2.5 million German immigrants; perhaps 4 million native-born Americans had parents who had been born in Germany. The great majority of these people saw themselves as loyal American citizens. Indeed, several German-speaking detectives served on the NYPD Bomb Squad, and were subsequently stationed in dockside taverns where German sailors gossiped and plotted over their lager. In early 1916, the authorities swooped into New York and New Jersey, rounding up Rintelen's confederates who had been "outraging our neutrality," in the words of a contemporaneous book on the incidents. This action largely halted the campaign of ship bombings.⁵

The dragnet, however, missed other conspirators. Rintelen's former contacts shifted their targets from ships carrying war materiel to the factories producing it. Although American detectives never caught more than a handful of the suspects—and thus it is difficult at this remove to sketch the true picture of the conspiracy—it seems clear now that small teams of German agents succeeded in infiltrating various plants and sites filling contracts for the Allies.⁶

The conflagration at Black Tom pier was their most spectacular success, but there were others. In January 1917, a mysterious fire at a shell-packing plant in Kingsland, New Jersey, just across the river from Manhattan, rocked the city and sent thousands fleeing from unfused shells flung high in the air by the blasts. Three months later, another unexplained fire destroyed the Hercules Powder Company plant in Eddystone, Pennsylvania, killing over a hundred workers, most of them women and children. A book published in 1937 estimated that, between early 1915 and spring 1917, 43 American factories suffered explosions or fires of mysterious origin, in addition to the bombs set on some four dozen ships carrying war supplies to the Allies.

These attacks did little damage to the huge American economy or the Allied war effort. One later estimate put the damage at \$150 million in then-current money (or somewhat less than \$1.5 billion dollars today).⁷ Nevertheless, the cumulative effect of the skullduggery—and especially

renewed U-boat sinkings of American ships—poisoned public opinion against Germany. The final straw came with Britain's interception of the Zimmerman Telegram—in which Berlin promised Mexico its lost territory in Texas and the Southwest if it would attack America—and the Wilson administration's publication of the damning cable.⁸



Inspector Thomas J. Tunney of the New York bomb Squad.

America declared war on Germany in April 1917, creating a new legal and political climate for German agents and their pursuers. As the war loomed that spring, Germany's main undercover agents—fearing execution if captured as spies in an enemy country—had quietly decamped for Mexico. Following the declaration, the Attorney General authorized his department's small Bureau of Investigation to investigate espionage on its own initiative. A few weeks later, Congress passed the Espionage Act, which remains the basis of modern espionage statutes.⁹ The Bureau's roughly 400 agents joined the campaign against German agents.¹⁰ Among the Justice Department officials working closely with the Bureau in its monitoring of suspicious aliens was an up-and-coming attorney named J. Edgar Hoover, who would one day head the organization and give it the name it holds today: the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The fight against German espionage and sabotage took two significant paths thereafter. The long campaign of subversion unfortunately heightened suspicions of all Germans and bred a popular fear of aliens, agitators, and subversives. A wave of wartime vigilantism swept the country, with thousands of Americans denouncing their immigrant neighbors and anyone else suspected of disloyalty. Popular worries about German plotters were misplaced—the vast majority of German-Americans

were patriots, and many fought for their country in 1918—but the distrust of entire ethnic groups during times of national emergency was a trait that would endure.

The official response to German sabotage followed a more professional path. With British help, American counterintelligence agencies finally organized themselves and even took the offensive against German networks in the final months of the war. The Army expanded its tiny Military Intelligence Division (MID), hiring detectives from the NYPD Bomb Squad and eventually assigning several sections to domestic security duties, under the theory that "the misbehavior, disloyalty, or indifference of native Americans is as important a material of military intelligence as any other."¹¹ When American authorities penetrated a German operation run from Mexico, one of these MID units—Herbert Yardley's Negative Branch—broke a German agent cipher and provided evidence that helped to convict an important operative.¹² Indeed, the decryption of the coded messages of suspected German agents originally formed the bulk of the work of the US Army's code-breaking section, and gave it a reason to begin monitoring radio transmissions as well. Signals intelligence, as well as counterintelligence, was born as a discipline in the United States as a result of World War I.

Postwar Developments

The effects of the German sabotage campaign reverberated after the war. In 1924, the Justice Department's Bureau of Investigation got a new broom—Director J. Edgar Hoover—who was determined to make it an instrument that would energetically and professionally track foreign threats. As a second European war loomed in the late 1930s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt secretly ordered Hoover to monitor communist and fascist sympathizers. The outbreak of World War II in 1939 precipitated new measures to guard American neutrality. The White House authorized the FBI to watch potential saboteurs and Congress passed the draconian Smith Act, requiring (among other things) the periodic re-registration of all aliens and giving federal law enforcement agencies powerful weapons to use against radicals of all stripes. Indeed, memories of the German sabotage campaign helped sway the Roosevelt administration's decision to intern Japanese-Americans after Pearl Harbor. "We don't want any more

Black Toms," President Roosevelt told Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy, who implemented the internment order.¹³

All this high-level attention also persuaded the Army and Navy intelligence agencies in 1939 to join the FBI on a committee to coordinate actions and policies. It bears noting that the main focus of this coordination—America's first civilian-military intelligence-sharing arrangement—was to prevent sabotage like that conducted by Germany in World War I. The formation of the outfit that became the Office of Strategic Services was closely related to these developments; it had much to do with the desire of British intelligence agencies for a central point of contact in Washington for information-sharing regarding German threats to British war materiel moving from the United States.

Conclusion

The lessons to America are clear as day. We must not again be caught napping with no adequate national Intelligence organization. The several Federal bureaus should be welded into one, and that one should be eternally and comprehensively vigilant.¹⁴

—Arthur Woods, Police Commissioner of New York, 1919

Few today remember the Black Tom explosion or the Kingsland fire, but incidents like these made a deep and lasting impression on the minds of two generations of American leaders. German sabotage actually killed only a comparative handful of Americans. Nevertheless, it piled outrage upon outrage to convince many people of two elemental but enduring lessons: first, that enemy aliens in our midst can be a source of great mischief in wartime and therefore must be watched closely; and, second, that strong federal laws and federal agencies are indispensable to the effective investigation—and deterrence—of foreign conspiracies on American soil.

No one today can predict the long-term impact on the Intelligence Community of the events of 11 September 2001. If the past is any guide, however, those effects are likely to be profound. Certain lessons from that tragedy are sure to shape the minds of the American people, their elected officials, and those who oversee the Intelligence Community. The effects of Germany's sabotage campaign took at least three decades to work

themselves out; the attack on 11 September may exert powerful pressures for change in the American intelligence establishment for at least that long.

Footnotes

1. Quoted in Jules Witcover, *Sabotage at Black Tom: Imperial Germany's Secret War in America, 1914-1917* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin, 1989), pp. 70-71.
2. Thomas A. Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1958 [sixth edition]), pp. 567-575.
3. Henry Landau, *The Enemy Within: The Inside Story of German Sabotage in America* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1937), p. 8. The German Embassy had apparently been ordered to conduct sabotage against British economic interests in 1914, but its initial, amateurish efforts had been directed against railways in Canada. Berlin's 26 January 1915 authorization survived--courtesy of British signals intelligence--and is crucial as a piece of evidence because it is the sabotage campaign's earliest extant operational order.
4. After America entered the war, the British bundled Rintelen off to New York to stand trial. One of the charges that stuck was that of conspiracy to create an illegal restraint of trade by inducing dockworkers to strike against firms loading ships with munitions. He thus became surely the most important--and probably the only--spy to be jailed for violating the Sherman Antitrust Act. Released in 1920, Rintelen eventually moved to England, told his story in a lurid memoir titled *The Dark Invader: Wartime Reminiscences of a German Naval Intelligence Officer* (London: Lovat, Dickson, 1933), and died in London in 1949.
5. Thomas J. Tunney and Paul Merrick Hollister, *Throttled: The Detection of the German and Anarchist Bomb Plotters in the United States* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1919), p. vii
6. This phase of the sabotage campaign may forever remain obscure. Few if any official documents on this subject survived in Germany; many were apparently destroyed by the German General Staff in 1919. Most of the German agents were never caught, and those who were said little to help the authorities.
7. The \$150 million estimate and the numbers of ships and factories

come from Landau, pp. 38, 300. In 1953, the new Federal Republic of Germany agreed to pay \$95 million (including interest) over 26 years to claimants alleging damages from the Black Tom and Kingsland fires. The last payments were made on schedule in 1979--see Witcover, p. 310. It is also interesting to note that munitions at Black Tom were bound for Russia, and might have lessened the shortfall that hastened the collapse of the Czar's army in the fall and winter of 1916-1917

8. Barbara W. Tuchman tells this story in *The Zimmerman Telegram* (New York: Dell, 1958). Of particular interest is the groundwork laid--both in the minds of German leaders and American investigators--by Rintelen in his dealings with exiled Mexican contenders in New York. Washington was already sensitive about German plotting with Mexico when the British passed Zimmerman's cable to American diplomats. See Tuchman, pp. 64-81.
9. On 1 July 1916, before there was an espionage statute, Congress had allowed the Bureau to investigate German subversive activities upon request from the Department of State.
10. The Bureau gained at least one counterintelligence coup in April 1918, when it quietly tunneled into a vault of the Swiss consulate in New York to peek at the files of former German Commercial Attaché Heinrich Albert. Don Whitehead, *The FBI Story: A Report to the People* (New York: Random House, 1956), p. 32.
11. John Patrick Finnegan, *Military Intelligence* (Washington: US Army Center of Military History, 1998), pp. 24-30.
12. The agent, Lothar Witzke, has long been suspected of a hand in the Black Tom sabotage; see Witcover, pp. 245-246. Herbert Yardley tells the story in his own words in *The American Black Chamber* (New York: Ballantine, 1981 [1931]), pp. 106-107.
13. See Witcover, p. 311. Witcover notes that he interviewed McCloy in his law offices high in World Trade Center, commanding a fine view of the Statue of Liberty and the site of Black Tom pier. McCloy's interest in the German campaign ran deep. He had investigated the sabotage for the Mixed Claims Commission that heard the cases against Berlin in the 1930s, and had been brought to Washington by Secretary of War Stimson in late 1940 to work as a consultant on German sabotage; see Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), pp. 123-25, 182.
14. Quoted in Tunney and Hollister, p. ix

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