

## *Hiding in Plain Sight: Felix A. Sommerfeld, Spymaster in Mexico, 1908 to 1914*

Heribert von Feilitzsch (Henselstone Verlag, 2012) 468 pp., index.

**Reviewed by Mark Benbow**

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This decade marks the centennial of both the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) and the First World War (1914–1918). They overlapped in more ways than simple chronology. During the prerevolutionary regime of Porfirio Díaz (1876–80, 1884–1911), American, British, and German businesses competed for opportunities in Mexico, especially in mining, oil, and railroads. After WW I began, Washington, London, and Berlin’s interest in Mexico intensified in large part because a new Mexican-American war could distract the United States and divert arms then going to the Allies. In short, Mexico became an important front in the WW I intelligence effort.

Numerous studies related to this subject have been released over the past few years, most notably books by Charles Harris III, Louis Sadler, and Thomas Boghardt.<sup>1</sup> Independent scholar Heribert von Feilitzsch has added a new volume with *In Plain Sight*, which discusses the career of Felix Sommerfeld, sometime miner and soldier of fortune, who became an adviser to Mexico’s President Francisco I. Madero during his short-lived presidency (November 1911–February 1913). While acting as Madero’s adviser and gatekeeper, Sommerfeld worked as an agent for the German government, reporting not just on Mexican affairs, but also on US policies in Mexico.

Sommerfeld was born in 1879 into a middle-class family in Germany. He studied to be a mining engineer before emigrating to the US to join a brother. He enlisted in the US Army for the Spanish-American

War, deserted—perhaps out of boredom—and returned to Germany. Sommerfeld served in the Kaiser’s army in China during the Boxer Rebellion. He returned to the United States, avoided arrest for desertion, and passed through Arizona and northern Mexico working as an engineer.

Sommerfeld’s actions during 1906–1908 are hazy, but Feilitzsch suggests that he returned to Germany to train for intelligence work. Sommerfeld reappeared in Mexico as a German agent and in 1910, while officially a reporter for the Associated Press (AP), worked his way into Madero’s inner circle. After Madero’s assassination, Sommerfeld began working for various revolutionary factions, often collaborating with the US Bureau of Investigation while secretly sending reports to Berlin.

By 1915 Sommerfeld was “Pancho” Villa’s major arms broker in the United States. At the same time he worked for German Naval Attaché Karl Boy-Ed, who was then running a large espionage and sabotage organization in the United States aimed at interfering with US arms deliveries to the Allies. Sommerfeld suggested using Villa to create an incident to drag the United States into war with Mexico. In March 1916, Villa’s raid on Columbus, New Mexico, came very close to doing just that. Interned as an enemy alien once Washington entered WW I, Sommerfeld was interviewed by the US Army in 1918. Much of this book is based on those interviews. Sommerfeld disappeared from the historical record in the 1930s.

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<sup>1</sup> Harris and Sadler, *The Secret War in El Paso: Mexican Revolutionary Intrigue, 1906–1920* (University of New Mexico Press, 2009) and Boghardt, *The Zimmermann Telegram: Intelligence Diplomacy, and America’s Entry into World War I* (Naval Institute Press, 2012). The latter was reviewed in *Studies in Intelligence* 57, No. 2 (June 2013).

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Sommerfeld successfully juggled his multiplicity of roles, at least initially. But even in a preelectronic era, he left traces which Feilitzsch successfully follows to pierce Sommerfeld's slightly amateurish denial and deception campaign. For example, Sommerfeld often travelled under his real name and left immigration records. Sometimes the lack of a record proved useful. Feilitzsch found no evidence to substantiate Sommerfeld's claim that he was the manager of several Mexican mines just before the revolution. (36) Still, some parts of Sommerfeld's activities remain clouded, such as any role he might have played in sparking Villa's Columbus raid.

*In Plain Sight* is well researched and well argued. The bibliography is fine; Feilitzsch used libraries and archives in the United States, Mexico, and Germany as well as the major scholarly works on international involvement in the Mexican Revolution. He is, however, sometimes prone to overstatement. When discussing Sommerfeld's activities, he often says "the only explanation is...." His conclusions are logical, but while they are the most reasonable explanations for Sommerfeld's activities, they are not the only explanations. For example, Feilitzsch describes Sommerfeld's relationship with the German vice-consul in Chihuahua before the revolution. Sommerfeld's reports praised the vice-consul's work and the man received a promotion. The consul then put Sommerfeld on his payroll. "There is only one interpretation of

what Sommerfeld was paid to do" von Feilitzsch writes, "Espionage." (75) While that's a likely explanation given Sommerfeld's role in Mexico at the time, it is not the only possible reason for the consul's actions. It might also have reflected gratitude for aid in winning promotion. Often replacing "only" with "likely" would have improved the author's arguments.

*In Plain Sight* was published by Henselstone Verlag, the author's own company. Self-published books are usually ignored by academics, often for good reason. However, they seem to be increasingly popular. For example, The History Press has found a niche releasing local histories by talented, if sometimes irregularly trained historians. Self-published authors often have little or no training as historians, but Feilitzsch earned an MA in Latin American history at the University of Arizona.

Nonetheless, the book would have benefited from the services of a professional editor at a scholarly press. There are a few too many awkward phrasings, and the author often slides into passive voice. The rather spare index is merely adequate. Despite these issues, Feilitzsch has done an exemplary job of tracing the activities of a shadowy character in a chaotic time and place. *In Plain Sight* is a welcome addition to the growing literature of the intelligence war of the 1910s and is well worth the read.

