

Intelligence in Public Media

The Nazi Spy Ring In America: Hitler's Agents, the FBI, & the Case That Stirred the Nation

by Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones (Georgetown University Press, 2020) 237 pages, endnotes, bibliography, photos, index.

Reviewed by David A. Welker

Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones's new book on the pre-World War II Rumrich spy ring is an engaging new look at an often-ignored case that bears lessons worth remembering today.

The story begins in January 1938, when US Army intelligence provided the FBI with a British MI-6 warning—obtained by monitoring the communications of Jessie Jordan, a Scotland-based “letterbox” operator managing Abwehr communications with the field—that German intelligence had hatched a plot to kidnap or kill an American colonel with access to US East Coast defense plans. Placed in charge of the resulting investigation was FBI Special Agent Leon G. Turrou, who thwarted the plan through dogged investigation, his unique ability to obtain intelligence from interviews and questioning, and a deep-seated hatred of the fascist machine operating in Hitler's Germany. A series of arrests quickly began peeling back the onion of Germany's Abwehr, its external intelligence service, and operations within the United States.

Although the public was largely ignorant of these efforts, German agents had worked since the late 1920s to penetrate US industry, government, and academia. Initially, intelligence collection was focused on commercial technology useful in rebuilding Germany from the devastation of World War I, but as Germany grew increasingly powerful and aggressive, Abwehr efforts expanded to include military and political intelligence as Hitler realized his global expansion plans would eventually lead to confrontation with the United States. Americans, however, remained blissfully ignorant in the haze of neutrality which enveloped President Franklin Roosevelt's administration, business leaders, and much of the public.

The growing FBI net soon swept up its first major figure, Guenther Gustave Maria “Gus” Rumrich,^a who quickly revealed to the FBI all he knew about the Abwehr's US operations and the names of other German agents. These revelations not only ripped open several

agent networks, but they also revealed Germany's use of its extensive fleet of commercial ships to support intelligence operations. It was this highly secure communication and support network that several of the compromised spies used in fleeing to Germany. In response, the ever-ambitious FBI director, J. Edgar Hoover, pushed for a public trial, rather than continue to run the remaining agents to deepen the FBI's counterintelligence haul. Hoover's decision also reflected the growing pains of the bureau in its new role as the nation's lead counterspy agency.

London's *Daily Express* labeled the October 1938 New York City trial the “biggest show in town in twenty years.” Four Nazi spies were eventually sentenced to between two and six years for their crimes. Jeffreys-Jones notes that the case did not inspire American belligerency but rather—perhaps as importantly—began the increasingly rapid erosion of US neutrality. When the Abwehr tried once again in 1940 to infiltrate spies into the United States, specifically the Fritz Duquesne ring and Wilhelm Sebold, thanks to the experience of the Rumrich case, the FBI was ready. The Duquesne ring was quickly exposed and Sebold was turned into a double-agent to more effectively frustrate the Nazi services. When Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor finally brought the United States into the war, the US public was temperamentally prepared for conflict in ways that it had not been in 1938.

Jeffreys-Jones tells this often-complicated story in a clear, relatively easy-to-follow way that brings the characters and events to life. Although the book would benefit from more clear explanations of the significance of some persons and events raised early on, it includes a “dramatis personae” list at the back to help readers juggle the many new names and their roles until they become more familiar. Still, the narrative is well-constructed and several secondary stories are seamlessly woven into the text, particularly the complicated life of Leon Turrou and his fall from grace with Hoover and the FBI.

a. The case would be publicly named after Rumrich, although he was never the spy ring's leader.

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This tale of ambition, ego, patriotism, and fortune could easily be its own, stand-alone story but charting it alongside the larger Rumrich spy ring story offers context that would otherwise be lost. Similarly, Jeffreys-Jones's thorough research and use of new material adds to the volume's value to historians. These materials include recently-released FBI records that correct Turrou's published accounts of the identity and motivations of the Abwehr officer whose security breach initially exposed the ring.^a The author also isn't afraid to confront conventional wisdom, for example, debunking Hoover's image of the FBI by noting its frequent CI failures and reminding readers that the lingering popular belief that as early

as the late 1930s President Roosevelt was secretly leading America into inevitable war with fascism is simply false.

The Nazi Spy Ring in America demonstrates that by failing to make intelligence collection a priority and clinging instead to preferred illusions, 1930s America provided Nazi Germany technology and political breathing space that unintentionally enabled Hitler's fascist regime. By breathing new life into this often-ignored spy story and its implications, Jeffreys-Jones provides readers an important reminder that although the United States today faces different adversaries, seeing the actions of any nation in a clear, honest light is vital to avoid repeating the failures of the 1930s and once-again paying the disastrously high cost of fixing them.



The reviewer: David A. Welker is a member of CIA's History Staff.

a. Turrou's accounts inspired several Hollywood films. One was *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, starring Edward G. Robinson. Turrou was given writing credits. Another was *House on 92nd Street*, which was released after the war.