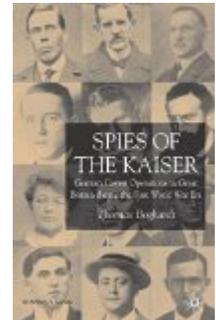




Thomas Boghardt. *Spies of the Kaiser: German Covert Operations in Great Britain during the First World War Era.* Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. xiv + 224 pages \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4039-3248-8.



Reviewed by Jeffrey Verhey

Published on H-German (September, 2006)

The period before World War I was a great time in Great Britain for spy stories. In the last years before the war, German spies seemed to be everywhere and were a standard topic in the columns of the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express* and similar newspapers. Even the greatest detective of all times himself came out of retirement to stop the Germans. In "His Last Bow," a short story published in 1917, Arthur Canon Doyle described how Sherlock Holmes broke up a vast and very efficient German spy ring just as the war was beginning.

How true, how real was the threat? How good, how sophisticated were the German spies? And how successful were the British in dealing with this threat? These are the questions Thomas Boghardt attempts to answer in his fine account of German spying in Great Britain in World War I. Boghardt is the right man for such a task. An historian at the International Spy Museum in Washington, D.C., his work--the first scholarly account of the activities of the German naval intelligence agency ("N") before and during the First World

War--is based on extensive research in German and British archives.

Boghardt begins with a description of the development of German naval spying in Great Britain before World War I. He concentrates on naval intelligence because this was what the Germans were mostly interested in and because army intelligence has already been well documented. German spying in Great Britain before 1914 was not nearly as dangerous as many British at the time thought; the German navy's intelligence organization was relatively small and poorly funded. In addition, German spies were largely looking at the wrong things--they were mostly interested in technical information about the British navy and did not pay much attention to the British Expeditionary Forces. Even within this framework, German spying in Great Britain produced few tangible results. For example, Germany was surprised by the most important technical development during these years, the Royal Navy's launching of the dreadnought battleship class.

The absence of spies did not stop the British from *perceiving* spies. In the 1890s, authors such

as William Tufnell Le Queux and Erskine Childers profited from the growing unease with Germany by publishing scare stories in which Germany replaced the traditional enemy, France. Their books were not only bestsellers, but in a cycle that seems quite common in the history of intelligence, the books themselves contributed to a certain perception of Germany. As Boghardt notes, it was in response to this spy scare and in response to popular pressure that the British government set up the Secret Service Bureau, the precursor to MI5. The early years of British counter-espionage were not crowned by success. Although Le Queux produced miraculous amounts of information on German spying, the Secret Service Bureau "possessed virtually no valid information on any de facto foreign espionage" (p. 39). During its first two years of existence, the Secret Service Bureau was unable to apprehend or even detect a single German spy. In later years (in the years just before the war), the Bureau finally did find a few genuine spies, but as Boghardt shows on the basis of a careful analysis of court records and documents in German archives, these spies were small fish: "a sober analysis of the information provided by the handful of genuine German spies arrested should have informed the British government that Berlin was primarily interested in technical naval intelligence and that the German pre-war espionage apparatus was not very extensive" (p. 80). But it was not the spying itself, but "rather the unquestioned assumption of a vast, hostile, clandestine organization" (p. 73) which led to the expansion of the Secret Service Bureau.

The outbreak of the war was accompanied by an outburst of British paranoia over German espionage. As in the other nations where this spy fever took place (pretty much everywhere), the police had to investigate hundreds--even thousands--of denunciations. These investigations failed to produce any genuine spies. The spy fever then turned into an attack on enemy aliens, with calls in the *Daily Mirror* and *John Bull* for all Germans to be interred. The authorities did little to

stop the fever; indeed, they used it to pass the Defense of the Realm Act at the beginning of August 1914, curbing Britain's liberal traditions.

Legend has it that MI5 defeated a German spy ring at the beginning of the war. Boghardt shows they did nothing of the sort. Through a careful, detailed analysis of the individual cases, Boghardt is able to document that out of 21 spies reported arrested on the first day of the war (August 4, 1914), only 9 were actually spies. Moreover, the "spies" the British police rounded up in August 1914 were the usual suspects, not a dangerous "ring." To prove this claim, Boghardt shows through an examination of the files in the German archives that the arrests in no way disrupted German spying activities, such as they were.

Boghardt describes German spying during the war by analyzing a few exemplary cases in detail. Here one sees the sort of stuff of which spying is made. For example, Boghardt notes that German spies passed on to Germany the canard that Russian troops had landed in Great Britain in late 1914 on their way to the western front. Another agent reported on the effects of submarine warfare by noting that "a stroll through London stores would not be pleasant for a German ... there is a lot of food" (p. 139). This is not to say that it was the British who kept the Germans from great intelligence. During the war, MI5 arrested 31 bona fide enemy agents. Based on all the available records, at least 120 German agents operated in Britain from 1914 till 1918. Although not a bad record, this is not an especially great accomplishment.

But of what value could spying have been in Great Britain in World War I? The German Navy was holed up in its harbor and the British effectively blockaded the German coasts. In this situation, the information that would perhaps have been of most use--which ships were sailing when--was almost impossible to transmit to Germany and then back to the submarines in "real time."

Boghardt closes his book with the recognition that "the history of German espionage in Great Britain reveals a curious double failure: the incapacity of 'N' to make a significant contribution to the German war effort and the inability of British counter-espionage to produce a realistic assessment of German espionage" (p. 143). What is perhaps heartening, given recent American experiences, is that the officials prosecuting the war in Germany and in Great Britain do not seem to have placed too much importance on intelligence. It was the British public which developed a "fever." Although Boghardt does not address these implications directly, many lessons for the present can be learned from this superb study.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Jeffrey Verhey. Review of Boghardt, Thomas. *Spies of the Kaiser: German Covert Operations in Great Britain during the First World War Era*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2006.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12283>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.