

RING OF SPIES:
How MI5 and the FBI brought down the Nazis in America
Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones
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Simon Matthews

Flick through the 70 or so free view channels on your TV and you'll come across at least half a dozen that specialise in slightly off-beat, but decently made and adequately researched documentaries. Programmes with titles like *Abandoned Engineering*, *Searching for Bigfoot*, *FBI Files* and *Unsolved Mysteries*. It's hard to tell what the appeal is of this material but one imagines the audience is overwhelmingly male and over 65. Given the number of such programmes there must be a sufficiently large cadre of viewers to justify their production and repeated screening. This book resembles a printed version of that type of entertainment, with the bonus that it also has the trappings of a heavy-weight academic text: footnotes, a bibliography and an index.

The author was formerly Professor of American History at the University of Edinburgh and, rather oddly, his narrative occasionally adopts the style of a hard-boiled true-life detective story. For example:

'tall, blond and blue-eyed, he stirred feelings in an Alabama girl, Mary Aurora "Lady May" Evans'

- and -

'the detective saw a man of 5ft 11in with a military bearing and high forehead. Pulling himself up to his full height, the prisoner demanded to know why he was being dragged around from one place to another'.

But, like the TV shows, the end product is easy to digest and, in this case, does provide some information on the operation of the German intelligence network in America in the late 30s and early 40s when the US was neutral, and may have stayed so had the Japanese not attacked Pearl Harbour.

As indicated in the title, there was some US-UK collaboration on this matter and various German espionage activities in the US were thwarted. But the involvement of MI5 was actually quite limited. In 1937-1938 they monitored the activities of a Mrs Jordan who ran a hair-dressing salon in

Dundee that was used as a delivery point for letters from German agents in the US. When her premises were searched, maps were found on which the location of various UK defence establishments and bases were clearly marked. She was tried, convicted of espionage and sentenced to 4 years in prison in 1939. Released in 1941, she was immediately interned as an enemy alien and subsequently deported to Germany in 1946. Her detection led to the exposure of a German spy in the US codenamed 'Agent Crown' (a.k.a. Guenther Rumrich). MI5 passed information about him to the FBI, who duly unearthed his network.¹

This led to the first of two major cases: Rumrich (1938), involving 4 agents of whom 3 were convicted and Duquesne (1941), which was much more extensive. The defendants in both trials did all the things spies do – stealing plans for new tanks, aircraft and ships etc. – but, other than obtaining the blueprints for the famed Norden Bombsight, it seems doubtful that they contributed anything meaningful to the outcome of the war. It isn't even clear if getting the Norden Bombsight gave Germany an edge: its design was fairly similar to the Carl Zeiss Lotfe 7 device the Luftwaffe used – and the performance of the Norden, in combat situations, wasn't that impressive anyway. In the late summer of 1941 – after the German invasion of the USSR, and with American-Japanese relations collapsing – the US rounded up the Duquesne network. The trial of the 33 agents caught by the FBI began in September and was ongoing when Pearl Harbour happened. They were convicted on 13 December 1941 with the ringleaders receiving lengthy prison sentences.

Whatever the hyperbole around the case – and J Edgar Hoover's flair for self-publicity ensured there was plenty – one might take the view, given the size of the US, and its potential to influence world affairs, that the country contained relatively few German agents. Even more to the point, did anyone in Germany take any notice of them? Hitler declared war on the US on 11 December 1941, regardless of anything the Duquesne ring might have done, and before its members had been convicted. There are various views about why Hitler did this, ranging from complete ignorance about the economic and military potential posed by the US, to a private awareness, after the successful Soviet counter-attack

¹ Mrs Jordan became a German citizen by marriage in 1912 and lived in Germany until 1937. She returned to Scotland following her divorce from her second German husband, the first having been killed in WW1. It seems that in the 30s MI5 automatically kept people with some sort of link to Germany under surveillance. No motive – political, financial or emotional – was found for her activities.

at Moscow (5 December 1941), that the war was now lost, or at the very least could no longer be won.² Either way he took no notice of Duquesne and his colleagues.

Following the events as they happened, Jeffreys-Jones's narrative tapers away somewhat in the final third. The reader may think that what the book is edging towards is a conclusion that spy rings are a distraction. But no, that question isn't asked. Nor does the book explore if (or how) the German spy rings interconnected with the pro-isolation America First Committee; or what connections, if any, they had with long-term pro-German activist George Viereck. There is also no mention of the workings of the German-American Bund during the same period.

The author claims that the sensational press coverage of both the Rumrich and Duquesne cases raised public awareness about the threat posed to US democracy and security by German agents, and created a short-lived interest in Hollywood thrillers about heroic 'G-Men'. Specifically, Warner Brothers released *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* in May 1939, with a script drawn up with assistance from former FBI agent Leon Turrou. (Turrou had been active in the Rumrich case, but lost his position at the FBI when he published articles about it without permission.)

But did a couple of films really change public opinion? Based on the support the America First Committee had by 1940-1941, one would doubt that they did.³ Fortunately for future generations, as well as ignoring his own secret agents, Hitler capsized the America First Committee anyway with his prompt declaration of war in support of Japan.⁴

Suppose things had gone differently, with Hitler refraining from involving himself with the US. Some consider this one of the great 'what-ifs' of our time and the alternative timeline is speculated as going thus: within a couple of years, Germany, slowly losing a fight to the death with

² On this see John Lukacs, *The Last European War* (Yale University Press, 1976) pp. 161-166, and Joachim Fest, *Hitler* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1974) pp. 655-657.

³ The Committee claimed 800,000 members. Prominent supporters included future Presidents John F Kennedy and Gerald Ford and the movement's best known spokesperson was Charles Lindbergh.

⁴ That Germany declared war on the US, rather than the US declaring war on Germany in explicit support of the UK, still comes as a surprise to many. Tony Blair, for example, is reputed to have been puzzled that this was the case. For this see Robert Harris *The Ghost*, a roman à clef based on Blair, in which the central character, Adam Lang, is an avid reader of history books (like Blair, apparently) and voices these views.

the Soviet Union, eventually settles for a separate peace with Stalin (which nearly happened in 1943, according to some sources) and then turns on a UK exhausted by its efforts in the Mediterranean and Far East. The US commits all its resources to the war against Japan (which it defeats) and bereft of US support there is no second front. In consequence the UK settles with Hitler, too. Thus by 1945 there is no war in Europe, which is completely controlled by Germany, the UK loses its predominant role in the Mediterranean and Stalin carries on building socialism in one country. Mussolini survives as well.

Until recently this would have been speculation of precisely the type seen on obscure late-night TV channels. But, in a world where President Trump can state, when asked to visit a US WW1 cemetery in 2018, 'Who were the good guys in this war?' and can also say that he doesn't understand why the United States intervened on the side of the Allies, a bit more digging around by the author in this terrain would have been welcome. Instead, what we have here is a well-researched account of two spy cases that focusses for much of its length on the internal politics of the FBI.

Simon Matthews' book, Looking for a New England – UK Film, TV and Music 1975-1986, will be published by Oldcastle Books in 2021.