



## On the Homefront

# The Bureau and National Security in World War I

by John Fox, FBI Historian

When war broke out in August 1914, the Bureau of Investigation was six years old and had only 161 full-time employees, 93 percent of whom were Agents. Bureau Chief Alexander Bielaski, a founding member of the



Bureau Chief Alexander B. Bielaski, ca. 1910 FBI

Society, had been in charge for several years and was well adept at handling the Bureau's main priorities – the interstate prostitution law, neutrality violations on the Mexican border, antitrust matters, bankruptcy fraud, and civil rights related matters. The National Security matters the Bureau dealt with largely related to stopping insurgents from using the American southwest as a staging ground for their attempts to overthrow the success of the recent Mexican revolution.

As the war progressed that fall, American neutrality came to be sorely tested. The United States found itself caught between the German and the British intelligence services as they covertly worked to woo the United States to their side, or at least keep the United States from joining with their enemy. In dealing with these threats, the United States began to educate leaders and its people about the threats these adversaries (and even future allies) posed. Such lessons would clearly inform our action in the next world war.

Germany's problems were the most vexing. Unable to buy and ship U.S. war goods across the Atlantic due to the strength of the British Navy, Germany resorted to submarine warfare, sabotage, and subversion. German subs were hobbled as it was diplomatically untenable to target U.S. or other neutral ships. Sabotage and subversion proved very successful as long as the attacks could not be linked back to Germany. Over the course of 1915 and 1916, many ships and tons of cargo were lost to unexplained fires and

accidents by both U.S. and international ships. Sometimes ingenious chemical incendiaries were found in ship holds. Everyone suspected sabotage, but proof took time to develop.

There was a suspicious fire at the munitions transfer point at Black Tom Island in the New York Harbor, which led to an explosion that rocked the area with the force of thousands of tons of TNT. Several other munitions plants were also destroyed by mysterious fires.



APL Chief Badge Chief

Fragmented national security authority meant no organization had clear jurisdiction to investigate such events. The largest response to the unexplained fires and ship explosions came from the very capable, but jurisdictionally limited, New York Police Department's Bomb Squad under Chief Thomas J. Tunney. The U.S. Secret Service was also a significant respondent at first, and its agents helped to unravel a number of German schemes in the New York area. One of their most famous exploits was when Secret Service Agent Frank Burke grabbed the attaché case of a suspected German agent. Burke and his partner had been following George Viereck, a German national; the Bureau would later arrest him under the Foreign Agents Registration Act during World War II. Under Burke's eye, Viereck was joined on an elevated train to Harlem by a well-dressed older man. Burke realized it was Dr. Heinrich Albert, a German consular official who was suspected in a number of covert activities. When Viereck left the train, Albert became engrossed in his reading and almost missed his transfer. He rushed off the train, forgetting his case, and Burke grabbed it just as Albert turned back to get it. With no prosecutable evidence, the U.S. government leaked the contents of Albert's briefcase to the press. The documents clearly showed German efforts to bribe union officials and to use local newspapers to promulgate German propaganda. The documents also hinted of other covert influence operations.

The Bureau of Investigation, meanwhile, pursued its criminal jurisdictions and limited national security responsibilities. The anti-sabotage work was not within its jurisdiction and so limited by the Attorney General. Bureau Agents did pursue a conspiracy by the German-owned Hamburg-American Shipping Company to fuel and resupply German warships in the Atlantic that resulted in several convictions in multiple courts. Ironically,

in one court the conviction wasn't for the fueling and re-supply effort, but the conspiracy to hide their efforts from U.S. customs officials. The Bureau was also heavily invested in the investigation of Werner Horn who planted explosives on the Vanceboro Bridge, a rail passage between Maine and Canada. A Bureau investigation eventually secured his arrest on the federal charge of interstate transportation of explosives without a license. There was enough doubt, however, on whether he was a lone nut or a German provocateur that the German government could deny a connection. Horn would not connect his act to German representatives and was committed to a mental institution after the war; evidence did eventually emerge linking him to German government operations in New York.

In July 1915, Congress authorized the Bureau to conduct investigations for the Secretary of State; the Secret Service would be given similar authority the next year. This allowed the Bureau to get involved in more matters involving German agents. One of the largest investigations conducted under this new authority was the continuing investigation of a plot to blow up the Welland Canal. The canal connects Lakes Erie and Ontario, bypassing Niagara Falls, which ships would have had trouble navigating. In the spring of 1916, a federal grand jury heard evidence gathered by Bureau agents and others against German military attaché Franz von Papen, ship Captain Hans Tauscher, and another German attaché named Wolf von Igel, who served as a secretary to von Igel. The most significant evidence were papers seized from the office of von Igel. Interestingly, von Igel operated out of an office on Wall Street with no obvious connections to German diplomatic facilities or anything else related to German leadership.

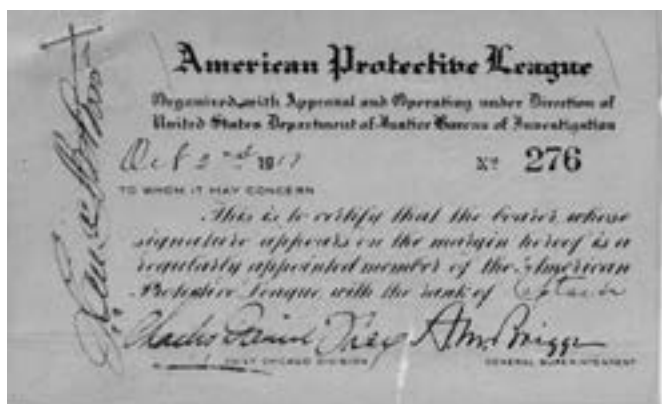
According to press reports upon his arrest in April of 1916, von Igel resisted so much that Bureau Agents had to pull their revolvers. A New York Field Office leader named Joseph Baker assured *the New York Times* that "no effort was made to use [revolver]." The Bureau's exacting investigation showed how von Igel helped funnel money to other German agents. One of the papers seized was a letter in which Tauscher sought to buy 300 pounds of dynamite. Others revealed German covert support for propaganda efforts.



*Wolf von Igel, ca. 1915*  
Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division,  
[LC-DIG-ggbain-21528 (digital file from original negative)]

Another major case involved both Bureau investigative efforts fueled by British Intelligence. It should be remembered that in the early 1900s, nationalist sentiment around the globe was on the rise against older, colonial rulers. India and Ireland were especially chafed under British rule, and with the start of the war, Germany made strong efforts to take advantage of these sentiments. German agents in the United States sought to fund and otherwise provide support to pro-Irish and pro-Indian groups in the United States and elsewhere. The largest of the Indian groups was the Ghadar Party. In the spring of 1917, Bureau agents arrested dozens of party members in connection with their plans to buy and ship arms to India. Investigations showed connections between Ghadar leaders and German officials in California, including the Consul-General Franz Bopp. The bulk of the indictments and the trial focused on violations of the U.S. Neutrality Act, but it was the penultimate court day that captured the headlines. At the summation, one defendant, Ram Singh, pulled out a gun and shot his fellow defendant, Ram Chandra, apparently over financial irregularities revealed in the trial. A quick-thinking U.S. Marshal immediately shot the gunman, preventing further bloodshed. The two leaders now lay dead, beyond the court's justice; the rest of the group was convicted the next day.

After three years of sabotage and subversion, relations between the United States and Germany had declined precipitously. British intelligence, in cases like the Ghadar conspiracy and others, had played a covert role in this, but it was in February 1917, that MI 1c (later MI-6) had its biggest



*American Protective League (APL) membership card*



Ambassador Johann von Bernstorff, ca. 1910 Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, [LC-DIG-ggbain-23615 (digital file from original negative)]

peace settlement if Germany won. The Brits made sure that the telegram fell into American hands, without revealing they had been reading coded German traffic (and U.S. traffic, by implication). This, together with the German resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare and fears of German atrocities, incensed Americans. By early April, the United States had declared war on Germany and Congress passed the Espionage Act, greatly increasing the Bureau's national security authority. The government then worked to mobilize not only the U.S. armed services but the entire economy and the American people to support the war effort.

This expanded jurisdiction during wartime forced the Bureau to go on a hiring spree, almost doubling its number of agents between 1914 and 1915 and almost tripling its staff of support personnel between 1916 and 1917. This expansion was still woefully undermanned for the nation's involvement in a world war. In response, the Bureau took on the assistance of a volunteer organization, the American Protective League or APL. The APL was the brain-child of three Chicago area businessmen who proposed to DOJ in early 1917 that they would rally a volunteer group of citizens to provide the eyes and ears to assist the Bureau in its efforts to ensure German intrigues were quickly identified. The group's numbers grew from its three leaders to tens of thousands in months, with chapters across the nation. Over time, the group became problematic as it did much more than feed leads to the Bureau. Its members began to assume law enforcement powers and play the role of agent and more in dealing with perceived threats. It was immediately shut

success. It was then that a German foreign affairs official named Arthur Zimmerman via coded telegram, proposed that Mexico should ally with Germany if the United States entered the war, and that they would be rewarded in the





*Pier at Black Tom Island, after explosion on July 30, 1916 Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, [LC-DIG-ggbain-22664 (digital file from original negative)] FBI*

down after the November armistice, but elements of it tried to continue to work with the Military Intelligence Division of the Army for a time. Director Hoover had to politely shut down efforts by its veterans to revive it as World War II approached twenty years later.

Over the nineteen months of the U.S. involvement, the Bureau worked tirelessly to deal with its duties, new and old. These duties included the monitoring of enemy aliens, providing investigative aid to the Alien Property Commissioner (whose assistant was a young J. Edgar Hoover), investigations into food hoarding, rounding up of draft evaders, and multiple matters under the new Espionage Act. Together, these and many other matters kept the Bureau's lights on around the clock.

One of the first things the Bureau did upon a declaration of war was to try and secure evidence of earlier German crimes during the neutral years. New York Agents learned that the German officials leaving the country had placed their official papers into the hands of the Swiss consulate and began plotting how to retrieve these papers. Through means unknown, they learned of the layout of the offices and the room in which the documents were secured.

Division Superintendent Charles DeWoody had four Agents rent a room next to the Swiss offices and tunnel through the wall into the back of the locked storeroom. They carefully removed the German archive making it appear

that the official seals were intact. They then hired a local cart man to deliver the papers to the Bureau's office first thing the next morning. Later news stories connected the work to "Patriotic Adventurers," but the intelligence served the Bureau well, and despite German complaints over the compromise of diplomatic secrets, the yield from the Bureau's first bag job served to bolster the Bureau's claims in the proceedings over war-reparations in the 1920s.

Although the Bureau continued its national security related work through the 1920s into the New Deal era, its efforts were limited by American policy and proclivity. Regardless, the die was cast. As the FBI expanded in the public eye by successfully tackling gangsters like John Dillinger, war was again approaching on the European continent. This time, the Bureau and the military were better prepared. They looked back to their experiences in World War I and began to figure out how to work together should war break out again. Through the course of World War II, the Bureau became the tent-pole for defending the homeland, while our Armed Services protected the United States overseas from the threats of the Axis powers. The FBI retains this crucial role today.