

D Day

by Society Historian Ray Batvinis (1972-1997)

“Tangle within, plot and counter-plot, ruse and treachery, cross and double cross, true agent, false agent, double agent, gold and steel, the bomb, the dagger and the firing party, were interwoven in many a texture so intricate as to be incredible yet true.” Winston Churchill

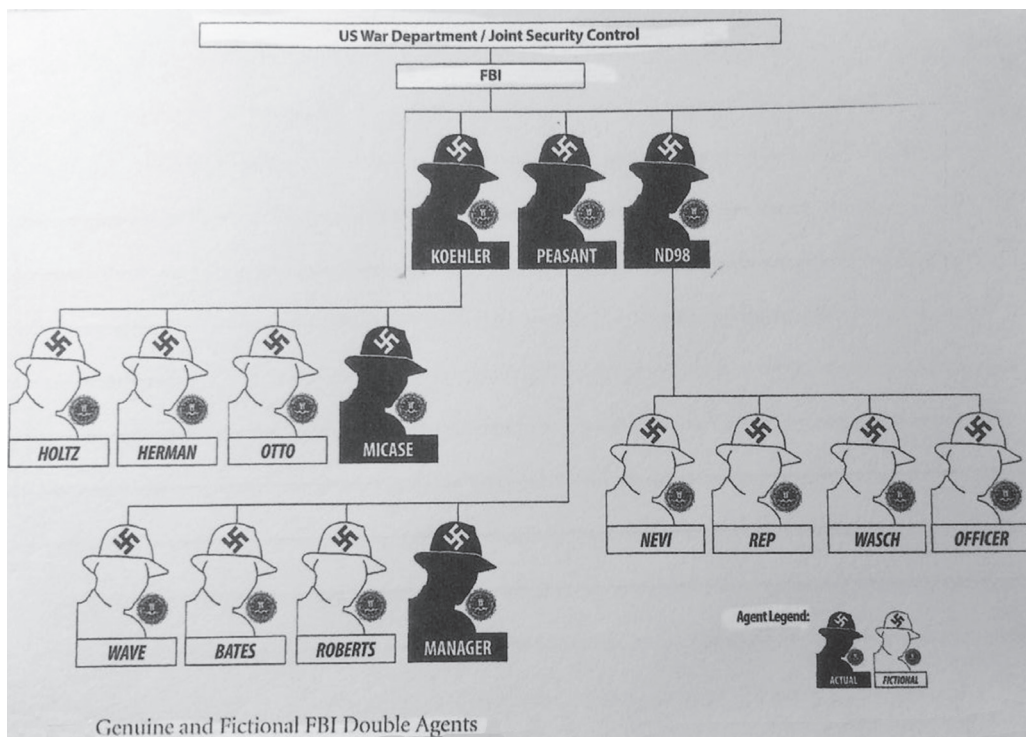
This month marks the seventy-fifth anniversary of the surprise landings by United Nations forces on the beaches of Normandy, France. At day-break on June 6, 1944, Allied soldiers stormed along a fifty-mile fortified coastline onto five beaches forever remembered as Utah, Gold, Sword, Juno, and Omaha. A day that changed the course of history with a butcher's bill totaling more than nine thousand casualties, including more than 4,400 dead. We paid dearly for a thin strip of land; but from that tiny bridgehead, over the next 338 days, the Allies fought across more than seven hundred miles of Europe to Berlin, killing or badly wounding more than a million German soldiers. Writing about World War II, historian Rick Atkinson poignantly remembered that day. “So indeed the day, epochal and soon legendary, and perhaps indeed as on the judgement of a Royal Air Force history ‘the most momentous in the history of war since Alexander set out

for Macedon.’ ”

A summer invasion was no secret. The Germans had known about it since January 1944, when the Big Three leaders Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin, meeting in Tehran, issued a communiqué to the world announcing that an invasion of northwest Europe led by American general, Dwight Eisenhower, would occur later that year. It would be the largest amphibious attack in history and wherever the Allies struck – success or catastrophe, as everyone also knew – were going to be near things.

As Eisenhower assumed his new command in London, he knew the importance of complete secrecy if he was going to construct a strike force of more than one hundred thousand combat ready troops and safely land them along with millions of tons of supplies and equipment on the continent of Europe under German noses. It would also require the most audacious deception scheme in the history of modern warfare. One that would be trans-Atlantic in scope with the FBI playing an important yet little known role.

The goal as recorded by Roger Hesketh, official historian of the deception, was to force the Germans into making “faulty dispositions in North-West Europe before and after (the Normandy invasion).” The idea was to confuse, misdirect and mislead enemy strategists as to where the attack(s) would fall,



Double Agent Chart: Black Agents are actual and White Agents are fictional



Mark Felt circa 1942

thus forcing them to hesitate and in so doing increase the distance between Wehrmacht forces and the target area, thus reducing the rate and size of reinforcements reacting to the invasion. A second and equally important goal was to induce enemy investment of valuable resources and energy building up defenses in areas other than the actual target area, thus lowering their vigilance in France. So critical was the deception to the success of the invasion that planners codenamed it, Bodyguard. The term came from no less a figure than Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who once quipped that “in wartime, truth is so precious she must always be attended by a bodyguard of lies.”

In the United Kingdom, Bodyguard was segmented into two geographical components codenamed FORTITUDE NORTH and FORTITUDE SOUTH. By the spring of 1944, two-and-a-half years since the start of the Allied bombing campaign over Europe, German forces had taken a horrendous pounding. Yet, despite shattering losses, no one had the slightest doubt that the enemy in France and the Low Countries still remained a powerful and determined fighting force. Hitler’s greatest weakness, however, was a complete absence of knowledge about where the blow would fall; an almost fatal intelligence blind spot that forced him to stretch his already strained resources from France’s border with Spain in the south, to the rugged coast of Scandinavia in the north.

FORTITUDE NORTH threatened a strike northeast across the North Sea toward Norway where a quarter-of-a-million German troops nervously readied themselves behind heavily-fortified defenses for an attack that would never come. Putting forth this lie required the creation of the British Fourth Army. Headquartered in Edinburgh, Scotland under the command of General Sir A. F. A. N. Thorne, this huge concentration comprised a XV Corps in Northern Ireland ready and waiting to go together with a 2nd British Corps training in Stirling, a tiny village near Dundee along Scotland’s North Sea coast. There was no Army nor Corps. They were all a complete fiction.

FORTITUDE SOUTH, based hundreds of miles south in Cheshire near the southeast coast of England, also required a

bogus force but with a clever, yet critical, twist in concept and design. Using the existing 21st Army Group, planners conceived a second and much larger fake force called the First U.S. Army Group, known as FUSAG, both poised to strike “somewhere” in France. The idea behind FORTITUDE SOUTH was to signal German commanders that diversionary attacks by the smaller force could occur somewhere in the Normandy region as a prelude to a larger and more powerful assault by FUSAG under the command of the redoubtable American General George S. Patton then lying in wait for the right moment to punch through German defenses at the French port of Pas de Calais, just a short 18 miles across the English Channel. All that was required for FORTITUDE SOUTH planners in the months and weeks before the attack, according to Hesketh, was to convince the enemy that both army groups were in “an equal state of readiness.”

Hitler’s field marshals and generals were no fools. As seasoned and battle-hardened commanders after nearly five years of constant warfare, they were keenly aware of the importance of strategic deception having themselves used such devices many times with great effectiveness. For the Allies then, selling such a massive hoax required meticulous coordination of thousands of moving parts in advance of two objectives. One was ensuring that such an outrageous, yet, plausible lie was clearly delivered and acted upon, and equally essential was guarding against a fatal misstep or slip-up that could leak the truth to the enemy.

In January 1944, the plot began in earnest when German radio intercept stations along the English Channel and North Sea coast began picking up traffic (all bogus) moving back and forth in ever-increasing volumes between previously unknown British, Canadian and American units assembling in the British Isles. The few German aircraft that were still flying and could successfully make it back to base confirmed what the radio interceptors were gathering about large forces readying for action. What they saw in truth, however, were phantom armies – an enormous fabrication made up of tens of thousands of inflatable rubber landing barges, trucks, artillery weapons, tanks and other armored vehicles closely guarded by thousands of equally alert rubberized British “Tommies” and American “GIs.”



New York Navy Yard aerial photo April 1945

Selling these two illusions required British deceivers to implement a third audacious scheme innocuously called

“Special Means,” now remembered as the most essential weapon in spinning the Allied lie. In general, the term refers to all of the channels available to deception planners for passing false intelligence to the Germans. In theory, these avenues were unlimited when, in fact, by the early months of 1944, they had been reduced primarily to an odd collection of German espionage agents who had fallen under British control. Since the start of the war in September 1939, through codebreaking wizardry, encrypted German messages had been broken, permitting British authorities to round up all German spies sent to Great Britain. In exchange for their lives, fifteen of them agreed to serve as double agents, with seven now communicating with their German handlers by wireless radio.

As any experienced investigator will attest – sources are where you find them. In the case of British deception planners, they found a very strange lot indeed. Captured agents included the likes of “Tate,” the Danish fascist nursing a sprained ankle from a bad parachute drop picked up shortly after hobbling into the Cambridgeshire village of Willingham in a “natty blue suit with an unmistakable foreign accent” according to historian, Ben McIntyre. Then there were volunteers like Dusko Popov, codename “Tricycle,” a Serbian playboy; “Treasure,” a multi-lingual journalist and painter with czarist Russian roots named Lily Serguiev; Eddie Chapman also known as “Zigzag,” a talented London thief and flimflammer whose contribution to the invisible war included two amazing forays into occupied Europe under British control; and “Brutus,” a skilled pilot, son of wealth and suave ladies’ man named Roman Czerniewski, whose ferocious devotion to his native Poland was matched only by his hatred for the loathsome Germans and an eerie and unending lust for the dangers of spying. The most legendary member of this strange menagerie, however, was “Garbo,” actually Juan Pujol Garcia, a failed Spanish chicken farmer and fleabag hotel manager, whose brilliant orchestration of almost 20 imaginary sources spread throughout Great Britain was later recognized by both King George VI with the Order of the British Empire and the Order of the Iron Cross from Adolf Hitler. These characters and dozens more, both real and fictitious, with codenames like “Freak,” “Mutt,” “Jeff,” and “Gellatine” spun their web of lies, truths and half-truths under the watchful eye of the Twenty Committee, a top-secret collection of British government and military officials who met weekly throughout the war. Their remit was to decide what information could be safely handed over to the enemy while assuring message consistency in the passage of the overall



Benson House

falsehood. The Twenty (XX) Committee, gave the now legendary name to the greatest strategic operation in the twentieth century – the Double Cross System.

At the start of the American-British wartime intelligence collaboration after the Pearl Harbor attack, military planners agreed on a division of responsibility for strategic deception. The European theater would be controlled by the British, with the United States taking the lead in the Pacific. Day-to-day handling of European-directed sources fell to London Controlling Section (LCS), a small highly-secret counterespionage unit working closely with Joint Security Control (JSC), the War Department’s deception control staff. Throughout the war, the LCS sent specifically-worded messages to JSC in Washington that they wished to pass to the FBI’s National Defense Division for transmittal through its own Double Cross agents to Germany in furtherance of Bodyguard lie.

By 1944, the FBI, while still relatively new to the game of deception, was rapidly learning the tricks of the trade. In February 1940, nearly two years before America entered the war, Bureau agents began directing their first Double Cross agent. He was William Sebold, a German-American and U.S. citizen, who approached the FBI following his extortion-like espionage recruitment in Germany under threat of harm to his family. For the next eighteen months, FBI agents closely watched and recorded while Sebold received stolen classified documents from a web of German spies throughout the U.S. and paid them for their service to the Fatherland. With Sebold’s cooperation, FBI agents exchanged almost seven hundred coded radio messages with Hamburg, Germany from a rundown bungalow situated on a bluff overlooking the tiny hamlet of Centerport, New York on Long Island’s north shore. The “Tramp” case (Sebold’s codename) produced mountains of valuable intelligence including the pinpointing of the many circuitous international banking routes German intelligence relied on to pay their sources, the profound weaknesses in our nation’s industrial security mechanism, and the rolling up of thirty-three German agents in the United States together with the identification of another fifty spies operating in countries around the world. By December 1941, the back of Axis espionage in America had been broken and the last of the German spies in the U.S. had been convicted and sentenced to prison.



Benson House on the National Register of Historic Places



ND98

By 1944, the FBI had acquired three important Double Cross agents codenamed “ND98,” “PEASANT,” and “KOHLER,” all communicating with Germany by wireless. ND98 was Jorge Mosquera, a man in his 40s, born into a merchant family in Argentina. In the 1920s, he moved

to Germany where he found success importing and exporting commercial items to Latin America. By the late 1930s, with the Nazi grip squeezing Germany’s economy and war looming, Mosquera began liquidating his business with plans to return to Buenos Aires. The move was stymied, however, when German police prohibited him from taking his funds to the Western Hemisphere. His money would remain escrowed in a bank until Germany’s final victory, but it would be vastly increased if he agreed to spy for the Nazis. His assignment – make his way to the United States where he could recruit important sources of intelligence and transmit their secrets to Germany via radio. Upon agreeing with a plan that he never intended to carry out, he left Germany in the late summer of 1941, traveling across France and on to Portugal where he boarded a ship bound for South America. At Montevideo, Uruguay, he made his way to the American consulate where he related his story to American officials. Within a week, Edward Tamm, J. Edgar Hoover’s assistant director in charge of investigations and operations, ordered that he be brought to the United States and begin working with the FBI.

Much like the British did with Garbo, FBI agents gradually began constructing a spiderweb around Mosquera, codenamed ND 98, of imaginary informants with access to important wartime secrets. First, there was a colorless bureaucrat codenamed “Wasch” burrowed deep in the bowels of the War Department. Next came “Nevi,” a Washington official handling strategic data about ship movements at the Navy Department. As the months went by, the ND98 network widened further with the addition of two new players, “Osten” and “Rep.” Osten was just one of seventy thousand wartime employees working at the United States Naval Shipyard, more commonly known as the Brooklyn Navy Yard. As the largest ship repair and embarkation depot in the world, it was dispatching huge convoys filled with everything needed to feed the voracious needs of soldiers, sailors and Marines fighting in North Africa, Europe and the Pacific. As for Rep, he was employed with the Republic Aviation Company, a Long Island company, pouring out fighter planes for the Army Air Corps at almost unimaginable levels.

So, why did they work for ND98? The simple answer in the minds of the Germans was – greed. Plaited among the thousands of messages that ND 98 sent to his Axis bosses over the course of the war were plaintive expressions of fear of imminent

arrest by the ever-vigilant FBI and appeals for funds to pay his money-hungry wireless operator and the growing stable of sources who were selling out the Allied cause for a few dollars. As always, Hamburg regularly sent expressions of appreciation, encouragement, and assurances that the funds were on the way. Looking back, it is remarkable to think that despite the long distances and the danger posed to German intelligence by British and U.S. security measures, ND98’s Berlin bosses managed to send him nearly \$47,000 (\$686,000 in March 2019) between February 1942 and March 1944.

Starting in January 1944, ND98 began reporting his sources’ information full blast. Wasch had learned that the War Department had ordered the immediate construction of more than 85,000 landing craft of all sizes and shapes. More than 4,000 contractors and 20,000 sub-contractors had received “urgent instructions to expedite” production with a deadline set for “next spring or summer.” Keeping the Germans guessing also meant passing conflicting descriptions of unexpected “production delays” due to labor strikes which could push back the invasion date. Adding to this headache were reports describing growing British criticism of the “slow” build-up in the United Kingdom of American forces with “little or no training on the organization and tactics of the Germans.” Then on May 4, 1944, a month before D-Day, General Eisenhower, according to Wasch, blew up in fury upon learning that vitally-needed landing craft crucial for an amphibious assault were being redirected to the Pacific. On June 12, six days after the invasion, as Allied troops were struggling to break out of their Normandy toehold, ND98 issued a frantic warning designed to freeze enemy troops in place. Wasch had learned that six army divisions were training in river crossing and bridging operations with “strong indications” of anticipated attacks on Norway, the Balkans and the Mediterranean regions.

Hellmudt Siegfried Goldschmidt, codename PEASANT, was a Dutch Jew living in Holland when he was interrogated and forced into spying for the German Abwehr out of fear for his family’s safety. Fluent in English, Spanish and his native Dutch, Goldschmidt, before the war, had traveled the world for many years working for oil companies and even spent some time in Tulsa, Oklahoma as a bookkeeper for a local drilling company. Dispatched to America through Spain, he eventually made his way to Lisbon, where he turned himself in to the British who sent him on to London for processing. There, he came into the hands of Arthur Thurston, an FBI agent, and Hoover’s representative with the British security and intelligence services. After a series of meetings, Thurston assessed Goldschmidt as a con man, who would be more of a problem than an asset if sent to America. Instead, the British agreed to isolate him in London while FBI radio specialists posing as Goldschmidt and using his Abwehr codename “Muth” signaled Hamburg that he had successfully arrived in America. Some months later the FBI, now posing as MUTH/PEASANT, radioed the wonderful news to Hamburg that he had landed an important position with the Shell Oil Company office in Washington, DC. Once this matter was settled, the case was assigned to Mark Felt, a young headquarters supervisor, who decades later would be exposed as “Deep Throat” in the Watergate investigation.

As the Battle of Normandy approached its climax in August 1944, acute oil shortages began posing a grave concern for the German military machine – one historian later described it as “Germany’s Achilles heal.” Between 1942 and 1944, Berlin’s refineries had produced a meager 23 million tons of oil-based fuels compared with more than 600 million tons refined by the Allied nations during the same period. So serious had the problem become that German commanders found themselves taking radical steps to conserve their steadily dwindling supplies. Essential troop training was drastically curtailed, oxen replaced vehicles in towing Luftwaffe aircraft around runways; factories began turning out vehicles with wood-burning engines; and German chemists found themselves in a desperate race to synthesize oil and lubricants extracted from acorns and grapes.

Muth’s radio messages made the Nazi’s already gloomy hopes for a miracle even more dismal. The U.S. oil industry was not slowing down production, he warned, but rather increasing output even more with “over 700,000 barrels of 100 octane aviation gasoline daily.” A “friend” in the U.S. Patent Office, he added, during a recent visit to Seattle, had discovered that the Boeing Aircraft factory was manufacturing a radically new long-range bomber known as the B-29 with a huge bombload capacity as well as a cargo plane with a larger fuselage. A now frantic Hamburg promptly demanded more details and explanations as to “how they are being navigated across the Atlantic.” Muth steadily became a German morale nightmare for the remainder of the war with an array of reports including strong hints about new and more destructive weapons systems. There was an engine under development by the Pratt and Whitney Company which produced a shocking 3,000 horsepower and experimental rockets capable of taking off in “very short distances.”

By the end of January 1945, JSC had assembled impressive evidence that Peasant’s information, which the Germans had begun passing to their Japanese partners, had been accepted as genuine. Analysis of Axis radio traffic by both British and American codebreakers revealed, in the words of one FBI report, that the “Germans had believed the information reported by Peasant to be correct and had relayed that information to the Japanese, who also believed it to be correct.”

The last of the American Double Cross trio was fifty-year old Alfred Meiler called “Kohler.” He too was a Dutch Jew from the small town of Nijmegen, Holland. Before the First World War, he worked in the family electrical supply business and later as a wartime double agent for the Dutch police against the Germans. During the 1920s he became entangled in right-wing politics and joined the Dutch Nazi party in 1932. From then on, he remained active in party affairs even signing on as a trustee of the Schulverein, the German Language School Society in Holland. By 1940, however, with German forces occupying Holland, Meiler’s fascist loyalties held no weight with the secret police now eagerly rounding up Jews. Afraid, and fearing for his family’s safety, he was dispatched to Argentina after agreeing to spy for German military intelligence. By May 1942, he was in New York laying out his story for the FBI. Over the next three years, Kohler proved to be just as invaluable in the invisible war as ND98 and Peasant. During the run up to the invasion, the FBI directed his attention

toward supporting the lie of the British Fourth Army and the attack on Norway. His messages were full of encounters in bars and restaurants across New York City with American GIs wearing uniform shoulder patches of all kinds including a “five sided blue and gold device of a kind that I had never seen before.” In fact, it was the emblem of the 55th Division, a phantom army division that would become part of the equally non-existent British Fourth Army order of battle. Wasting no time applauding his success, Berlin still urging caution, encouraged him in his search for more such information. In response, he confirmed lies spun by Cobweb and Beetle, two British double agents in Iceland, who had been warning about preparations underway for the imminent departure of American troops to Scotland. In addition to spewing out reams of shoulder patch and troop movement data, he also reinforced Peasant’s lies in the minds of the Germans by describing a chilling vignette from a recent conversation he had with a friend who had visited Kansas. Kohler’s contact carefully watched for hours as American air crews with battle ribbons from the Italian and North African campaign practiced take offs and landings of the new long-range B-29 Superfortress bomber. Where they were bound for no one knew – and his contact dared not ask. Then, in September 1944, Kohler’s new Brooklyn Navy Yard source, a grubby little creature with an insatiable hunger for cash codenamed “Holtz,” was introduced into the network. Until the war’s end, Kohler sent dozens of much-appreciated Holtz-inspired naval secrets flowing across the Atlantic.

The channels of the three Double Cross agents continued to buzz until a few days before General Walter Bedell Smith, Eisenhower’s chief of staff, signed the surrender documents in the wee hours of the morning of May 7, 1945 in a tent at Reims, France. Even as a spearhead of the British Eighth Army were overrunning Hamburg, German intelligence was still sending to them. A last desperate message to Peasant was typical. “Because of present situation we must consider temporary disruption of our connection. (We) will protect your interests in the future as before and will care for you. We thank you many times for that which you have done up to present time.” In the end, Colonel Newman Smith, a key deception speaking for the War Department’s JSC, commenting on the contribution of ND98 really spoke for all three of them and the imaginative FBI agents who directed them when he hailed their “important [role] in the successful operations of the Allies on the Coast of Normandy.”

Author’s Note: For the three and a half years that America fought the European war, FBI personnel, posing as Kohler and ND98, conducted their radio deception from the Benson House, a spacious and remote house located on bluff overlooking Long Island Sound in Wading River, New York. (See *Grapevine* article dated August 2014.) In May 2018, the United States Department of the Interior honored the “Wading River Radio Station” by placing the Benson House on the National Register of Historic Places. As for Peasant, his broadcast from a FBI station established before the war at Camp Springs, Maryland.

Ray Batvinis is the author of *Hoover’s Secret War Against Axis Spies, FBI Counterespionage during WWII*.