Before the Deluge

1 SEEKERS AFTER TRUTH

The secret war started long before the shooting one did. One day in March 1937, a letter dropped onto the desk of Colonel František Moravec, addressed to ‘the chief of the Czechoslovak Intelligence Service’ – which was himself. It began: ‘I offer you my services. First of all I shall state what my possibilities are: 1. The build-up of the German army. (a) the infantry …’ and so on for three closely-typed pages. The Czechs, knowing themselves to be prospective prey of Hitler, conducted espionage with an intensity still absent elsewhere among Europe’s democracies. They initially responded to this approach with scepticism, assuming a Nazi ruse, of which there had been plenty. Eventually, however, Moravec decided to risk a response. After protracted correspondence, the letter-writer whom Prague designated as agent A-54 agreed a rendezvous in the Sudeten town of Kraslice. This was almost wrecked by a gunshot: one of Moravec’s aides was so nervous that he fired the revolver in his pocket, putting a bullet through the colonel’s trouser leg. Tranquillity was fortunately restored before the German visitor arrived, to be hurried to a nearby safe house. He brought with him sheaves of secret documents, which he had blithely carted through the frontier posts in a suitcase. Among the material was a copy of Czechoslovakia’s defence plan which revealed to Moravec a traitor in his own ranks, subsequently hanged. A-54 departed from Kraslice still nameless, but richer by 100,000 Reichsmarks. He promised to call again, and indeed provided high-grade information for the ensuing three years. Only much later was he identified as Paul Thummel, a thirty-four-year-old officer of the Abwehr intelligence service.

Such an episode was almost everyday fare for Moravec. He was a passionate, fiercely energetic figure of middling height. A keen game-player, especially of chess, he spoke six languages fluently, and could read
some Latin and Greek. In 1914 he was an eighteen-year-old student at Prague University, with aspirations to become a philosopher. Conscripted into the Austro-Hungarian army, like most Czechs he was unwilling to die for the Hapsburgs, and once at the front seized the first opportunity to desert to the Russians. He was wounded under their flag in Bulgaria, and finished the war with a Czech volunteer force on the Italian front. When Czechoslovakia became an independent state he gratefully cast off these tangled loyalties, to become an officer in its new army. He joined the intelligence branch in 1934, and took over as its chief three years later. Moravec learned the trade mostly from spy stories bought off bookstalls, and soon discovered that many real-life intelligence officers traffic in fiction: his predecessor’s supposed informants proved to have been figments of the man’s imagination, a cloak for embezzlement.

The colonel devoted much of his service’s resources to talent-spotting in Germany for informants, each network painstakingly ring-fenced. He set up a payday loan company inside the Reich, targeted at military and civil service clients. Within a year ninety of the bank’s representatives were roaming Germany, most bona fide employees, but some of them intelligence personnel who identified borrowers with access to information, vulnerable to bribery or blackmail. The Czechs also pioneered new technology – microdot photography, ultra-violet rays, secret writing and state-of-the-art wirelesses. Moravec was plentifully funded, a recognition of his role in his nation’s front line, and was thus able to pay a Luftwaffe major named Salm 5,000 Reichsmarks – about £500 – as a retainer, and afterwards the huge sum of a million Czech crowns – £7,500 – for Göring’s air force order of battle. Salm, however, flaunted his new-found wealth, and found himself arrested, tried and beheaded. Meanwhile other people’s spies were not idle in Czechoslovakia: Prague’s security officers arrested 2,900 suspects in 1936 alone, most of them allegedly acting for Germany or Hungary.

Every major nation probed the secrets of others in the same fashion, using both overt and covert means. After Russia’s Marshal Tukhachevksy visited Britain in April 1934, he conveyed personally to Stalin a GRU agent’s description of the RAF’s new Handley Page Hampden bomber, detailing its Bristol and Rolls-Royce engine variants and attaching a sketch showing its armament:
The Abwehr somehow laid hands on the 1935 fixture list of an ICI plant’s football team, which in the course of the season played at most of the company’s other British factories; Berlin thus triumphantly pinpointed several chemical installations the Luftwaffe had hitherto been unaware of. The Australian aviator Sidney Cotton conducted some pioneering aerial photography over Germany at the behest of MI6’s Wing-Commander Fred Winterbotham. The summer roads of Europe teemed with young couples on touring holidays, some of whom were funded by their respective intelligence services, and displayed an unromantic interest in airfields. MI6 sent an RAF officer, designated as Agent 479, together with a secretary to assist his cover, on a three-week spin around Germany, somewhat hampered by the facts that Luftwaffe station perimeters seldom adjoined autobahns, and neither visitor spoke German. The airman had originally planned to take his sister, who was fluent, but her husband refused consent.

In the Nazis’ interests, in August 1935 Dr Hermann Görtz spent some weeks touring Suffolk and Kent on a Zündapp motorbike, pinpointing RAF bases with pretty young Marianne Emig riding in his sidecar. But Emig tired of the assignment, or lost her nerve, and Görtz, a forty-five-year-old lawyer from Lübeck who had learned English from his governess, felt obliged to escort her back to Germany. He then returned to collect a camera and other possessions – including plans of RAF Manston – that the couple had left behind in a rented Broadstairs bungalow. Unluckily for the aspiring masterspy, the police had already secured these incriminating items, following a tip from the spy-conscious landlord. Görtz found himself arrested at Harwich and sentenced to four years’ imprisonment. He was released and deported in February 1939; more will be heard of Hermann Görtz.

For probing neighbours’ secrets, every nation’s skirmishers were its service officers posted to embassies abroad. Prominent among Berlin military attachés was Britain’s Colonel Noel Mason-MacFarlane. ‘Mason-Mac’ was shrewd but bombastic. One day in 1938, he startled an English visitor to his flat by pointing out of the window to the spot where Hitler would next day view the Wehrmacht’s birthday parade. ‘Easy rifle shot,’ said the colonel laconically. ‘I could pick the bastard off from here as easy as wink-
ing, and what’s more I’m thinking of doing it … With that lunatic out of the way we might be able to get some sense into things.’ Mason-MacFarlane did nothing of the sort, of course. In his temperate moments he forged close friendships with German officers, and transmitted to London a stream of warnings about Nazi intentions. But the vignette provides an illustration of the role played by fantasy in the lives of intelligence officers, tottering on a tightrope between high purpose and low comedy.

The US government was said by scornful critics to possess no intelligence arm. In a narrow sense, this was so – it did not deploy secret agents abroad. At home, J. Edgar Hoover’s Federal Bureau of Investigation was responsible for America’s internal security. For all the FBI’s trumpeted successes against gangsters and intensive surveillance of the Communist Party of the USA and trades unions, it knew little of the army of Soviet spies roaming America, and did nothing to dissuade hi-tech corporations from booming their achievements. German military attaché Gen. Friedrich von Bötticher observed boisterously about his years of service in Washington: ‘It was so easy, the Americans are so broad-minded, they print everything. You don’t need any intelligence service. You have only to be industrious, to see the newspapers!’ In 1936 Bötticher was able to forward to Berlin detailed reports on US rocket experiments. An American traitor sold the Germans blueprints of one of his country’s most cherished technological achievements, the Norden bombsight. The general urged the Abwehr not to bother to deploy secret agents in the US, to preserve his hosts’ faith in Nazi goodwill.

Intelligence agencies overvalue information gained from spies. One of the many academics conscripted into Britain’s wartime secret service observed disdainfully: ‘[MI6] values information in proportion to its secrecy, not its accuracy. They would attach more value … to a scrap of third-rate and tendentious misinformation smuggled out of Sofia in the fly-buttons of a vagabond Rumanian pimp than to any intelligence deduced from a prudent reading of the foreign press.’ American foreign correspondents and diplomats abroad provided Washington with a vision of the world no less plausible than that generated by Europe’s spies. Major Truman Smith, the long-serving US military attaché in Berlin and a warm admirer of Hitler, formed a more accurate picture of the Wehrmacht’s order of battle than did MI6.

America’s naval attachés focused on Japan, their most likely foe, though they were often reduced to photographing its warships from passing passenger liners and swapping gossip in the Tokyo attachés’ club. As secre-
tary of state in 1929, Henry Stimson had closed down his department’s ‘Black Chamber’ codebreaking operation, reasoning like many of his fellow-countrymen that a nation which faced no external threat could forgo such sordid instruments. Nonetheless both the army and navy, in isolation and fierce competition, sustained small codebreaking teams which exerted themselves mightily. The achievement of William Friedman, born in Russia in 1891 and educated as an agriculturalist, whose army Signals Intelligence Service team led by former mathematics teacher Frank Rowlett replicated the advanced Japanese ‘Purple’ diplomatic cipher machine and broke its key in September 1940, was all the more remarkable because America’s cryptanalysts had shoestring resources. They made little attempt to crack German ciphers, because they lacked means to do so.

The Japanese spied energetically in China, the US and the European South-East Asian empires, which they viewed as prospective booty. Their agents were nothing if not committed: in 1935 when police in Singapore arrested a local Japanese expatriate on suspicion of espionage, such was the man’s anxiety to avoid causing embarrassment to Tokyo that he followed the E. Phillips Oppenheim tradition and swallowed prussic acid in his cell. The Chinese Nationalists headed by Chiang Kai-shek sustained an effective counter-intelligence service to protect his dictatorship from domestic critics, but across Asia Japanese spies were able to gather information almost unhindered. The British were more interested in countering internal communist agitation than in combating prospective foreign invaders. They found it impossible to take seriously ‘the Wops of the East’, as Churchill called the Japanese, or ‘the little yellow dwarf slaves’, in the words of the head of the Foreign Office.

Britain’s diplomats were elaborately careless about protecting their secrets, adhering to the conventions of Victorian gentlemen. Robert Cecil, who was one of them, wrote: ‘An embassy was an ambassador’s house party; it was unthinkable that one of the guests could be spying on the others.’ As early as 1933 the Foreign Office received a wake-up call, albeit unheeded: after one of its staff put his head in a gas oven, he was revealed to have been selling British ciphers to Moscow. Next a clerk, Captain John King, was found to have been funding an American mistress by peddling secrets. In 1937 a local employee in Britain’s Rome embassy, Francesco Constantini, was able to rifle his employer’s papers for the benefit of the Italian secret service, because the ambassador assumed that one could trust one’s servants. At that period also, Mussolini’s men read some British codes: not all Italians were the buffoons their enemies supposed. In 1939,
when Japanese intelligence wanted the codebooks of the British consulate in Taipei, its officers easily arranged for a Japanese employee to become night-duty man. During the ensuing six months Tokyo’s agents repeatedly accessed the consulate safe, its files and codebooks.

Yet nowhere in the world was intelligence wisely managed and assessed. Though technological secrets were always useful to rival nations, it is unlikely that much of the fevered secret political and military surveillance told governments more than they might have gleaned from a careful reading of the press. Endemic rivalries injured or crippled collaboration between intelligence agencies. In Germany and Russia, Hitler and Stalin diffused power among their secret policemen, the better to concentrate mastery in their own hands. Germany’s main agency was the Abwehr, its title literally meaning ‘security’, though it was responsible for both intelligence-gathering abroad and counter-espionage at home. A branch of the armed forces, it was directed by Admiral Wilhelm Canaris. When Guy Liddell, counter-espionage director of MI5 and one of its ablest officers, later strove to explain the Abwehr’s incompetence, he expressed a sincere belief that Canaris was in the pay of the Russians.

The Nazis also had their own security machine, the Reichssicherheitshauptamt or RSHA, directed by Ernst Kaltenbrunner within the empire of Himmler. This embraced the Gestapo secret police and its sister counter-intelligence branch the Sicherheitsdienst or SD, which overlapped the Abwehr’s activities in many areas. A key figure was Walter Schellenberg, Reinhard Heydrich’s aide: Schellenberg later took over the RSHA’s foreign intelligence-gathering service, which subsumed the Abwehr in 1944. High Command and diplomatic codebreaking activities were conducted by the Chiffrierabteilung, colloquially known as OKW/Chi, and the army had a large radio intelligence branch that eventually became OKH/GdNA. Göring’s Air Ministry had its own cryptographic operation, as did the Kriegsmarine. Economic intelligence was collected by the WiRuAmt, and Ribbentrop’s Foreign Ministry gathered reports from embassies abroad. Guy Liddell wrote crossly: ‘Under our system of government there was nothing to stop the Germans from getting any information they required.’ But the elaborate Nazi intelligence and counter-espionage machines were far more effective in suppressing domestic opposition than in exploiting foreign sources, even when they heard something useful from them.

France’s intelligence departments enjoyed a lowly status and correspondingly meagre budgets. Pessimism overlaid upon ignorance caused
them consistently to overstate German military strength by at least 20 per cent. František Moravec believed that politics crippled French security policy as war loomed: ‘Their desire to “know” seemed to decrease proportionately as the Nazi danger increased.’ Moravec the Czech found his French counterparts half-hearted colleagues, though he returned from one inter-Allied conference with a present from a famous French criminologist, Professor Locarde of Lyons: a chemical developer which proved useful for exposing secret writing.

Since the beginning of time, governments had been able to intercept each other’s communications only when spies or accidents of war physically diverted messages into their hands. Now, however, everything was different. Wireless communication was a science slightly older than the twentieth century, but thirty years elapsed before it became a universal phenomenon. Then, during the 1930s, technological breakthroughs prompted a global explosion of transmissions. The ether hummed, whined and crackled as messages private, commercial, military, naval, diplomatic traversed nations and oceans. It became indispensable for governments and their generals and admirals to communicate operational orders and information by radio, to every subordinate, ship and formation beyond reach of a landline. Making such exchanges secure demanded nice judgements. There was a trade-off between the speed at which a signal could be dispatched and received, and the subtlety of its encryption. It was impracticable to provide front-line army units with ciphering machines, and thus instead they employed so-called hand- or field-ciphers, of varying sophistication – the German army used a British-derived system called Double Playfair.

For the most secret messages, the only almost unbreakable code was that based upon a ‘one-time pad’, a name that reflected its designation: the sender employed a unique combination of letters and/or numbers which became intelligible only to a recipient pre-supplied with the identical formula. The Soviets especially favoured this method, though their clerks sometimes compromised it by using a one-time pad more than once, as the Germans found to their advantage. From the 1920s onwards, some of the major nations started to employ ciphers which were deemed impregnable if correctly used, because messages were processed through electrically-powered keyboard machines which scrambled them into multi-millions of combinations. The magnitude of the technological challenge posed by an enemy’s machine-encrypted signals did not deter any nation from striving to read them. This became the most important intelligence objective of the Second World War.
The brightest star of the Deuxième Bureau, France's intelligence service, was Capitaine Gustave Bertrand, head of the cryptanalytical branch in the army’s Section des Examens, who had risen from the ranks to occupy a post that no ambitious career officer wanted. One of his contacts was a Paris businessman named Rodolphe Lemoine, born Rudolf Stallman, son of a rich Berlin jeweller. In 1918 Stallman adopted French nationality; simply because he loved espionage as a game in its own right, he began to work for the Deuxième. In October 1931 he forwarded to Paris an offer from one Hans-Thilo Schmidt, brother of a German general, to sell France information about Enigma in order to dig himself out of a financial hole. Bertrand accepted, and in return for cash Schmidt delivered copious material about the machine, together with its key settings for October and November 1932. Thereafter he remained on the French payroll until 1938. Since the French knew that the Poles were also seeking to crack Enigma, the two nations agreed a collaboration: Polish cryptanalysts focused on the technology, while their French counterparts addressed enciphered texts. Bertrand also approached the British, but at the outset they showed no interest.

Britain’s codebreakers had acquired an early-model commercial Enigma as early as 1927, and examined it with respect. Since then, they knew that it had been rendered much more sophisticated by the inclusion of a complex wiring pattern known as a Steckerbrett, or plugboard. It now offered a range of possible positions for a single letter of 159 million million million. That which human ingenuity had devised, it was at least theoretically possible that human ingenuity might penetrate. In 1939, however, no one for a moment imagined that six years later intelligence snatched from the airwaves would have proved more precious to the victors, more disastrous for the losers, than every report made by all the spies of the warring nations.

2 THE BRITISH: GENTLEMEN AND PLAYERS

The reputation of MI6 was unmatched by that of any other secret service. Though Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini and Japan’s generals shared a scepticism, or even scorn, about the old lion’s fitness to fight, they viewed its spies with extravagant respect, indeed cherished a belief in their omniscience. British prowess in clandestine activity dated back to the sixteenth century at least. Francis Bacon wrote in his History of the Reign of King Henry VII: ‘As for his secret Spials, which he did employ both at home and abroad, by them
to discover what Practises and Conspiracies were against him, surely his Case required it. Queen Elizabeth I’s Sir Francis Walsingham was one of history’s legendary spymasters. Much later came the romances of Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*, of John Buchan’s Richard Hannay, of dashing ‘clubland heroes’ who played chess for England with a thousand live pieces across a board that spanned continents. A wartime British secret servant observed: ‘Practically every officer I met in that concern, at home and abroad, was, like me, imagining himself as Hannay.’ The great Danish physicist Niels Bohr told the scientific intelligence officer R.V. Jones that he was happy to cooperate with the British secret service because ‘it was run by a gentleman.’

British intelligence had enjoyed a good Great War. The Royal Navy’s codebreakers, such men as Dillwyn Knox and Alastair Denniston, labouring in the Admiralty’s Room 40, provided commanders with a wealth of information about the motions of the German High Seas Fleet. The decryption and public revelation of Berlin’s 1917 Zimmermann Telegram, urging the Mexicans to take aggressive action against the United States, played a critical role in bringing the Americans into the war. For two years after the November 1918 Armistice, the secret service was deeply involved in the Allies’ unsuccessful attempt to reverse the outcome of the Russian Revolution. Even after this was abandoned, the threat from international communism remained the foremost preoccupation of British espionage and counter-espionage.

Yet amid the inter-war slump, funding was squeezed. MI6 mouldered, to an extent little understood by either Britain’s friends or foes. Hugh Trevor-Roper, the historian who became one of its wartime officers, wrote: ‘Foreign intelligence services envied the British secret service; it was their idealised model … It enjoyed the reputation of an invisible, implacable force, like the Platonic world-spirit, operating everywhere. To the Nazi government, it was at the same time a bogey and an ideal … The reality … was rather different.’ MI6’s senior officers were men of moderate abilities, drawn into the organisation by the lure of playing out a pastiche of Kipling’s ‘Great Game’, and often after earlier careers as colonial policemen.

They masqueraded as passport control officers in embassies abroad, or shuffled paper in the service’s austere – indeed, frankly squalid – headquarters beside St James’s Park underground station, in Broadway Buildings, a place of threadbare carpets and unshaded lightbulbs. MI6 sustained a quirky tradition of paying its staff tax-free and in cash, but so small a pittance that a private income was almost essential for officers who aspired
to an upper-middle-class lifestyle, which meant all of them. Though its budget was progressively increased from £180,000 in 1935 to £500,000 in 1939, few graduates entered the service, because its bosses did not want them. MI6, in the view of one practitioner, was designed merely to receive intelligence rather than actively to procure it. It was run by a coterie of anti-intellectual officers who saw their principal, if not sole, task as that of combating revolutionary communism. The shift of emphasis to monitoring Nazis and fascists during the late pre-war period caused great difficulties.

Some recruits of that period proved ill-suited to the essential nastiness of espionage. Lt. Cmdr Joseph Newill, a retired sailor posted to Scandinavia in 1938 on the strength of speaking Norwegian, wailed to London: ‘I doubt whether I have the natural guile so essential for this work!’ Newill complained that his role involved much more hard labour than he had expected. He told his station chief petulantly: ‘I am 52 and I am not going to work myself to death at my time of life.’ But he was kept in the job, and contrived to meet Broadway’s undemanding standards. MI6’s Shanghai station chief, Harry Steptoe, operated under cover as vice-consul. A jaunty little cock-sparrow figure who affected a moustache and monocle, he puzzled a foreign diplomat by his appearance at receptions in a lovat-green suit adorned with gold braid. Was this, demanded the diplomat, the full-dress uniform of the British secret service? When the Japanese interned Steptoe in 1942, they dismissed the possibility that such a comic figure could be a spymaster, and instead subjected to brutal interrogation a hapless British Council representative, whose field of knowledge was exclusively cultural.

Broadway struggled to secure intelligence from the Continent. In 1936 a new MI6 department was formed to monitor Germany and Italy. Z Section was run by Claude Dansey, a former imperial soldier who bore a haversack groaning with blimpish prejudices, among them a loathing for Americans. It became an almost independent fiefdom, which operated under commercial cover from offices in Bush House in The Strand. Its sources were mostly elderly retreads such as the Lithuanian Baron William de Ropp, who for more than a decade extracted from the British £1,000 a year – a handsome competence – in return for fragments of German political gossip. The Nazis were well aware of de Ropp’s role, and fed him what they wanted London to hear. In August 1938 the Baron decided that his secret life had become too fraught, and wisely retired to Switzerland.

Naval engineer Dr Karl Kruger’s story had a darker ending. From 1914 to 1939 he fed some good information to the British on a cash-and-carry
basis, but vanished from sight a month before the outbreak of war. His file at Broadway was eventually marked ‘Agent presumed “dead”’. This was not surprising, because Kruger – like most of MI6’s German informants – was controlled by its Hague station, where one of the local staff, Folkert van Koutrik, was on the Abwehr’s payroll. The service’s best pre-war humint source was Wolfgang Gans Edler zu Putlitz, press attaché at the German embassy in London, an aristocrat and homosexual. He was run by Klop Ustinov – father of the actor Peter – a Russian-born journalist who lost his newspaper job in 1935 because of his Jewishness. When Putlitz was transferred to The Hague in 1938, Ustinov followed him at MI6’s behest. After Folkert van Koutrik later betrayed the British operation in Holland, Putlitz hastily sought asylum in London.

The flow of intelligence from the Continent was thin. The Air Ministry complained about the paucity of material on the use of aircraft in the Spanish Civil War, an important issue for planners. Britain’s ambassador in Berlin, Sir Nevile Henderson, shared with his fellow-diplomats a disdain for espionage which caused him to refuse diplomatic status to Broadway’s ‘Passport Control Officers’. Even where MI6 tried to provide German informants with wireless sets, most were reluctant to take them, because discovery of such equipment by the Gestapo ensured a death sentence for the possessor.

Very occasionally, among the mountain of rubbish that accumulated in Broadway’s files there was a pearl. In the spring of 1939 an agent code-named ‘the Baron’, with good social connections in East Prussia, reported to his handler Harry Carr in Helsinki that the Germans were secretly negotiating with Stalin. He followed this up with a further missive in June, asserting that talks between Berlin and Moscow were making good progress. Yet this sensational pointer to the looming Nazi–Soviet Pact, which afterwards proved to have come from gossip among aristocrats working in the German Foreign Ministry, was dismissed in Broadway. To MI6’s senior officers, a devils’ pact between Stalin and Hitler seemed a fantastic notion. An authentic scoop was missed; first, because MI6, like most intelligence organisations, had an instinctive and usually prudent scepticism about its own sources; second, because what ‘the Baron’ reported ran contrary to his employers’ expectations. At that time, and indeed throughout the war, MI6 had no internal machinery for analysing incoming intelligence, though its chiefs could point out that the Axis Powers lacked this also.

Czechoslovakia and Poland occupied the front line in the European confrontation with Hitler. MI6 showed little interest in collaboration with
their intelligence services until March 1939, when the strategic picture changed dramatically: the British and French governments gave a security guarantee to Poland. This galvanised Broadway.

On 25 July, a British delegation composed of a naval intelligence officer together with Alastair Denniston, director of the Government Code & Cypher School, and Dillwyn Knox, one of its foremost codebreakers, joined France’s Gustave Bertrand – himself no cryptographer, but a notable facilitator and diplomat – at an exploratory meeting with their Polish counterparts led by Col. Gwido Langer, held at their cryptographic centre in the Kabackie woods near Pyry, south of Warsaw. The first day’s talks, conducted in mixed French and German, went very badly. Knox, for reasons unknown, was in a vile temper, and highly sceptical that the Poles had anything to tell worth hearing. He seemed unable to understand the methods by which they claimed to have achieved the breakthrough which had enabled them to read some German naval traffic. All the parties present were fencing, to discover each other’s state of knowledge. Warsaw’s decision to involve the British was prompted by new difficulties that had frustrated their own codebreakers since the Germans on 1 January adopted an enhanced stecker board, for their Enigmas, with ten plugs instead of seven. On the second day, 26 July, the conference’s atmosphere was transformed for the better. In the basement of the building the Poles showed off their ‘bomby’, primitive computing devices designed to test multiple mathematical possibilities. Then they produced a coup de théâtre: they presented both visiting delegations with mimicked copies of the Enigma built by their own men. Knox’s scepticism crumbled, and the meeting ended in a mood of goodwill and mutual respect. Everybody at Broadway recognised the importance of the Poles’ gesture to their allies as a contribution to the secret struggle against the Nazis. Marian Rejewski, a former mathematics student at Warsaw University who had joined the Kabackie woods team back in 1932, is today acknowledged as a pioneer among those who laid bare the secrets of Enigma, even if it fell to others, in Britain, to advance and exploit Rejewski’s achievement.

Stewart Menzies, then deputy chief of MI6, was so impressed by the outcome of the Polish trip that he turned up in person at Victoria station to greet Gustave Bertrand – and to inspect the mimicked Enigma. Knox sent the Poles a gift of scarves, decorated with images of Derby runners, with the letter thanking his hosts for their ‘co-operation and patience’. At or around this time also, the Poles provided the British with five of the Enigma’s eight alternative rotors. A chasm still yawned, however, between
understanding how the machine worked, and achieving the ability to read its traffic. Though a trickle of German messages were broken by human ingenuity during the winter of 1939–40, traffic was breached on an industrial scale only from 1941 onwards, following the creation of revolutionary electro-mechanical technology. Nonetheless, the assistance of the French and Poles dramatically accelerated progress at the GC&CS, now evacuated from London to a safer country home. Physical possession of the enemy’s encryption instrument enabled its cryptanalysts to grasp the mountainous challenge they must overcome.

Until 1939, and in large measure for two years thereafter, British intelligence remained dependent for its view of the world upon humint – reports from informants abroad. How well did MI6 fulfil its responsibility to brief the government about the mounting threat from Nazi Germany – ‘Twelveland’ in Broadway parlance? It produced many reports arguing that Hitler’s long-term ambitions lay in the East, and this was fundamentally correct. Unfortunately for its credibility, however, in 1940 Germany chose first to seek to dispose of the Western democracies. MI6 was in no doubt that Hitler was rearming fast, but insistently emphasised the weakness of the industrial base from which he aspired to make war.

Responsibility for gathering economic data rested with the Industrial Intelligence Centre, an offshoot administered since 1934 by the Foreign Office, but run by the veteran secret service officer Major Desmond Morton. During the ‘wilderness years’, Morton passed to Winston Churchill – with the sanction of prime minister Stanley Baldwin – details of German rearmament which empowered the unheeded prophet to cry forth warnings to the world. Ironically, the Major wildly overstated the growth of Hitler’s military machine: Morton never had much grasp of economics in general, nor of the Nazi economy in particular.

But modern historians critical of pre-war British intelligence failures miss some important points. In those days few people of any nationality understood economic analysis. The IIC was correct in judging that Germany was ill-prepared to conduct a long struggle, and was rendered vulnerable by its dependence on imported commodities and especially oil. The German economy, as Adam Tooze has shown, was not strong enough to meet the huge challenge Hitler sought to fulfil, of conquering the most advanced societies on earth. Germany’s GDP was no larger than Britain’s, and her people’s per capita incomes were lower. In 1939, Hitler’s expenditures on armaments had reduced his country’s finances to a parlous condition. But it was asking too much of any intelligence service
to gauge the potential of German industry under the stimulus of conflict: to the very end of World War II, the best brains in the Allied nations failed fully to achieve this. MI6 could not be expected to predict Hitler’s conquests, which dramatically enhanced his access to oil, raw materials and slave labour.

On the military side, neither MI6 nor the service departments learned much about the new technology and tactics being developed by Britain's enemies. Nor about their limitations: they wildly overrated the Luftwaffe’s ability to devastate Britain’s cities. In 1938, Broadway reported that the Germans had 927 first-line bombers capable of mounting 720 sorties a day and dropping 945 tons of ordnance (this was an exaggeration of 50 per cent), and projections of likely casualties were even more inflated. War Office appreciations of the German army were equally mistaken, especially in estimating its potential mobilised strength. These suggested in 1939 that Hitler was already master of the largest war machine his nation's resources could bear. Rearmament, coupled with vast public expenditure, ‘had taxed the endurance of the German people and the stability of the economic system to a point where any further effort can only be achieved at the risk of a breakdown of the entire structure’.

A February 1939 Strategical Appreciation by the chiefs of staff, drafted by the Joint Planning Committee, asserted that Britain could survive a long war better than Germany. This was true, but the chiefs said nothing about the danger that it could meanwhile lose a short one. Moreover, they never pressed the cabinet to acknowledge the shocking weakness of Britain's Far East empire. The three services’ intelligence branches had no contact with each other, and there were no joint staffs.

As for politics, an MI6 officer wrote in a November 1938 report for the Foreign Office: ‘Not even Hitler’s intimates, according to one of them, knows if he would really risk world war.’ A few months later, the service’s credibility was severely injured by its issue of warnings that Germany intended imminently to strike at Western Europe, starting with Holland. Embarrassment was increased by the fact that the Foreign Office forwarded this alarm call to the US government. One of the British recipients, senior civil servant Sir George Mounsey, delivered a blast against MI6 which echoed around Whitehall. The Foreign Office’s standing was damaged, he said, by acting on the basis of ‘a highly sensational and highly disturbing kind of information which [MI6] are unable to guarantee.’ Mounsey was dismissive of all covert sources, agents whose rumour-mongering had prompted Broadway's warning: ‘They have a secret mission and they must
justify it … If nothing comes to hand for them to report, they must earn their pay by finding something … Are we going to remain so attached to reliance on secret reports, which tie our hands in all directions?’ Mounsey had his own agenda: to sustain the policy of appeasement adopted by Neville Chamberlain and Lord Halifax, whom he admired prodigiously. His views nonetheless reflected a general scepticism in high places about Broadway’s performance.

Gladwyn Jebb of the Foreign Office, often a critic of MI6, on this occasion leapt to its defence. While acknowledging the frustrations of dealing with secret organisations, he said that he could not forget that its officers ‘did warn us of the September [1938 Munich] crisis, and they did not give any colour to the ridiculous optimism that prevailed up to the rape of Czechoslovakia, of which our official [diplomatic] reports did not give us much warning’. In December 1938 Broadway offered a sound character sketch of Germany’s Führer, at a time when many British diplomats and politicians still deluded themselves that he was a man they could do business with. ‘Among his characteristics,’ asserted the MI6 report, ‘are fanaticism, mysticism, ruthlessness, cunning, vanity, moods of exaltation and depression, fits of bitter and self-righteous resentment, and what can only be termed a streak of madness; but with it all there is great tenacity of purpose, which has often been combined with extraordinary clarity of vision. He has gained the reputation of being always able to choose the right moment and right method for “getting away with it”. In the eyes of his disciples, and increasingly in his own, “the Führer is always right”. He has unbounded self-confidence, which has grown in proportion to the strength of the machine he has created; but it is a self-confidence which has latterly been tempered less than hitherto with patience and restraint.’

It is easy to catalogue the shortcomings of MI6. Like most of its sister services on the Continent, in 1939 it commanded little respect in high places, and had small influence on policy-making. It seems necessary to go beyond this, however, and pose the question: what might its spies have usefully discovered, granted more resources and cleverer people? The likely answer is: not much. MI6’s reporting was matched by a daily bombardment of newspaper headlines, both showing beyond peradventure that Germany was rearming. More accurate and detailed information about Hitler’s armed forces would have been useful to the War Office and Downing Street, but the critical issue, the vital uncertainty, was not that of Germany’s capabilities, but rather that of its intentions.
It seems quite misplaced to blame wrong or inadequate intelligence for the calamitous failure of Britain and France to deal effectively with the Nazis. Both nations correctly assessed the options at Hitler’s disposal for onslaughts East or West. MI6 can scarcely be held responsible for failing to anticipate exactly where or when he would attack, because he himself was an opportunist who reserved his decisions until the last moment. Sir Alexander Cadogan, permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office, wrote much later: ‘We were daily inundated by all sorts of reports. It just happened that these were correct; we had no means of evaluating their reliability at the time of their receipt. (Nor was there much that we could do about it!)’ Rather than a failure of intelligence, what mattered was the democracies’ failure of will – the refusal to acknowledge that the Nazis constituted an irreconcilable force for evil, which the very survival of European civilisation made it essential to destroy, rather than to bargain with.

Most of Hitler’s opponents inside Germany, and indeed across Europe, were communists who considered the Russians the only people both willing and able to challenge fascism. Everything said and done by the British and French governments before the outbreak of war confirmed anti-Nazis in that view. Thus, people who wished to contribute to undoing Hitler offered information to the agents of Moscow much more readily than to those of London or Paris. It was anti-Nazis’ poor opinion of Neville Chamberlain that made them reluctant to look to his country as a shield against Hitler, not their perception of MI6.

It is far more plausible to argue that Britain’s diplomats should have exposed the dictators’ intentions than to suggest that its spies might have done so. In peacetime, good intelligence officers can assist their governments to grasp the economic, military and technological capabilities of prospective enemies, but it is unusual for a secret service to provide a reliable crib about their intentions. Top diplomats ought to have been cleverer than intelligence officers. Their training, experience and access to sources should have empowered them to assess the world with greater wisdom than Broadway’s old soldiers. It seems far more discreditable that Henderson, Britain’s ambassador in Berlin, was willing for so long to think well of Hitler, than that MI6 with its meagre resources was unable to tell the government what the Führer would do next. If a German anti-Nazi had turned up on Henderson’s embassy doorstep, offering inside information, it is likely that he would have been sent packing.

Admiral Sir Hugh Sinclair – ‘C’, as the head of the secret service was always known – died suddenly in November 1939, having occupied his
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post for sixteen years. Winston Churchill, as First Lord of the Admiralty, pressed the claims of the obscure Gerhard Muirhead-Gould, a former naval attaché in Berlin, to succeed him. Instead, however, Sinclair’s deputy, forty-nine-year-old Guards officer Brigadier Stewart Menzies, convinced the Foreign Office and the prime minister that he had been anointed by the dying Sinclair as his rightful successor. He thus inherited a mantle that he was widely considered ill-fitted to wear. The ninth Duke of Buccleuch, who had been Menzies’ fag at Eton, told a friend that ‘C’s’ contemporaries were mystified ‘how so unbelievably stupid a man could have ended up in such a position’. Hugh Trevor-Roper sneered at Menzies as ‘a thoughtless feudal lord, living comfortably on income produced from the labour of peasants whom he had never seen, working estates which he had never visited’.

This was hyperbolic, as were most of the historian’s private judgements on his colleagues, but it was true that Menzies had learned his craft in a bad school – not so much Eton as service on the staff of Brigadier John Charteris, Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig’s egregious intelligence chief on the Western Front. Menzies’ DSO and MC showed that he did not lack courage. His social skills sufficed to win the confidence of Maj. Gen. Hastings ‘Pug’ Ismay, soon to become Churchill’s chief of staff, and in some degree that of the prime minister himself. But ‘C’ knew little of the wider world he aspired to spy upon, and tolerated in Broadway a bevy of even less inspired subordinates.

Decisions were powerfully influenced by his two joint deputies, Valentine Vivian and Claude Dansey, who hated each other. Vivian was a former Indian policeman who was credited with a major role in frustrating the machinations of the Comintern – the Communist International – in South America and the Far East; he was also an office intriguer of energy and skill. Meanwhile Dansey went briefly to Bern in September 1939, to try to organise intelligence links from neutral Switzerland to Germany. A plentiful supply of fraudulent informants emerged, of whom by no means the most imaginative was a German refugee in Switzerland who used his nation’s Army List to fabricate a mobilisation programme which he attempted to sell. One of the few useful sources Dansey identified was an Austrian Pole, Count Horodyski. He, in turn, introduced the British to Halina Szymańska, wife of the former Polish military attaché in Berlin, now an exile in Switzerland. She became one of MI6’s most useful conduits, with connections in the Abwehr. Dansey thereafter returned to London, where he exercised a powerful influence on the wartime fortunes of MI6, mostly to its detriment.
During the years that followed, Britain’s secret service recruited numbers of outstanding officers and agents, who did some useful and a few important things for the Allied cause, but its chieftains inspired only limited respect. The stimulus of war would generate an intelligence revolution, and give birth to one of Britain’s most dazzling achievements. However, this did not take place in Broadway Buildings, but instead outside a dreary suburban town in Buckinghamshire.

3 THE RUSSIANS: TEMPLES OF ESPIONAGE

Just before noon on 23 May 1938, Pavel Sudoplatov of the NKVD strolled into the Atlanta restaurant in Rotterdam and greeted a Ukrainian nationalist leader whom he had come to know well, in the guise of being a sympathiser with the man’s cause. Sudoplatov, newly arrived on a merchant ship from Murmansk, presented the man with a handsome box of chocolates adorned with the Ukrainian crest. The two chatted for a few moments to arrange a further rendezvous, then Moscow’s agent bade his companion farewell and moved on. He was a safe distance down the street by the time he heard a sharp explosion. A timing device had detonated a bomb inside the box, killing the nationalist. This was a typical Moscow Centre* operation of the period, one thrust in the relentless campaign to liquidate state enemies, real or supposed traitors. Sudoplatov’s success earned him a four-hour meeting with Stalin’s foremost secret policeman, Lavrenti Beria, who marked him for bigger things, such as managing the assassination of Leon Trotsky.

The Soviet Union owned the most active and best-resourced intelligence organisations in the world – the Red Army’s GRU and the NKVD, the latter controlled by Beria from December 1938. The foremost purposes of Joseph Stalin, master of the Kremlin, were the promotion of socialism abroad through the Comintern and the maintenance of his own power against domestic and foreign enemies. Both required spies in profusion. Throughout the 1930s, Russia pursued a strategy more far-reaching in its means – the plantation of deep-penetration agents – and its ends – the worldwide triumph of communism – than those of any other nation. How far the funds and energy lavished on its secret war profited the Soviet Union will be considered below. Here, it suffices to say that the espionage

* Both the GRU’s and NKVD’s officers and agents referred to their respective headquarters as ‘Centre’. 
networks it established in the US, Britain, Japan and Europe were on a scale far beyond those of any other nation, and manifested in big things and small. When Japanese police arrested a Soviet agent carrying a Leica camera, Tokyo’s intelligence officers were pathetically envious: they could not afford to equip their own spies with technology remotely so sophisticated. This was a time when tens of millions of Russians were starving, yet Stalin’s agents spent whatever seemed necessary to purchase information and the deaths of enemies. From Switzerland to Mexico they left roadsides studded with corpses, and created some of the most remarkable agent networks in the history of intelligence.

The Russian addiction to espionage and conspiracy was as old as time. In 1912, when according to official figures Germany spent £80,387 on its secret service, France £40,000 and Britain £50,000, the Russians avowed a budget of £380,000, plus a further £335,000 for the tsar’s secret police. Tsarist codebreakers achieved some notable coups, and their successors sustained the tradition. In the 1930s the NKVD’s Fourth Department, the world’s most lavishly-funded signals intelligence unit, was based in the Foreign Affairs building on Moscow’s Kuznetsky bridge. Its chief, Gleb Ivanovitch Bokii, achieved a reputation as a killer and sexual predator matching that of Beria. Though Bokii’s team never broke wartime German Enigma messages, it enjoyed useful earlier and lesser successes, such as securing the secret protocol to the 1936 Anti-Comintern Pact between Germany and Japan, before its chief faced a firing squad the following year. Stalin personally read many decrypts; like Churchill later, he trusted the codebreakers’ product as he never did humint. The Kremlin displayed as brutal a carelessness about casualties among its spies as it did towards the fate of its soldiers. In 1936 František Moravec of Czech intelligence received a Soviet proposal that his service should provide crash espionage training for a hundred Russians, who would then be dispatched into Germany. Moravec expostulated that such novices would face wholesale extinction. His Moscow contact shrugged: ‘In that case, we shall send another hundred.’

The Soviet Union enjoyed a critical advantage in building its empire of espionage. While fascism gained millions of supporters in Germany, Italy and Spain, it never matched the appeal of worldwide communism during the decades before the latter’s bloodstained reality was laid bare. In every nation, men and women of brains and education, lofty ideals and unbounded naïveté queued to betray their own societies’ secrets for what they deemed a higher cause. From Moscow, hundreds of men and women
were sent forth to direct networks in Japan and the United States, Germany, France and other European nations. The NKVD achieved excellent penetration of the French Foreign Office, and frequently quoted its ambassadors’ dispatches. Many of its informants deluded themselves that they were passing secrets not to the Soviets, but instead to the Comintern – which was in truth merely a postbox for the Kremlin.

Pavel Sudoplatov became one of the principal puppeteers of the Kremlin’s *danses macabres*. He was a Ukrainian miller’s son, born in 1907, who served as a cipher clerk with the Red Army before joining the Bolshevik security service. As a teenager, Sudoplatov ran a network of informers in his home town of Melitopol. Secret police work became a family affair when he married in 1928, since his Jewish wife Emma was a more senior officer than himself in the OGPU, forerunner of the NKVD. He was trained by its foreign department before being posted to Germany as an ‘illegal’, posing as a Ukrainian nationalist. He led a roving life in the years that followed, travelling across Europe and spending a month in a Helsinki jail. He saw his wife just once, when she turned up in Paris as a courier. In 1938 he visited Spain, describing its civil war as ‘a kindergarten for our future operations’. At an early stage of his relationship with Beria, Sudoplatov noted a curiosity: this most terrible of Soviet secret policemen displayed meticulous civility to little people – junior staff – while treating big ones – his rivals in the Kremlin hierarchy – with lacerating rudeness. ‘Beria had the singular ability to inspire both fear and enthusiasm,’ he wrote.

Sudoplatov became one of the spy chief’s most devoted servants, graduating from field work to senior desk roles, assisted by the demise of rivals. Between 1937 and 1939, thousands of intelligence officers of all ranks died before firing squads or were dispatched to the gulag. Stalin lashed out at the intelligence services during a meeting of the Soviet Military Council in language that defied parody: ‘We have defeated the bourgeoisie on all fronts. It is only on the intelligence front that they beat us like small boys. This is our chief weakness … Our military intelligence service … has been polluted by spies. [Its chiefs] were working for Germany, for Japan, Poland, for anyone but us … Our task is to restore the intelligence service. It is our eyes and ears.’ In his madness, Stalin insisted upon not merely the execution of scores of senior officers of the GRU and NKVD, but also on the severance of Moscow Centre’s relations with their informants in the field, thousands of whom were branded as fascist stool-pigeons. The chaos that followed impacted variously upon different departments and regions, but
paralysed some networks until 1941 and beyond. After the destruction of Nazism, in Vienna a veteran NKVD officer met an old German source, one of many with whom he had broken contact in accordance with orders back in 1938. Now, this man demanded of the Russian: ‘Where on earth were you all through the war? I was General Kesselring’s personal orderly!’

Among the foremost of the NKVD’s overseas agent-runners was Theodore Maly, a Hungarian who in his youth had belonged to a Catholic monastic order. He was taken prisoner as a Hapsburg officer in 1916, joined the Bolsheviks and forswore God. In 1936 Maly was posted to London, where many of Moscow’s British informants later testified to their respect and affection for him. Yet in 1938 he was among those recalled to Moscow and shot as a supposed traitor, along with the NKVD’s equally talented Rome resident and several of its Berlin men. An obvious question persists: why did any officer with a brain obey the order to go home, when they could surely have read the runes? The most plausible answer is that even in those crazed and bloody days, adherents to the world socialist ideal, such as Maly was, cherished a lingering faith in the Soviet system, though he also professed fatalism if his death was decreed.

Many Russian knees quaked during the Purges. Thirty-nine senior GRU officers, intelligence veterans, are known to have been shot, and the NKVD suffered in proportion. Pavel Sudoplatov survived an investigation and the threat of expulsion from the Party; he believed afterwards that he might have been preserved by Stalin’s personal intervention. Clambering over a mound of corpses, he acquired his own office in the Lubyanka building at 2 L Street – cosily referred to by its occupants as ‘Dom Dva’, ‘Number Two’, a place of dread for every passer-by, and for any prisoner who crossed its threshold. Like all those who prospered in Stalin’s dreadful universe, Sudoplatov learned to regard the grotesque as normal, the unspeakable as familiar. During family conversations in their apartment, for instance, he and Emma never deviated from a rigidly domestic script, because they took it for granted that every word spoken was recorded by Beria’s eavesdroppers. He wrote long afterwards in an apparently half-truthful memoir: ‘I accepted the brutality and stern order that characterised our centralised society; it appeared the only method of preserving the country when it was surrounded by German, Polish and Japanese enemies.’

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the forest an agent of the GRU, who would later become famous, or notorious, for his association with the German Red Orchestra – the extraordinary espionage network to be described
later – was putting down roots in foreign parts. Anatoli Sukolov-Gourevitch, born at Kharkov in November 1913, was the son of Jewish parents who were both pharmacists. He started work in 1929 as an apprentice draughtsman in a factory, and hated the life. From an early stage, and like most Soviet citizens, he acquired the habit of obsessive secrecy, writing in his memoirs: ‘I learned to hide my feelings and troubles from my nearest and dearest, my friends, and indeed from everyone.’ Desperate to escape from the common ruck, while still very young he became a communist functionary, and somehow secured an appointment as a lecturer on military studies at a Leningrad school for Intourist guides, thereafter serving in intelligence.

In 1937 he was recruited to travel to Spain as one of the Soviet military group assisting the embattled Republican government. Gourevitch thoroughly enjoyed his subsequent Spanish adventures – as who would not, after sampling Soviet factory life? He was able to dress with an elegance unimaginable at home, and thereafter favoured a Warsaw tailor. He took a trip in a submarine, travelled in France and learned conversational French, Spanish and German. On returning to Moscow, he was selected for training as a foreign agent of the GRU. Asked much later if it had troubled him to join the Soviet Union’s murderous secret services, like Sudoplatov he shrugged that his country was encircled by enemies; he then believed that its defenders did only what they had to.

His chief, the gaunt, jug-eared intelligence veteran Major Simon Gendin, enquired whether he had any marriage plans which could complicate his future career overseas. Gourevitch replied that he was indeed in love, with a girl named Lialia whom he had met when they were both working in Spain, and who was now an Intourist interpreter. Gendin told his staff to add her name to the brief list of intimates with whom Gourevitch might correspond, though that relationship perished, like so much else, during the years that followed. On graduation from the GRU’s spy school, Gourevitch himself expressed doubts about his fluency as a coder and wireless-operator – he lacked a sensitive ear for Morse. Gendin reassured him: he would not need specialised radio skills, for he was destined to become an intelligence-gatherer and agent-runner.

Gourevitch was briefed to travel to Brussels to work with another Soviet agent, codenamed ‘Otto’, then to move on to Sweden after establishing himself and improving his language skills. He would exploit his knowledge of Spanish by adopting a cover identity as ‘Vincente Sierra’, a prosperous businessman with a Uruguayan passport. For the next three years,
Moscow furnished him with funds to sustain an appropriately flashy lifestyle. Yet although he was instructed about the importance of dressing smartly, affecting the hat and gloves that were then badges of bourgeois respectability, Gourevitch later complained that he was untutored in social skills. When he checked into a smart Helsinki hotel on the first leg of his journey to Belgium, he was bewildered when a porter picked up his suitcase and carried it upstairs: never in his short life had he received such a personal service. He gasped on seeing an open buffet in the hotel dining-room, which at first he assumed was set for a banquet rather than for the daily fare of guests. Later, in Brussels, as he fumbled his way towards an entrée into relatively smart social circles, he was embarrassed to be taken aside one evening by an acquaintance who told him that only waiters wore white bow ties with smoking jackets. ‘I was completely ignorant of these subtleties,’ he wrote ruefully.

‘Otto’, the Soviet agent whom Gourevitch joined in Brussels, was Leopold Trepper, born in 1904 the son of a Galician shopkeeper, one of the key figures in Russia’s European intelligence operations, and later a heroic Soviet legend. As a young man, Trepper ran a Paris network which was rolled up by the French in 1933. He fled first to Germany, then to Russia where he found employment with Stalin’s spymasters while moonlighting as editor of a Jewish journal. Early in 1939 he was dispatched to Brussels, which was deemed a secure base from which he could forward information from the GRU’s network inside Germany. Centre boasted of running two important Berlin agents: Ilse Stöbe, who worked in the press department of Ribbentrop’s Foreign Ministry, and a diplomat named Rudolf Shelia. Trepper carried a Canadian passport in the name of Adam Mikler, stolen during the Spanish Civil War. He was married with two sons, but only one accompanied him to Brussels – the other, seven-year-old Michael, remained in Moscow. Trepper became known to his sources in Western Europe as ‘le grand chef’, while Gourevitch was ‘le petit chef’. Soviet narratives lavish praise on the Trepper network for its services to the socialist cause, and it was plainly useful as a post office for the messages of Stöbe and Shelia. But it seems unlikely that Trepper recruited useful informants of his own. The foremost achievement of the GRU agents in Belgium was to stay at liberty, make some friends and create lifestyles that supported their cover stories.

* * *
Of more importance to Moscow – certainly from 1941 onwards – were the GRU’s organisations based in Switzerland. These would later channel towards the Kremlin material derived from Berlin sources such as Western agent-runners could only dream of. One network had been established in 1937 by German-born Rachel Dübendorfer. A larger group, which became known as the ‘Lucy’ Ring, was run by Dr Alexander Radó – ‘Dora’ – a ‘sleeper’ permitted by his chiefs to slumber almost as long as Sleeping Beauty. A Hungarian, Marxist from his youth, Radó served as a commissar in Budapest’s 1919 Red Terror. Obliged to flee when Admiral Horthy became Hungary’s dictator, for a time he ran an émigré Resistance group in Vienna. He then decamped to Moscow, where he received intelligence training, and was deemed sufficiently significant to be introduced to Lenin. Posted to Western Europe, he served as an agent in Berlin and Paris, under cover as a correspondent for the Soviet news agency TASS. After marrying a German communist with whom he had two children, he tried to settle in Brussels, but was sent packing by the authorities, who held a thick dossier on him. Instead he went to Switzerland, where he parleyed a lifelong passion for maps into the creation of a cartographic publishing business, which quickly became profitable.

The Swiss police watched Radó for a while, then left him alone when they decided he was what he seemed – a quiet-living fellow, forty in 1939, who simply wanted to turn an honest penny. Radó was word-painted by one of his wireless-operators, an Englishman named Alexander Foote: ‘With his mild eyes blinking behind glasses, he looked exactly like almost anyone to be found in any suburban train anywhere in the world.’ Moscow instructed its man to do nothing until Europe erupted. Radó settled down quite happily with his maps, which enabled him to make a living without much recourse to GRU funds. When his handler was recalled to Moscow during the Purges, Radó for a time lost contact with his chiefs. But he made useful local friends, some of them communists, others not. One was a Swiss socialist, Otto Punter, who admired the Soviet Union and had worked for the Republicans in Spain. Punter forged connections in Germany, and with some German émigrés in Switzerland such as Baron Michel von Godin. Von Godin recruited the Vichy French press attaché, Louis Suss, codename ‘Salter’. The Chinese press attaché Pao Hsien Chu – ‘Polo’ – was another source, and Punter also had connections with influential local Catholics.

Radó’s comrade Alexander Foote always claimed to have been an adventurer rather than a communist ideologue. A round-faced, bespectacled, mildly seedy young Englishman, in September 1938 he returned
from service in Spain with the International Brigade. A few months later, one of Moscow’s British recruiters offered him unspecified new employment for the workers’ cause in Switzerland. Cheap melodrama was not lacking. In obedience to instructions, Foote reported to the main post office in Geneva at noon one day, wearing a white scarf and holding a leather belt. He was approached by a woman who fulfilled her side of the identification procedure by holding a string shopping bag and an orange. She asked in English where he had bought his belt, and he replied implausibly, at an ironmonger’s shop in Paris. When he had then asked where he could buy an orange like hers, she introduced herself. She was ‘Sonya’, Ursula Hamburger* of the GRU, whom Foote was pleased to find was no squat commissar, but instead an attractive woman of thirty-one, with ‘a good figure and even better legs’. This remarkable personality was the daughter of a Berlin economist. At the age of eleven she was briefly a child actress before taking up an alternative career in espionage. She was already a veteran of exploits in China for which she had been awarded the Order of the Red Banner.

Hamburger instructed Foote to travel to Munich, establish himself in the city, learn German and make friends. He was given 2,000 Swiss francs and told to meet her again in three months in Lausanne – once again, at the post office. Keeping this rendezvous after a German sojourn that was uneventful save for a chance glimpse of Hitler lunching in a restaurant, he was told that he was now on the GRU payroll as a ‘collaborator’, at a salary of US$150 a month plus reasonable expenses. Given the cover name ‘Jim’, and various means of making contact if ‘Sonya’ disappeared for any reason, he was then sent back to Munich with an advance of US$900 in cash. Nothing significant happened thereafter until in April 1939 he was visited by an old International Brigade comrade from Spain, Len Brewer, British-born son of German parents, whom he appears to have introduced to Hamburger, who promptly recruited him. In August he was summoned to yet another meeting, this time at Hamburger’s home, a chalet at Caux-sur-Montreux where she lived in incongruous bourgeois domesticity with her two children, Maik and Janina, and an old German nurse. Foote was disconcerted by the casualness with which his hostess left components of her wireless transmitter lying around the house.

* Hamburger, like many others in this book, used a variety of names in the course of her career, starting out as Kuczynski and ending up as Werner. To avoid confusion, only one name is used throughout for all those described.
The GRU ring in Switzerland was as traumatised as many other communists around the world by the August 1939 Nazi–Soviet Pact. Foote felt that it hit Hamburger even harder than himself; that her faith in the omniscience of the Party was shattered: ‘I think that from that time onwards her heart was not in the work’ – this seems implausible, since she later became courier for the atomic spy Klaus Fuchs, and died an avowed Stalinist. Desperate to get out of Switzerland, she divorced her husband and married Len Brewer. Initially, according to Foote, this was merely an arrangement of convenience to secure a ‘shoe’ – a passport – but then the couple fell in love. Their plans were momentarily threatened when their maid, Lisa, became disaffected and telephoned the British consulate to denounce them anonymously as communist spies. But the girl’s English was so poor that nobody at the other end understood, or at least took notice.

Days before the outbreak of war, Foote boarded a train bound for Germany once more, only to find his handler suddenly pushing her way along the carriage to reach him, just before departure time. She told him to get off, fast. New orders had come from Moscow: war was imminent; he must stay in Switzerland. During the period that followed, in which the ‘Lucy’ Ring was temporarily dormant, while living at a small pension in Montreux both Foote and Len Brewer learned how to operate a shortwave radio transmitter. They practised on Hamburger’s set, though its performance was not improved by being buried in her garden between transmissions – then waited to be given messages to transmit to Moscow.

Even as the GRU’s Swiss networks were bedding down, Centre’s German sources were already producing information of extraordinary quality. The first musician in what became known to history as the ‘Red Orchestra’ was recruited following an approach to the Soviet embassy one day in 1929, by an ex-Berlin policeman named Ernst Kur. He offered his services as an informant, and was promptly recruited by the local NKVD resident as agent A/70. Kur, a rackety and often drunken boor, had been dismissed from the police, but proved to have a critical contact in its counter-intelligence branch, who was soon designated by the Russians as agent A/201. On 7 September Moscow messaged its Berlin station: ‘We are very interested in your new agent, A/201. Our only fear is that you have got yourselves into one of the most dangerous predicaments where the slightest indiscretion on the part of either A/201 or A/70 could lead to multiple misfortunes. We think it necessary to look into the issue of a special chan-
nel of communication with A/201.' Investigation showed that it was A/201 – an officer named Willy Lehmann, who had prompted Kur's approach to the Russians, using him as a cut-out during their exploratory dealings.

Lehmann was born in 1884, and served twelve years in the Kaiser's navy before becoming a policeman. His NKVD file spoke in the highest terms of his character, though noting the existence of a long-term mistress, Florentina Liverskaya, a thirty-eight-year-old seamstress who lived and worked at 21 Blumenstrasse. She was described, somewhat ungenerously, as a short woman with reddish hair and a plump face. When Kur started using his payments from the Soviet embassy to fund extravagant drinking sprees, Lehmann and his handler agreed that this now redundant intermediary must be got out of the way. With unusual sensitivity for Centre, instead of being pushed under a tram, in 1933 the dissolute ex-cop was rehoused in Sweden, where he passed the rest of his days as a small trader, occasionally moonlighting as an informant.

Lehmann, codenamed ‘Breitenbach,’ thereafter became one of Moscow's most valued German agents. For some time his handler was Vasily Zarubin, an NKVD star. Born in 1894, highly intelligent and personable though largely self-educated, Zarubin served successively in China and Europe as an ‘illegal,’ latterly under cover as a Czech engineer. A cheerfully gregarious figure, though with ample blood on his hands, he spoke several languages and forged a warm relationship with Lehmann. Although Zarubin occasionally gave the policeman modest sums of money, Lehmann never appeared greedy, and seemed keen to assist the Russians simply because he disliked his own nation's government – an animosity that became much more marked after the Nazis gained power.

Lehmann gave Moscow details about the structure and activities of Germany’s various intelligence organisations, and warned of forthcoming operations against Soviet interests. He provided samples of Abwehr codes, and passed on gossip about Nazi power struggles. He himself worked latterly in the Gestapo's Department IVE, ultimately under Himmler’s control, and was made responsible for security at especially sensitive defence plants. Thus in 1935 he attended some early German rocket tests at Peenemünde, and produced a report on them which reached Stalin. He also acquired considerable information about other military and naval technological developments. As the Nazis tightened their grip during the 1930s, Lehmann became increasingly nervous about meeting Zarubin, or indeed any Soviet agent. He found himself under surveillance, as a result of a bizarre coincidence. A woman quarrelled with her lover, and
denounced him to the authorities as a Russian spy: this proved to be another Gestapo officer, also named Lehmann. The muddle was eventually cleared up, and the shadow was lifted from 'Breitenbach.' But in 1935 he asked for a false passport in case he had to run in a hurry, and this was duly provided. When Zarubin reported that Lehmann had fallen seriously ill, the news prompted a panic in Moscow: Centre declared that its most precious German source must be kept alive at any cost, and that the NKVD would meet his medical bills if the money could somehow be laundered. 'Breitenbach' recovered.

Later that year the GRU made a sudden decision to wind up its German networks amid the Nazis' ruthless persecution of known communists, and to make a fresh start, beginning at the top. Both the Berlin station chief and his deputy were recalled to Moscow and liquidated. Early in 1937, the NKVD's Zarubin also fell victim to the Purges. He was summoned home, and at an interview with Beria accused of treason. After interrogation, unusually he was neither executed nor cleared, but instead demoted. He remained for a time in Moscow, serving as assistant to a novice intelligence officer, Vladimir Pavlov.

Before Zarubin's abrupt departure from Berlin, he transferred the handling of 'Breitenbach' to a woman named Clemens, one of his staff. She scarcely spoke German, but there was nobody else, and he himself expected soon to return. As matters fell out, Clemens was obliged to assume ongoing responsibility for the relationship, exchanging envelopes containing orders and information, which were then passed to another NKVD illegal, Ruben, who soon found himself the sole surviving member of the Berlin station as the Purges claimed ever more victims – the GRU's Major Simon Gendin, who had sent Gourevitch to Brussels, was shot in February 1939.

Zarubin, in Moscow, contrived to send a note to 'Breitenbach,' assuring him that he was not forgotten by his friends; that he should continue his intelligence activities, while exercising extreme caution. The Gestapo officer replied: ‘I have no reasons to worry. I am sure that they [in Moscow Centre] also know over there that everything is being done responsibly here, everything that can be done. So far there is no great need for anyone to visit from there. I will inform you if this will become necessary.’ As the NKVD's silence became protracted, however, Lehmann grew frustrated and impatient. He sent another message to Zarubin via Clemens: 'Just when I was able to make good deals, the company there stopped being interested in doing business with me, for completely
unknown reasons.’ Zarubin responded soothingly that ‘the company’ tremendously valued his work, and besought him to keep going – which he did, until November 1938. But then, as the Soviet intelligence machine became paralysed by its domestic contortions, all contact between ‘Breitenbach’ and Moscow was lost: the relationship was not restored until the autumn of 1940.

Willy Lehmann was by no means Moscow’s only German source, nor even any longer its most important. One day in 1935 a Luftwaffe officer named Harro Schulze-Boysen, who held a senior post in Hermann Göring’s Air Ministry, contacted the Soviet embassy in Berlin with an offer of information, which was immediately accepted. He was given the code-name ‘Corporal’, and NKVD file 34122. Schulze-Boysen was a champagne socialist from a smart Berlin family of intellectual inclinations – Admiral Tirpitz was among his forebears. From his desk in the Air Ministry he forged contacts in army staff communications, among Abwehr officers, and also with Hans Henniger, a government inspector of Luftwaffe equipment. Göring gave away the bride at his 1936 wedding, to the beautiful and exuberant Libertas Haas-Heye, who had worked for a time as a Berlin press officer for MGM Films. She now learned to share Schulze-Boysen’s political convictions and the burden of his labours for the Soviet Union, and her bed with a legion of lovers.

At about the same time, but independently, a senior civil servant in the economics ministry, Arvid Harnack, contacted the Soviet embassy, and was likewise recruited as agent ‘Corsican’, NKVD file 34118. Harnack was born in 1901 into a scholarly family in Darmstadt. He qualified as a lawyer and practised as an economist, spending some time in the United States. At the University of Wisconsin’s Madison campus he met Mildred Fish, a strikingly handsome and serious-minded student of English. They were married in 1929, and elected to live in Germany. Both were keenly interested in Marxism – they made a tour of the Soviet Union, and in 1932 launched a political study group. When Arvid began to pass information to the Russians, and to recruit fellow-foes of Hitler to his ring, he joined the Nazi Party to improve his protective colouring. Meanwhile both he and Schulze-Boysen steadily extended their groups of like-minded intellectual foes of Hitler. Between them, by 1939 they had opened windows into some of the most influential institutions in Nazi Germany.

Moscow now made a serious security mistake: it ordered that the two networks should collaborate. Their guiding spirits had very different temperaments. Schulze-Boysen was an exuberant, impulsive extrovert;
Harnack was a quiet, intense intellectual, whose impeccable middle-class background enabled himself and his friends for years to escape the attention of the Gestapo and the Abwehr. The two men nonetheless forged a close relationship, driven by shared hatred of the Nazis and romantic enthusiasm for the Soviet Union. Until June 1941 they had no need of wirelesses, merely transmitting information through the Russians’ Berlin military attaché.

One of the most striking aspects of espionage is that its processes, the mere business of living a covert existence, acquire a life of their own, heedless of spies’ achievements as collectors of information. Anatoli Gourevitch, in his memoirs, touches on a weakness in his own training which might be applied to the experience of many other agents. He was exhaustively instructed in techniques – secret inks, passwords for rendezvous and suchlike. No matching effort, however, was expended upon explaining the purpose of his mission: ‘Why was so little heed paid to the means by which I might obtain information, to the whole organisational aspect of the business of intelligence-gathering?’ In other words, and as Gourevitch’s subsequent career illustrated, for many secret agents the management and perils of daily existence consumed a lion’s share of their energies, often overwhelming the function that mattered – the acquisition of information of value to their service and its government.

Arrived in Brussels early in 1939, fresh from the GRU training school, Gourevitch took rooms in a lodging house, enrolled himself in a language school in his guise as a Uruguayan visitor, and reflected that his own absolute ignorance of commerce seemed likely to prove an impediment to his intended cover life, helping to run a locally based business. This concern receded, however, in the face of a more serious one: disillusionment on first meeting his boss, Leopold Trepper. Gourevitch had forged a heroic mental image of this secret agent so much esteemed by Moscow Centre, yet now he was confronted by what he afterwards claimed was a drab, unimposing reality. He had been briefed to suppose that a solid business cover had been established for ‘Otto’s’ network in Belgium, whereas on the spot he found only a little suburban export business employing just three people and peddling ‘the Foreign Excellent Trench-Coat’. Its secretary was a young Russian émigré, married to a former tsarist army officer, who was apparently completely ignorant of the real nature of the firm’s operations. All the managers were Jews, which must make them instantly vulnerable in the event of a German takeover of Belgium.
Gourevitch felt more confidence in his fellow-agent ‘Andre’, a thirty-five-year-old Alsatian named Leon Grossvogel, who had deserted from the French army in 1925, then drifted around Germany before travelling to Palestine, where he became a communist, and forged a friendship with Trepper. After three years there he returned to Belgium, where his parents lived and ran a small trading house named ‘Au Roi’. It was the presence of the Grossvogels that persuaded Trepper to come to Belgium, and to exploit their commercial contacts as a cover, when in 1938 Moscow charged him with the formation of a West European espionage organisation. His new deputy nonetheless decided that Trepper’s supposed network of important intelligence contacts was nothing of the sort. While large allowance must be made for the fact that Gourevitch published his version long after he himself was denounced as a traitor, the thrust of his remarks makes sense. Whatever Trepper’s tradecraft skills, together with his plausibility in composing reports which found favour in Moscow, it is hard to imagine what useful intelligence he could have acquired in low-grade Belgian and French business circles, the only society that he had access to. Centre seemed content to accept Trepper’s claim to have created a system through which material could be gathered and passed to Moscow from its Berlin sources in the event of war with Germany. But Gourevitch dismissed as ‘completely false’ the claims of post-war Soviet historians that Trepper ran a large network of important agents extending into Scandinavia.

On the eve of war, Moscow Centre could boast that the Schulze-Boysen/Harnack groups in Germany provided excellent information from the Nazis’ inner circle. The ‘Lucy’ Ring in Switzerland had established itself soundly, but only began to provide important intelligence from 1941 onwards. The Trepper–Gourevitch networks trod water until 1940. The extensive Soviet secret machine in the US, which will be described elsewhere, produced a steady stream of technological intelligence, which would have been more useful to the Russians in advancing their own defence base if their industries had been capable of exploiting it.

We have left to last the best of all Moscow’s men – or rather, the most spectacular. Richard Sorge grips the imagination of posterity, more because of what he was than through his influence on history, which was marginal. He dispatched to Moscow a flow of privileged political and strategic information, acquired through an access to high places achieved through sheer force of personality. Much of his material was ignored, however, or merely duplicated similar reports from more authoritative
Berlin sources. Some historians who selectively quote Sorge’s occasional brilliant insights have ignored his misjudgements and false prophecies – ‘noise’. His character and career as an agent were nonetheless extraordinary.

‘Ika’, as Sorge was nicknamed, was born in Baku in 1895, one of nine children of a German petroleum engineer and a Russian mother. After completing school in Germany he found himself thrust into the Kaiser’s war as a young soldier. While convalescing in Königsberg after suffering a bad wound, he was indoctrinated into communist ideology, allegedly by the father of one of his nurses, though there was already a family precedent: Sorge’s grandfather had been an associate of Marx and Engels. When the war ended he became a Marxist instructor, and acquired a PhD in political science. In 1921 he married Christiane Gerlach, having persuaded her to abandon a previous husband. His communist and revolutionary links attracted the unfavourable attention of the police, and he found Germany becoming too hot to hold him. In 1924 the couple moved to Moscow, where Sorge was recruited and trained as a Soviet agent. Uncertainty persists about his movements in the next five years, though it is known that he visited Britain. Christiane left him, without the formality of a divorce – his immense appeal to women made him careless about whether they stayed or went. The combination of rough-hewn good looks and a hypnotic, driven personality enabled him to attract, and often to maintain in tandem, an impressive range of lovers of all shapes and sizes. Though sceptics later condemned Sorge as a charlatan as well as a betrayer – a fundamentally shallow figure despite his intellectual pretensions – he was a strikingly successful one.

In 1929 the Red Army’s Fourth Department – later the GRU – offered him an overseas assignment. He requested China, and arrived in Shanghai that November under cover as a freelance journalist, with a wireless-operator in tow. He achieved rapid social success in the European concessions, and made well-informed friends. Also agents. He himself was masquerading as an American, but dropped the pose with Agnes Smedley, the American China traveller, whom he enlisted in Moscow’s service. In 1930 he met twenty-nine-year-old Hotsumi Ozaki, a struggling magazine writer with communist sympathies, whom he also recruited and who played a notable part in his subsequent career. Like almost all those who worked with him, Ozaki fell under the foreigner’s spell. Long afterwards, another of his Japanese network said wonderingly of the superspy that Sorge became, ‘You meet a man like him only once in a lifetime.’ The GRU
agent threw himself into researching every aspect of Chinese life, and his reports earned warm approval from his chiefs.

In January 1933 he returned to Moscow, where he ‘married’ again: a young Russian girl named Yekaterina Maximova – ‘Katcha’ – to whom he wrote emotional letters through the years that followed. He himself wanted to stay in Russia, but what use was a foreign spy in his employers’ own country? The GRU decided to post him to Tokyo. In preparation for this assignment, Sorge travelled to Germany, now Nazi-ruled, to secure appropriate credentials, and achieved another brilliant social and professional success, while somehow evading exposure of his communist past. He met the publisher of *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*, an ardent National Socialist, and secured from him both a contract as a ‘stringer’ and a letter of introduction to the German embassy in Tokyo.

He also gained the goodwill of the magazine’s founder, Karl Haushofer, a second ‘stringing’ arrangement with *Tägliche Rundschau*, and a letter addressed to Lt. Col. Eugen Ott, a German officer serving an exchange term with a Japanese artillery regiment. The editor-in-chief urged Ott to ‘trust Sorge in everything; that is, politically, personally and otherwise’. Through these sponsors the spy pulled off a further coup: he became a member of the National Socialist Party. Thus armoured, this avowed Nazi set off for Tokyo via the United States with a wireless-operator, Bruno Wendt of the Red Army, carrying in his luggage a copy of the 1933 *German Statistical Yearbook* to provide the key for his coding. Sorge was thirty-eight, and on the threshold of one of the greatest espionage careers in history.

Arrived in Japan, with remarkable speed he established a relationship with the German ambassador Herbert von Dirksen, a Prussian aristocrat; and a much closer one with Colonel Ott, who embraced another former *Frontsoldaten* as kin. Sorge, with characteristic recklessness, promptly began an affair with Ott’s wife Helma, an Amazonian six-footer who was herself a former communist. This appears to have done no harm to the spy’s relationship with her husband, who seemed, as he remained, mesmerised by his new friend. The colonel was an austere and unbending figure who perhaps saw qualities in Sorge which he envied, not least exuberance. The newcomer also ingratiated himself with the convivial and charming Captain Paul Wenneker, who joined the German mission in 1934 as naval attaché.

Sorge’s intimacy with the embassy won him some respect and attention from the Japanese, though at this stage the Tokyo government had by no
means committed itself to an alliance with Hitler – German residents were subject to police surveillance as intrusive as that imposed on other foreigners. Sorge threw himself into acquiring information of all kinds about the country, its people, history and culture, forming a library of over a thousand books, though he never learned to read Japanese, nor even to speak it well. His sexual indiscretions would have earned censure in any spy school, but his management of the relationship with the German diplomatic community at the colonnaded and handsomely gardened embassy offered a masterclass in penetration. Despite his avowed National Socialist allegiance, he was gaily critical of German government policies.

At meetings with Dirksen and Ott – who was now transferred to become military attaché – Sorge appeared to provide as much information as he received. Indeed, they recognised that the journalist knew more about Japan than they did. He started to assist in the compilation of diplomatic reports for Berlin, and forged a long-distance relationship with the editor of the Nazi Party newspaper, contributing to its columns and attending local Tokyo branch meetings. Meanwhile, patiently and skillfully, Sorge built up his network of informants for Moscow. Hotsumi Ozaki, his old friend and source from Shanghai, was now a respected journalist in Osaka, whence he was able to transfer to Tokyo. In that pre-social-media universe, for the next two years Sorge was able to prevent Ozaki from discovering his real name: the German was known to him only as ‘Mr Johnson’, the American cover identity he had worn in his China days.

Another recruit, Yotoku Miyaki, was a painter born in 1903, whose family had moved to California when he was a child. The American Communist Party talent-spotted Miyaki for the Comintern, and the slightly-built young man was persuaded to move back to Japan, where he proved a superb agent. In keeping with Moscow’s stringent finance policies, though Miyaki received a salary from Sorge, he supplemented this through giving language lessons and selling his pictures, which commanded respectable prices. Another key Sorge subordinate was a Yugoslav-born journalist, Branko de Voukelitch. The Fourth Department peremptorily instructed Voukelitch to strengthen his cover by divorcing his wife Edith and marrying a Japanese woman. This the compliant agent duly did, confusing himself as well as his associates by falling sincerely in love with a well-born local girl, Yoshiko Yamasaki, who eventually married him.

It was a reflection of Colonel Ott’s intimacy with Sorge that when he toured Manchuria in 1934, he took along the Russian spy as his courier in
the Nazi interest. Sorge subsequently ghosted Ott’s report to the army economic department, which won plaudits in Berlin. The following year, the Japanese police broke up another Soviet spy ring in Tokyo run by an American, John Sherman, a development which increased Moscow’s dependency on Sorge. He once said, ‘Spying work must be done bravely,’ and indeed he became a famous figure in Tokyo’s social, journalistic and diplomatic circles, careering about the city on a motorbike, drinking heroic quantities of alcohol, bedding every woman within his reach. He rented a two-storey Japanese-style house at 30 Nagasaki Machi, and Moscow kept him supplied with sufficient funds to sustain the rackety life he loved. He had a housekeeper who became devoted to him, together with a maid and a laundryman who were routinely quizzed by the police. But even the pathologically suspicious Japanese had no clue that Sorge might be a spy; they regarded him merely as an influential acolyte of the Nazis.

He performed a daily tour of newspaper offices and the German Club before making his way to the embassy, where he now spent so much time that he was provided with his own office in which to conduct research and prepare material for transmission to Berlin; privacy was also useful for photographing documents for Moscow. A German diplomat spoke later of Sorge as ‘a gay, dissolute adventurer with a brilliant mind and an unassailable conceit.’ The spy wrote a memorably ironic letter to his Moscow ‘wife’ Katcha in 1937: ‘it is very hard, above all this solitude.’

It was indeed a ceaseless challenge for the Soviet agent to sustain a masquerade as a Nazi stooge while he partied and womanised. In the evenings he frequented a string of bars and clubs – Lohmeyer’s restaurant in the Ginza, which had a loyal German clientele; the seedy little Fledermaus; and the Rheingold, whose proprietor Helmut Ketel was an ardent admirer of Hitler. It was there that Sorge met ‘Agnes’, one of many bar girls who fell for him. Agnes proved to have staying power. She was twenty-three, and her real name was Hanako Ishii. She became increasingly a fixture in his house, and he paid for her to take lessons to fulfil a cherished ambition to become a singer. But Sorge was no more faithful to Hanako than to any other woman: he conducted a long parallel relationship with Anita Mohr, wife of a locally based German businessman, who was described as a ‘blonde bombshell’. Hanako appears to have provided a convenience rather than an object of real affection.

Sorge’s priority was always service to Moscow. As the weight of GRU material increased, so did the difficulties of transmitting it. Wendt, his
Gun licence issued to Richard Sorge in 1927
radioman, was incompetent, and Sorge insisted that a better man must be found. In 1935 the spy left Tokyo, supposedly on holiday, bound for the United States. From there he travelled covertly to the Soviet Union, to confer with his chiefs and sort out the communications issues. In Moscow he was rebriefed about priorities, foremost among which was to explore Japan's intentions towards the Soviet Union. Thereafter, in descending order he was ordered to study the Japanese army and industry; policies in China; positioning towards Britain and the US.

Soon after Sorge's return to Tokyo, a new wireless-operator and courier joined him from Moscow. Max Clausen held officer's rank in the Red Army. To provide cover he established a blueprint-copying business in Tokyo, which became a notably profitable pet project. Clausen's first intelligence task was to build his own wireless set, common practice among agents in countries to which it was deemed too difficult or dangerous to dispatch a professionally constructed one. He used a domestic radio receiver, attached the transmitter to a Bakelite panel mounted on a wooden box, and wound tuning coils from copper tubing intended for motor manufacture. In the absence of instruments to measure wavelengths, Clausen transmitted on a 37–39 metre band, and received on 45–48.

Sorge persuaded a friend and fellow-journalist, Gunther Stein, to allow the Soviet operator to message Moscow from his flat. Stein initially recoiled from accepting this appalling risk, but eventually assented. Since Clausen dared not set up an external aerial, he stretched two copper-stranded wires, seven metres in length, around the room from which he transmitted. Stein also became a useful informant for the Sorge ring, exploiting friendships he had formed at the British embassy. So too did Torao Shinotsuka, owner of a small military-equipment factory in Kansai, who provided extensive material on military aircraft and naval armaments. Anna Clausen, Max's adored wife, arrived in Tokyo from Moscow to share the wireless-operator's hazardous existence.

The Soviet network's membership thus expanded at a period when Japan was entering a period of paranoia about foreign espionage, and reinforcing its domestic security agencies. In 1936 there was a bad moment when Tokyo police arrested Taikichi Kawai at the request of their Manchurian counterparts. Kawai had been an informant of 'Mr Johnson' in Shanghai. In captivity he was brutally interrogated. Unlike most agents under torture, however, he gave away nothing significant. Sorge's luck held. His work was giving the highest satisfaction to both of its beneficiar-
ies, Moscow Centre and the Foreign Ministry in Berlin. The latter was especially delighted by a report which he compiled on the 1936 Japanese army revolt, but which he insisted should circulate among the Nazi hierarchy only under the coy initials ‘RS’, because he remained fearful of a Gestapo investigation of his political past.

He helped Ott and Dirksen draft a cable to Berlin, asking for information about a rumoured German–Japanese negotiation. Sorge sought to promote Moscow’s agenda by urging on the German embassy team the view that such an alliance would be mistaken, and rooted in absurd rumours that Stalin’s fall was imminent. He published an article on the Japanese army in Die Wehrmacht magazine. His reputation with the Tokyo embassy and with Berlin soared after the fulfilment of his prediction that Japan’s war in China would prove protracted. More important, however, was the mass of information about Japanese deployments on the Soviet border which Ott provided to Sorge, who swiftly forwarded it to the GRU. Moscow also professed appreciation of industrial data delivered by Hotsumi Ozaki at monthly restaurant meetings. The journalist had become influential in government circles, and correspondingly well-informed: for a time he even served in the Japanese prime minister’s office as an expert on China. Even though he lost that role when the government changed in 1939, he secured a new job as a Tokyo-based researcher for Japan’s Kwantung army in Manchuria.

In 1938 Herbert von Dirksen was invalided home. His successor as ambassador was none other than Colonel Ott. Sorge thenceforward found himself drafting the German embassy’s dispatches for Berlin, while transmitting his own to Moscow. On his forty-third birthday he was presented with a signed photograph of Nazi foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop as a token of Berlin’s appreciation for his services. No foreign penetration of a British diplomatic mission could be compared in significance with that achieved by Sorge of Hitler’s Tokyo embassy. When a Russian general defected to Tokyo in 1938, the spy was immediately able to warn Moscow that its codes were compromised. In May 1939, when tensions on the Russo–Japanese border erupted into local clashes, thanks to Ozaki Sorge could tell Moscow authoritatively that the Japanese had no intention of escalating the ‘Nomonhan Incident’ into a wider war. On this issue as on many others, however, doubts persist about the use made of his material. Sorge supposedly gave the Soviets detailed Japanese order-of-battle information, but Georgi Zhukov as the Red Army’s local commander complained bitterly about the absence of such data. It seems likely either
that Sorge later exaggerated his own contribution, or that the GRU failed to pass on his material.

He sought to strengthen his cover by publicly taunting Soviet diplomats when he met them at international receptions, but the stress of his fantastic high-wire act increasingly told on him, and was reflected in massive infusions of alcohol. In the company of Hanako, he succumbed to morose, drink-fuelled monologues, especially when she begged him to give her a child: ‘I am an old man. I am going to die soon. I can do without a baby! Oh, poor Sorge. You should study so that you can get along without Sorge …’ One night he crashed his motorbike, with agonising consequences – many days in hospital and the loss of his teeth. For the rest of his life he could swallow meat only if it was minced.

He had sense enough to abandon biking, and instead acquired a small car. He embarked on a whimsical cultural improvement programme for Hanako, persuading her to read *Gone With the Wind*, which he himself considered ‘magnificent’. Several hundred pages later she said, ‘I like Captain Butler.’ Perhaps providing a glimpse of his self-image, Sorge demanded, ‘Do you think I am like Rhett Butler?’ But Clausen wrote later about him: ‘He is a true communist … He is a man who can destroy even his best friend for the sake of Communism.’ He could also destroy a comrade. The spy’s treatment of his wireless-operator was cavalier, even brutal. And his lifestyle was ever more at odds with the ideal of a dedicated servant of the Party. Sorge had made himself probably the best-informed secret agent in the world. Nonetheless, his rashness made an ultimate train wreck inevitable, even if in 1939 this still lay a surprising distance in the future.

By the coming of war, the Soviet Union’s huge expenditure on espionage, and its access to highly placed communist sympathisers in many lands, should have made the Kremlin the best-informed centre of government on the planet. Yet those in Moscow who received and processed the reports from the field were far too fearful of offending the only audience that mattered – Joseph Stalin, master of the Kremlin – to forward any intelligence that was likely to prove unwelcome. Even when important information reached Moscow, it was seldom properly reviewed, far less exploited by policy-makers. Christopher Andrew has written: ‘The Soviet capacity to understand the political and diplomatic intelligence it collected … never approached its ability to collect the intelligence in the first place.’ Stalin acted as his own analyst, preferring to drill endless wells of espionage in search of imagined conspiracies rather than to use intelligence to inform policy-making. Soviet intelligence officers feared for their lives,
with good reason, if they told Stalin what he did not want to hear. He seemed to credit only reports that identified plots against himself or the state, at home and abroad. Where these did not exist, Russia’s most senior intelligence officers invented them. Stalin used the product of his codebreakers to some effect where and when this was available, but entered the greatest conflict in history almost blind through his own acts of will.

After Munich, with the doom of Czechoslovakia sealed, the Czech intelligence chief František Moravec was approached by three rival bidders for his services: Admiral Wilhelm Canaris for the Germans, Colonel Louis Rivet for the French, and MI6’s local man, Major Harold Gibson, for the British. Mistrusting the French, Moravec determined to throw in his lot with Britain. In anticipation of the Nazi occupation he did his utmost to reinforce links with local informants before himself leaving his country. He was able to transfer to London large sums of foreign currency, and hoped thus to ensure that he could sustain a Czech intelligence service in exile, though few of his agents were ever heard from again. On 3 March 1939 the Abwehr’s Paul Thummel, Moravec’s best German source, met him in Prague and reported that the city would be occupied on the 15th. ‘Agent A-54’ also warned that his entire staff would be seized by the Gestapo, and could expect no mercy. Moravec was amazed that Thummel declared himself willing to continue his own collaboration. The only proviso, said the Abwehr man, was that the Czechs must ensure that everything about himself in their files was destroyed. With that assurance, the two men parted. Thummel said, ‘Good luck, Colonel. This is not goodbye but Auf wiedersehen.’ The German officer took away with him two addresses for future correspondence, one in Holland, the other in Switzerland.

In Prague on the night of 13 March, Harold Gibson of MI6 – ‘Gibby’, as Moravec always called him, a small, slight figure with a moustache in proportion – drove a car into the Czech Intelligence Department’s garage. This was loaded with hundreds of files packed in canvas bags, which were borne away to the British embassy. The following afternoon, a Dutch civilian plane chartered by Broadway landed at Ruzyn airfield outside Prague to collect passengers for England – Moravec and ten officers of his staff. He chose them unsentimentally, he wrote later, taking those who would be most valuable in London, and those who knew too much to be left to the Gestapo. He felt obliged to leave behind his own wife and two daugh-
ters, and indeed to conceal from them his intended destination: he said he was merely making an overnight trip to Moravia.

The plane took off with difficulty amidst a snowstorm, which for a time threatened to force them down into the path of the approaching Germans. Moravec carried a briefcase containing 200,000 Reichsmarks and 100,000 Dutch guilders in cash – about £32,000 – to provide his little team with further seed money for future operations. As the plane passed over the mountains where lay Czechoslovakia’s frontier, the colonel buried his head in his hands and sobbed unashamedly at the prospect of exile. After a brief stop in Amsterdam, the party landed safely at Croydon. When former Czech prime minister Edvard Beneš later arrived in London, Moravec reported to his Putney residence to offer his services and those of his officers, which were readily accepted – his role was formalised the following year, when Beneš formed a government in exile. The colonel’s wife and children escaped from Prague and walked to safety in Poland, from whence they joined him in Britain.

In June 1939 Moravec was delighted to receive a letter, forwarded from a Zürich cover address, which began, ‘Dear Uncle, I think I am in love. I have met a girl.’ On the same page was a secret ink message, appointing a rendezvous in The Hague. It was from agent A-54, the Abwehr colonel Paul Thummel. The Czech officer who duly met him early in August warned Thummel that Moravec’s shrunken organisation no longer had cash to lavish upon him as generously as in the past, but the German responded dismissively that ‘more important matters than money are at stake.’ He told the Czech that an invasion of Poland was planned for 1 September, and provided details of the latest Wehrmacht order of battle. He also handed over a list of Polish traitors working for the Germans. Thummel subsequently provided the Nazis’ amended timetable, including on 27 August a final date for the Polish invasion of 3 September 1939. For the people of Czechoslovakia, Poland, and now of all Western Europe, the sparring was over: the death struggle had begun.