The joys of a spy's life

The Double-Cross System in the War of 1939 to 1945

By J. C. Masterman.

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Reviewed by MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE

The more exotic shores of Intelligence in the 1939-45 war were almost entirely populated by dons of one sort and another, thinly disguised as Major Trevor-Roper, Lt. Col. Rothschild, Captain Ayer, etc., etc. When the American contingent arrived on the scene, they, too, hailed mostly from Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, with a small admixture of the offspring of millionaires, senators, and service brass. M15 and M16, the home and overseas branches respectively of the British Secret Service (known in peacetime as S.I.S.), were particularly favored nesting places for these birds of paradise whose native habitat was the groves of academe. On the whole they acquitted themselves well, particularly in the field of manipulating double-agents for deception purposes. The subject has hitherto been little publicized, except in Bondish fantasies, in consequence of the natural discretion of those concerned, fortified by the operation of the Official Secrets Act; a good deal more stringent, in theory as well as practice, in Britain than in the United States.

How very satisfactory, then, that Sir John Masterman, himself a brilliant practitioner, should have seen fit to hand over to Yale University Press an account of the double-cross system which he originally prepared in 1945, right at the end of the war, when the memory of the techniques and individuals employed was still fresh in his mind. The fact that this account is written in sober, quasi-officialese rather than in the sort of over-dramatized, over-colorful style usually employed for such subjects, is, in my opinion, all to the good. I prefer it so, just as I prefer the Kinsey Report to *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. There is a workmanlike foreword by Norman Pearson, whom I well remember coming modestly and solemnly among us from Yale, the first of the hosts of General Donovan's O.S.S. soon to follow, most of whom were likewise solemn, but few so modest.

The double-cross operation is roughly as follows. An enemy agent is caught, and instead of being handed over for grilling and due punishment, is what is called turned round. That is to say, he goes on communicating with his own bosses, but under control, sending what he is told to send. Then, if his credibility can be maintained, he can be used for deception purposes. For instance, at the time of the Normandy landing, double-agents played an important part in persuading *(Continued on page 3)*

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(Continued from page 1) the Germans that General Eisenhower's forces were making for a quite different part of the French coast. This was obviously highly advantageous to the Allied campaign.

As Sir John lucidly explains, the art of the game is to give the double-agent enough sound, but relatively innocuous, material to transmit for him to acquire a high reputation on the enemy side. Then, when it comes to the crunch, and he is fed deception material, he will be believed. Striking a balance between these two exigencies, to convince and to deceive, is quite difficult. Sir John uses as examples some of the best-known double-agents in the war: like Tricycle and Garbo, who were household names among Intelligence personnel. He rather slides over the fact, no doubt for good security reasons, that owing to our side's notable skill at cipher-cracking, it was possible to follow exactly what happened to the deception material on the other side as it made its way laboriously along the serpentine channels of Intelligence and Operations. It was one of the great joys of a spy's life, as I found myself when I did a stint in Mozambique, to "show" in the cracked ciphers; like appearing in the television news, or being cited at a Congressional hearing.

Enemy agents, in my experience, are all too ready to be turned round. For one thing, it means they are paid by both sides; for another, they have a good chance of being decorated by both sides. Dear old Tricycle, wherever he may be, if he cares to, can stick an Iron Cross in one lapel and an O.B.E. in the other. There are also quite a lot of perks. We had a man in North Africa who was so highly regarded by the Germans for whom he ostensibly worked that he could ask them for scarce commodities like motor tires—a set were duly dropped, turning out, incidentally, to be Dunlops—and even money, making it clear that only gold coins would be any use to him. I tried to promote the idea that he should plead that his sexual appetites were troubling him, and that he dared not sleep with any of the local girls for fear of betraying himself. My vision of several Rhine Maidens floating down from the sky was scouted by the French officers in charge of the case, who insisted, I expect justly, that the only response would be a bottle of bromide.

In any case, as Sir John shows, in the U.K. the whole German espionage set-up fell into our hands, and was operated throughout the war by us. Some of the agents, as I recall, arrived in very inadequate drag; one, for instance, who was dropped in the Fens country round Cambridge was wearing spats, which soon drew attention to him. It turned out that in the *Abwehr* Department which had sent him, P. G. Wodehouse was regarded as a great authority on British life, and the poor fellow had been got up accordingly to look like Bertie Wooster. I wondered whether, supposing he had not been caught, he would have made his way to London in the hope of finding the Drones Club.

Sir John's purpose in producing his book in the first place was to ensure that the experience and expertise acquired in operating double-agents in the 1939-45 war should not be lost. Whether it will be required in any subsequent war may be doubted. What with U2-type aerial reconnaissance, radio interception, and other mechanical devices for finding out what the enemy is up to, it would surprise me if even a Tricycle or a Garbo had much of a role in subsequent hostilities. All the same, the book has an intrinsic interest, apart from its possible professional utility, as being what the French police call *pièces justificatives,* supporting more imaginative treatments of the subject file of Graham Greene's brilliant Intelligence fantasia, *Our Man in Havana.* (Greene, by the way, was also in the double-cross game.) In some ways, this is the great age of the double-agent; not just in Intelligence—in politics, in religion, in sex, in everything. Sir John's presentation of him in war may be laboratory work, but still, in considering the genre, serviceable. □

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