



When Intelligence Made a Difference

— EARLY 20TH CENTURY —

Alfred Redl

The Habsburg Arch-Spy — De-mythologized —

by Siegfried Beer

Introduction

The Alfred Redl story has long since become the quintessential Austrian spy case. It was the last major scandal felt across the Dual Habsburg Monarchy and beyond, until the assassination at Sarajevo of Archduke Ferdinand on June 28, 1914, hardly more than a year later. Almost immediately the Redl scandal became the stuff of myth and legend, reinforced by writers, film and docudrama artists over decades since. Historical proof and accuracy somehow became clouded by fiction.¹ Now, over a century later, as relevant archives have opened, historians are finally in possession of hard and proven facts, albeit not yet of all of them.

We owe far-reaching clarification of the Redl case as perhaps the 20th century's first great story of double-agency to merely a handful of specialists, who have since the 1990s discovered significant documentation long hidden in Russian, Austrian and other European national archives.² This has only increased

1. There have been five films about Redl made between 1925 and 1985, one stage play (John Osborne: *A Patriot for Me*, 1965), one documentary (2013), and several novels (e.g., Dennis Wheatley, *The Second Seal*, 1950, but still only one book-length semi-fictional treatment in English (by Robert Asprey, *The Panther's Feast*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1959). Among the major myth-makers are first and foremost Egon Erwin Kisch, *Der Fall des Generalstabschefs Redl*. Berlin: Verlag Die Schmiede, 1924 (and later works); Tristan Busch, *Entlarvter Geheimdienst. Secretismus*. Zürich: Pegasus Verlag, 1946 (English translation: *Secret Service Unmasked*. London: Hutchison, 1950); Robert Asprey and Georg Markus, *Der Fall Redl*. Wien: Armalthea, 1984. None of the memoir literature by authors personally involved in the Redl case has proved factually reliable. This particularly pertains to books and chapter articles by Austrian intelligence officers such as Maximilian Rongé, August Urbanski, and Clemens von Walzel.

2. Their names and works are strewn in the references offered. The

the fascination for the spy case with spectacular ingredients — betrayal, intrigue, professional dishonor, costly homo- as well as heterosexual pursuits, luxury and greed, debts and despair, death and suicide.³ Few compendia of espionage and secrecy fail to mention this story of treason and deception of the Habsburg military counter-intelligence chief, and few spy cases have received such intense and long-lasting recognition over more than a century.⁴

REDL'S CAREER

Though fairly well-known in its outline and often fictionally adorned, the story of the rise and sudden fall of Alfred Redl needs to be briefly and factually characterized. Born in Lemberg, Galicia (today Lviv, Ukraine) in 1864 to a family of modest means and fairly low socioeconomic status, the talented Redl – after cadet and basic officer training - was admitted to the very selective Imperial War College in Vienna where he started to develop a specialty in Russian military affairs. After stints in Vienna (railway bureau), Budapest, Lemberg and Kazan (Russia, for language studies), he became captain in the elite Austrian-Hungarian General Staff Corps in 1899 and joined the Evidenzbureau (Intelligence Bureau) in 1900 where he was soon assigned to the Russian Section. He rose quickly to a leading position in the military counter-intelligence branch (Kundschaftsstelle) where he became instrumental in the application of technological innovations, such as the use of cameras and recording machines and the creation of a data system for finger-printing, but perhaps foremost for the sinister "Third Degree" method of interrogating

most convincing and reliable in the English language is John R. Schindler, "Redl – Spy of the Century?" *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* No. 18, 2005, pp. 483-507. The most ambitious and comprehensive study by far is by Verena Moritz – Hannes Leidinger, *Oberst Redl. Der Spionagefall – Der Skandal – Die Fakten*. St. Pölten: Residenz Verlag, 2012.

3. The designation "spy of the century" has also been given to the double-agency of the British spy Kim Philby, whose espionage exploits culminated in mid-20th century. And indeed, several parallels can be drawn between those two spectacular cases, perhaps foremost in the sense that both Redl and Philby had at the height of their careers been considered as serious future candidates for the highest national intelligence position. More on Philby's Austria-connection cf. Siegfried Beer, "The Third Man and British Intelligence," *History Today*, 51, Nr. 5, 2001, pp. 45-51.

4. I know of only one encyclopedia of espionage in which Alfred Redl has not achieved mention: Christopher Dobson & Ronald Payne, *The Dictionary of Espionage*. London: Grafton Books, 1984. The Redl Affair has found its way into most popular anthologies of espionage, for example, those written or edited by Richard W. Rowan, *The Story of Secret Service*, Washington, DC, Westphalia Press, 2013, first published in 1937, New York, Library Guild of America; Allen W. Dulles, *Great True Spy Stories*, New York: Harper & Row, 1968; and Fitzroy MacLean, *Take Nine Spies*, New York: Macmillan, 1978.

suspected spies, using blinding flood lights. In 1907 he became deputy chief of the entire Evidenzbureau and in 1909 he was even seriously considered a candidate for chief. In 1912 he was promoted to Colonel and given the important position of chief of staff of the VIII Army Corps in Prague, a crucial outpost for Russian matters as well as the Empire's welfare. To his superiors and colleagues he was the model spymaster. By some, if not most, he was considered the rising star on the General Staff. He would never have been suspected of treason.

And yet it was exactly that which became apparent to the shocked leading figures of military intelligence when on May 24, 1913 the mysterious letters addressed to a Nikon Nizetas and altogether containing 21,000 crowns were claimed at the post office where they had been kept poste restante (general delivery) by Redl personally.⁵ Only a few hours later the colonel was visited by four high-placed officers of the Evidenzbureau at his hotel suite, among them the chief, August Urbanski, where Redl quickly confessed. Maximilian Ronge, a former protégé and admirer, then his successor in the Evidenzbureau, fetched and handed him a Browning pistol, and the traitor understood what that meant. In the early hours of May 25 a shot rang through Hotel Klomser. Quickly thereupon a cover-up was started by the General Staff, under orders of its chief, General Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf. The press was told Redl committed suicide because of overwork and severe nervous strains. And, as a prominent American analyst noted: "one of the most productive spies in history died without any interrogation."⁶

REDL'S DEMONS

A crucial question, from the start, should have been the extent of Redl's treachery, particularly its duration. No one at the General Staff seemed at first eager to find out, though officers did rush to Prague on the morning of May 25 to search through Redl's office and apartment. They found plenty of evidence. When the Army finally submitted information to the Emperor and Reichsrat, Redl was characterized as a sick homosexual in financial straits who had spied for the Russians for about a year with only light damage to the empire's military security. Serious damage assessment undertaken only in the mid-1970s established that Redl had begun spying for Russia already

by 1907.⁷ Not much later it became clear, that Redl's recruitment by the Russians must have been much earlier. Allegations spoke of the year 1900 when Redl spent a year at Kazan and was most likely approached by Colonel Batyushin, then the senior Russian intelligence officer at Warsaw. Batyushin was said to have discovered Redl's homosexual preferences then, and subsequently it allegedly became easy to entrap the Austrian officer into working for the czar. It was certainly true that Russia's military attachés in Vienna, Warsaw and Prague were known for their aggressive spy operations against the Dual Empire. Eventually all of these attachés - Colonel Vladimir Roop (1900-1905), Colonel Mitrofan Marchenko (1905-1910) and Colonel Mikhail Zankevich (1910-1913) - were declared personae non gratae and expelled. Redl dealt with all of these handlers, formally in his official position, via regular mail and payments and in rare personal meetings, but not all of them may have known who exactly was behind the informant "Agent Nr. 25," Redl's Russian code name. Redl soon proved his worth to the Russians and over the years must have felt pretty secure in his dealings. After all, he was the dominating figure in the Evidenzbureau and well respected in the European world of espionage, by friend and foe alike.⁸ He developed, apparently relatively unnoticed by his contemporaries, an extravagant lifestyle and thereby accumulating substantial personal debts. Despite the modest military income in the Army, he lived in luxury, owning several apartments, two flashy cars, a number of horses and employing personal servants. All of this is reflected in the flow of Russian money, which started coming in by 1907, deposited in sizably stuffed envelopes. By 1913 his debts stood at over 100,000 crowns, with his Russian and other payments perhaps accumulatively reaching that figure.

Redl lived a strenuous life, professionally and privately. His homosexual leanings were known in military circles, though he also exhibited bisexuality. In Habsburg Austria, among the higher ranks, both in society and in professional function, tolerance of sexual deviation was wide-spread. Yet Redl's homosexuality comes into special focus when one examines the circumstances of his recruitment. Was it black-

7. Cf. Josef Reifberger, "Die Entwicklung des militärischen Nachrichtenwesens in der k. u. k. Armee," *Österreichische Militärische Zeitschrift* 14, Nr. 3, 1976, p. 217. Reifberger and Asprey before him seem to have been the first researchers using Austrian archival documents. Cf. Ian D. Armour, "Colonel Redl: Facts and Fantasy," *Intelligence and National Security* 2, Nr. 1, 1987, pp. 170-183.

8. His German counterpart, Walter Nikolai, even in disdain and retrospect spoke of him at length as "undoubtedly the master-spy of prewar Europe." *The German Secret Service*, London: Stanley Paul, 1924, chapter XVII.

5. 21,000 crowns in 1913 equate to approximately US \$114,200 in 2021.

6. Richard Helms, *A Look Over My Shoulder. A Life in the Central Intelligence Agency*, New York: Ballantine Books, 2003, p. 78.

mail by the plotting maneuvers of Colonel Batyusin on account of his homosexuality? This assumption is now dispelled, mainly because in Batyushin's book of 1939, Secret Military Intelligence and Its Struggle, naturally in Russian and long ignored by both German and English writers on the case, the author refrains from claiming his recruitment of Redl. Nor apparently did Colonel Roop hint on agent "R's" sexuality when he briefed his successor in 1905. Furthermore, a sagacious biographical report of 1907 on Redl by Colonel Marchenko seems to prove, that the latter knew nothing about Redl's homosexuality:

Alfred Redl, General Staff major, deputy chief of the Evidenzbureau. In this rank since 1 November 1905. He was chief of staff of the 13th Landwehr Division in Vienna. He is of medium height, has slightly graying blond hair, a short, grey mustache, somewhat protruding cheekbones, grey eyes and a pleasantly ingratiating expression. He is clever, reserved, concentrated and efficient. His outward appearance seems greasy. He speaks sugar-sweetly, softly, and in a servile manner. His movements are measured and slow. He is more clever and false than smart and talented. A cynic. A lover of women who loves diversion.⁹

RECENT FINDINGS

This newly discovered evidence strengthens the theory that Redl was most likely a classical volunteer agent in need of cash to finance his growing demands on lifestyle and stature for which a new level was apparently reached in 1907.¹⁰ And it was not just Russian money he was after. The Italian intelligence officer Camillo Caleffi, later head of the Servizio Informazione Militare, in 1957 told of his singular meeting with Redl, soon code-named K.K., who eagerly offered his services for cash payment and yet managed to remain unidentified for years. The Italian money was also sent by letter to "Nikon Niketas" via a Viennese mailbox.¹¹ So far there is only circumstantial evidence that Redl also served French military intelligence.

This then was a major analytical break-through: it was not blackmail on account of homosexuality, but greed and debts. But in the course of time it also became clear that relevant documents and files on the Redl case had been hidden or destroyed; then only by chance did a professional researcher in the mid-1990s

9. This biographical sketch was first published by a GRU general in 1966 and is here cited from Schindler, pp. 489f.

10. Cf. Moritz-Leidinger, *Oberst Redl*, p. 31.

11. Caleffi's article "Un romanzesco caso di spionaggio" in *Corriere della Sera*, 20 August 1957.

stumble across a sealed and deceptively camouflaged bundle of documents at the Austrian State Archives, which had for decades been kept misplaced and thus hidden from serious inquiry, for the surmised sake of protection of the reputation of the Habsburg Army.¹² And so it is the writing of basically four researchers who in the new century concentrated on freshly available archival material and could thereby dispel a number of myths and claims long perpetrated by contemporary investigators and later by sloppy and sensationalist writers. Albert Pethö expanded his doctoral findings by a substantive article in a survey of global espionage;¹³ John R. Schindler published a convincing assessment of the Redl case in a specialist intelligence journal¹⁴ and the Austrian historian team of Verena Moritz and Hannes Leidinger managed to present a minutely researched book portrait not only of Redl's dramatic life but also of the culture and mentality as background of the waning years of Habsburg Austria, and all in time for centennial remembrance.¹⁵

So what, in essence, were the major findings of this new, source-based inquiry, apart from the disproven homosexuality blackmail as Clarification One? It was, secondly, that there was little or nothing regarding military planning of the Austro-Hungarian General Staff since 1901 that Alfred Redl was not privy to. He may have betrayed pretty much everything available to him over a 12-year period. He copied, photographed and transmitted dozens of highly secret and sensitive Papers. Thirdly, sizable payments from the Russians, Italians, French and maybe even the Serbs started coming in from 1907 till 2013. In today's terms and parlance, Redl over the years became a crown and even euro millionaire.¹⁶ Fourthly, Redl was badly in need of money to finance his luxurious lifestyle, particularly his love-life with demanding lovers. Financial greed made him vulnerable to professional carelessness.¹⁷ Fifthly, we now know what type of information

12. This episode was first told by Albert Pethö, *Agenten für den Doppeladler: Österreich-Ungarns geheimer Dienst im Weltkrieg*, Graz: Leopold Stocker Verlag, 1998, p. 383, footnote 940. Cf. Moritz-Leidinger, *Oberst Redl*, pp. 46-48.

13. Oberst Redl. In: *Geheimdienste in der Weltgeschichte. Spionage und verdeckte Aktionen von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Wolfgang Krieger, München: C.H. Beck, 2003, pp. 138-150.

14. *Redl – Spy of the Century?*

15. Oberst Redl. *Der Spionagefall – Der Skandal – Die Fakten*. Only a few years before, alongside with Gerhard Jagschitz, they had co-authored a Ronge-biography: *Im Zentrum der Macht. Die vielen Gesichter des Geheimdienstchefs Maximilian Ronge*. St. Pölten: Residenz Verlag, 2007.

16. Cf. Schindler, *Redl – Spy of the Century?*, p. 490, and Moritz-Leidinger, *Oberst Redl*, p. 78.

17. Demands and blackmail by lovers, particularly by longtime companion Lt Stefan Horinka, further added pressure and despair. Also, Redl had one close call: in 1909 a British military attaché in St. Petersburg hinted to his Austro-Hungarian counterpart that there

Redl betrayed (e.g., on fortifications, order of battle, mobilization and deployment) and how it benefited the Russians and Serbs, particularly in the first months of World War I. Yet, the painful military defeats of the Habsburg armies on the two fronts of 1914 cannot rightly be blamed on Redl, as Conrad von Hötzendorf and others, contemporaries, and later interpreters in search of scapegoats, consistently argued.¹⁸ New research has downgraded the operational impact of Redl's spying in regard to the Habsburg Army's performance, though damage cannot be ignored.¹⁹ The immediate and lasting effect of the Redl affair may have been of psychological nature, both for the Austro-Hungarian officer corps and as uplift for Russian intelligence. Some historians argue that despite the Redl calamity, Habsburg military intelligence in the Great War performed fairly well, particularly in the area of signals intelligence.²⁰ Finally, there is evidence that Redl was not the only highly-placed spy for the Russians, but that there was at least another one in the Austro-Hungarian General Staff. Redl also betrayed several Russians spying for Vienna. He had no accomplices.²¹

QUESTIONS REMAINING

Major questions about Redl's life and betrayal remain unresolved. For example: why was the leading counterintelligence expert in the Habsburg Empire so careless, if not reckless, in handling the payments? Was he perhaps already incapacitated by his syphilitic affliction or depressed because he knew it would lead to an early death? Did Redl's life really end in honor code suicide or was he helped along on May 25 at sunrise by a member of the Evidenzbureau, as rumored by the Hotel Klomser personnel?²² Was Redl's personal

was a highly-placed spy in the General Staff at work for the Russians in Vienna. Eventually Redl was asked by his chief to investigate and naturally the allegation was quickly buried and forgotten.

18. Manfried Rauchensteiner, *Der Erste Weltkrieg und das Ende der Habsburgermonarchie 1914-1918*. Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2013, pp. 166f.

19. Moritz-Leidinger speak of "alarming Russian knowledge" about the Habsburg General Staff plans and positions, but that in the course of the unfolding war this strategic advantage quickly dissipated. Moritz-Leidinger, *Oberst Redl*, p. 226 and p. 244. Pethö argues that Redl's treachery was in the end "more hindering than useful" for the Russian enemy, not least by turning the Redl fiasco into a successful disinformation campaign in Galicia. Pethö, *Oberst Redl*, p. 150.

20. Cf. Norman Stone, "Austria-Hungary," *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment Before the Two World Wars*, ed. Ernest May, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984, p. 60; John R. Schindler, "A Hopeless Struggle: Austro-Hungarian Cryptology During World War I," *Cryptologia* 24, Nr. 4, October 2000, pp. 339-350.

21. Schindler, *Redl – Spy of the Century*, p. 499. And Moritz-Leidinger, *Oberst Redl*, p. 113. Redl specifically exonerated his long-time lover Horinka. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

22. Already in 1938 the Russian General Dmitri Gurko told the Amer-

tragedy partially based on identity confusion.²³ And perhaps only remotely likely, can his treason also be seen as a strategic attempt to avoid war between Europe's most conservative empires?

These riddles will only contribute to keeping the allure of the Redl case alive. In the meantime the central myth definitely imploded: For decades the Redl affair, along with other spy cases involving homosexual agents, for example, like those of the Cambridge Five in the United Kingdom, served as proof that homosexuals per se could not be trusted because of their susceptibility to blackmail. Harassment and persecution resulted. As always, differentiation is the key, historical evidence the clincher.²⁴

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ican historian and future OSS-agent Harold C. Deutsch that he was absolutely convinced that Redl did not commit the reported suicide for the colonel "was not that type of person." "Sidelights on the Redl Case: Russian Intelligence on the Eve of the Great War," *Intelligence and National Security* 4, Nr. 4, 1989, pp. 827f.

23. Alan Sked, "A Patriot for Whom? Colonel Redl and a Question of Identity," *History Today* 36, Nr. 7, 1986, pp. 9-14.

24. Cf. John MacFarland, "Alfred Redl," *glbtq. An encyclopedia of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender & queer culture*. 2006. http://www.glbtq.com/social-sciences/redl_a.html.