

Chapter 1

The Mad Major

Herzlich Willkommen an Arsch der Welt – A Warm
Welcome to the Arsehole of the World

Sign at a secret German training airfield, Russia, 1922

TOWER BRIDGE, LONDON, 30 SEPTEMBER 1931

At first the silver wings of the little de Havilland Puss Moth were all but invisible against a leaden grey sky. Then it swooped down, lined up on the twin Gothic towers of Tower Bridge and shot through the gap between the roadway and the iron tracery of the walkway above. As astonished motorists and passers-by looked on, it continued upriver, passing low over the next seven bridges before darting through the central arch of Westminster Bridge and climbing away towards Brooklands aerodrome.

Daredevil pilot, wartime fighter ace and ‘resting’ actor Major Christopher Draper told reporters on landing that the flight had been a publicity stunt, partly to get work for himself and partly to highlight the plight of other jobless ex-servicemen reduced to penury by the global recession. The dramatic one-man protest led to an appearance in court charged with dangerous flying and flying without a valid pilot’s licence. A policeman claimed that the Puss Moth had dropped to within seven feet of the Tower Bridge roadway and that Draper and his cameraman passenger narrowly escaped death as the bridge was about to be raised to allow a ship to pass through. This was nonsense, as Paramount News footage of the flight showed, and Draper was let off with a stern warning. But it was music to the ears of a resting actor dubbed ‘The Mad

Major' by a delighted press as it brought welcome offers of work including a starring role in *Aces of the Air*, a nationwide tour by wartime British and German airmen delivering homilies on peace and the future of aviation to cinema audiences about to be thrilled by Howard Hughes' new aviation comedy, *Sky Devils*.

In the audience when *Aces of the Air* opened at London's Plaza cinema on 24 June 1932 was the tour's promoter, Colonel William Francis Forbes-Sempill. A scion of one of Scotland's oldest aristocratic dynasties and a wartime Royal Naval Air Service veteran, the Master of Sempill had been spying for the Imperial Japanese Navy since leading a naval aviation mission to Tokyo in 1922. Seduced by the militarist fascism of the ultra-nationalist Kōdōha (Way of the Emperor) faction and motivated to treason by an eye-watering bank overdraft, this clever, pushy, egocentric aristocrat was a keen supporter of British fascist organisations like the stridently anti-Semitic National Political League and the Royal Empire Society, a peculiar group that advocated stemming the tide of imperial decline with a programme of 'planned' emigration that would increase the Anglo-Saxon gene pool in fractious colonies. Sempill was also, in 1931, one of the founding principals behind the Anglo-German Fellowship, an organisation so rabidly right-wing that Soviet mole Kim Philby joined as effective cover for his own brand of treachery.¹

Sempill had begun planning the *Aces of the Air* tour after one of his regular visits to Germany and his shrill advance publicity trumpeted 'Personal Appearances by Four Famous Air Aces!' This was certainly warranted in the case of German Eduard Ritter von Schleich, the wartime 'Black Knight' who had a *Pour le Mérite*, or Blue Max, and 35 victories to his credit. 'Mad Major' Christopher Draper, fresh from his London bridges flight, had nine victories, so he too could be considered an ace. But Sempill was lying when he tried to pass off army officer Günther von Richthofen as a brother of the late Red Baron, Manfred von Richthofen, and an illustrious airman in his own right. Günther von Richthofen was really only a distant cousin of the Red Baron and no airman. The other British ace, Major Allan Bridgeman, was actually just a shy and unremarkable

wartime pilot down on his luck after a messy divorce. It is telling that this was to be a purely Anglo-German affair; no airmen from Britain's wartime allies, or from Germany's for that matter, were invited.²

Aces of the Air ran for 151 packed performances with the charismatic 'Teddy' von Schleich, his black uniform aglow with medals, the star turn. A fierce anti-communist who had narrowly escaped death while resisting an attempted Bolshevik coup in Bavaria, von Schleich had been among the first recruits to the nascent Nazi Party and, as Christopher Draper writes:

From him I learned a great deal about the National Socialist Party, and we had long and most interesting discussions, especially because one of our party, who accompanied the tour as a sort of business manager, was a very English Jew. As can be imagined, he and Teddy had the most heated arguments . . . Teddy used to tell me time and again: 'Christoph, eet eez only a question of time before my Hitler eez zee power.'³

Draper subsequently went to Germany as von Schleich's guest and, on 15 October 1932, was introduced to Hitler at Munich airport. The Führer seemed bored at first, but brightened on being told by his press agent Ernst Hanfstängl that Major Draper would be making a case for the Nazis in influential circles in London. Quite where 'Putzi' Hanfstängl got the idea that a cash-strapped, unemployed actor could wield pro-Nazi influence in Britain's corridors of power is unclear. Perhaps Draper's association with Sempill had something to do with it and, while this may only be a coincidence, Sempill had visited Germany just a week before Draper arrived in Munich.

Whatever really happened in Germany, Draper was by no means the first gay man to find the Nazis' pantomime rituals and homoerotic male bonding strangely appealing and, on 19 March 1933, the *Sunday Despatch* reported that Major Christopher Draper, recently returned from Munich where he had met Herr Hitler, was

organising a nationwide series of talks on behalf of the Nazis. At the end of April, an MI5 mail intercept on Dr Hans Thost, the London correspondent of the Nazi Party newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter* and a known low-level German spy, turned up an invitation to a meeting in Hampstead at which Draper would speak on the future of fascism in Europe.⁴

Thost recruited Draper as a Nazi agent; that much is clear. But the two men offer radically different accounts of how they met and the circumstances surrounding Draper's recruitment. Thost's version is that, in August 1932, towards the end of the *Aces of the Air* tour, he took Draper and von Schleich to lunch at London's fashionable Oddenino's restaurant and encouraged the Englishman to write pro-Nazi letters to the press. About a year later, Draper told Thost that he was 'prepared to work on behalf of Germany, that he was very short of money and that he would like to assist the German Luftwaffe'. Thost replied that Draper would first have to meet intelligence officers in Hamburg and, after some haggling over who should pay the fare, Draper agreed to go.⁵

Draper's autobiography, *The Mad Major*, published in 1962, makes no mention of the lunch at Oddenino's and claims that Thost invited him to his Wimbledon home on several occasions in 1933 and, after one particularly boozy lunch, proposed that he should become a German spy. Draper says that he asked for a couple of days to think it over as he was anxious 'to get in touch with MI5 as quickly as possible, for I realised that here was the most wonderful opportunity to double-cross the Hun'. He maintains that he told an acquaintance, one Baron K. de Trirop, of the approach and, two days later, met a 'Major X' and 'Sir Percy Sillitoe, the head of MI5', who instructed him to go along with everything the Germans asked of him, but to keep MI5 informed of his every move.

Draper then says that he boarded a Lufthansa flight from Croydon to Hamburg on Sunday, 23 July 1933, and, on landing, was taken to the Atlantic Hotel and left to his own devices for the evening. A young German called for him the next morning and led him to a café where, in a scene that might have come straight out of one of his own low-budget movies, the only customer was a pasty-faced

man seated at a corner table with the light behind him, wearing dark glasses and a hat pulled low over his eyes. Coffee was served and the spymaster, who gave his name as Degenhardt, said he wanted intelligence on military aircraft, aircraft factories and RAF squadrons. Draper replied that he could get this information and, perhaps a little over-eagerly, asked how much he would be paid. The German replied that payment would be by results and gave Draper two mail relay addresses, one in Hamburg and the other in Rotterdam, through which he was to send intelligence. Letters to Draper, ostensibly about stamp collecting, would be couriered to Britain and posted there. The meeting over, Draper returned to the Atlantic, packed and left for home.⁶

That, at least, was Draper's version of events, yet neither Draper nor Thost was telling the whole truth. Thost's account was given to Allied interrogators eleven years later, in 1945, so he can be forgiven some confusion over dates. It was also by then in his interest to downplay his role as an influencer and talent spotter. But Draper's story that he contacted MI5 immediately Thost tried to recruit him, and that the Hamburg trip was undertaken with their sanction, is nonsense. MI5 records show that they were already aware of Draper's links to Thost, but that his first meeting with MI5 actually took place on 3 August 1933, a week after his return from Germany. Draper made no mention of a café, dark glasses or a hat during the interview, merely stating that Degenhardt had been 'a German, aged about 35, rather Jewish and . . . not a man who had served as an officer in the forces'. Moreover, he certainly did not meet Sir Percy Sillitoe, who was then Chief Constable of City of Glasgow Police and only became head of MI5 in 1946; he was actually interviewed by Colonel Sir Vernon Kell, the Director General of MI5 and his deputy, Brigadier Oswald 'Jasper' Harker.⁷

Kell probably took part in the interview because MI5 had been monitoring Thost and his contacts with senior Nazis including Göring, Goebbels and Hess since his arrival in Britain in 1931. But his distrust of the flamboyant, homosexual Draper is all too evident in Harker's minute of the meeting. The MI5 officers rightly

concluded that the Englishman had considered becoming a German agent, but had changed his mind on realising that he was playing with fire and was now trying to rehabilitate himself by stringing the Germans along. Harker wrote that ‘there is no doubt that he is prepared to play’, but noted ruefully that, cash-strapped as ever, Draper had demanded to know whether he could keep any money the Germans sent him. MI5’s German specialist Edward Hinchley Cooke was assigned the role of case officer and, on 28 September 1933, gave Draper an innocuous Air Ministry document to send to Louis Fischer, Berglustaan 51a, Hillegersberg, Rotterdam, the Dutch cover address that he had been given while in Hamburg. This was returned without comment the following month and a small sum in Dutch florins was posted to Draper’s London flat a few weeks later.⁸

So if Draper really had considered becoming a German spy and only went to the authorities on returning from Hamburg, what had changed his mind? There was then certainly no shortage of evidence of the risks attached to the spying game in the early 1930s. Italian naval rating Ugo Traviglia had been shot for stealing documents for his ‘dark-eyed beauty’ French lover, while French engineer Professor Charles Eydoux and his secretary, Georgette Bonnefond, had been caught and jailed for espionage in Italy in February 1933. A Czech Army officer had killed himself after being lured into a honeytrap by a German nightclub singer, two Polish officers caught spying for the Soviet Union had been shot, a Yugoslav officer caught spying for Hungary had been hanged, two Frenchmen had been jailed for selling naval secrets to the Japanese and six British engineers were languishing in a Moscow jail awaiting trial for espionage.⁹

These cases were widely reported, but the contemporary spy case that must have concentrated Draper’s mind had begun with a British Army officer brazenly asking a Berlin hotel porter for the address of German military intelligence. Tipped off by a mysterious Russian, MI6 Head of Station in Berlin Frank Foley discovered that the British officer was one Lieutenant Norman Baillie-Stewart of the Seaforth Highlanders and an MI5 intercept on Baillie-Stewart’s mail

turned up, in November 1932, a letter from a Marie-Luise [sic] in Berlin:

My Dear Boy!

I often think of the nice days we spent together in Berlin last summer. I hope you are very well and you have not forgotten me. You were so kind in lending me some money. You remember my father stopped giving money to me because he did not wish that I should continue studying. Meanwhile, he has altered his opinion and it is all right. Unfortunately I cannot pay you back the whole sum at once, but I hope I may be able to send you the rest before Christmas. I look forward to seeing you again next year. Please write me again if you can come. With very kind regards, yours, Marie-Luise.¹⁰

The text of the supposed love letter was wooden and ambiguous, but the £50 enclosed with it, ostensibly as part-repayment of a loan, was downright suspicious. Baillie-Stewart had a substantial bank overdraft and was in no position to be lending large sums of money to anyone, least of all a German girlfriend he had only just met.

Baillie-Stewart's reply to the Marie-Luise [sic] letter was intercepted before it left Britain. Addressed to one Otto Waldemar Obst in Berlin, it read:

Dear Friend,

Thank you very much indeed for your letter and the prompt way in which you settled our small debt.

It is very good of you to ask me to stay with you and I shall do my utmost to take a holiday then, but I am afraid it is still too early for me to make any definite statement as to when I can get away. At the moment I think I should be able to manage at the beginning of March, but I shall let you know for certain later.

When you write to me in future may I make a suggestion that you use much smaller seals as such large ones are apt to arouse the curiosity of unscrupulous people. I say this because from the appearance of your letter I should imagine someone had opened it to have a look inside, before it reached me at my home address.

The weather here is not too good at the moment and nearly everyone seems to have colds. I hope you are faring better in Berlin. I shall look forward to hearing from you soon and to seeing you in the spring.

Again many thanks. Yours ever, Alphonse Poiret.¹¹

The reference to the first Marie-Luise letter having been tampered with caused some consternation until the Post Office confirmed that one of two wax seals on the envelope had actually been broken in transit from Germany, probably through being crushed. And the French-sounding signatory Alphonse Poiret led to some head-scratching in MI5 until Edward Hinchley Cooke pointed out that 'Poiret' meant a small pear in French, 'Marie-Louise' was also a type of small pear and 'Obst' was German for fruit. Hinchley Cooke had also learned that, since returning from Berlin, Baillie-Stewart had borrowed mechanised warfare training manuals from the garrison library at Aldershot and had snooped around the Mechanical Warfare Experimental Establishment at Farnborough.

Another 'Marie-Louise' letter, this time with £40, was intercepted a month later and, with the evidence against him mounting, Baillie-Stewart would normally have faced a court martial. But his ham-fisted approach to the Germans and his palpable lack of success as a spy would make it hard to portray him as a credible threat to national security. So he was confronted by Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Syms of the Judge Advocate's Office and Captain William Phillips of MI5, handed two closely typed pages detailing his treachery and given the opportunity to quietly resign in exchange for information on his dealings with the Germans.

Anyone with a grain of common sense would have leapt at such an easy way out of a treason charge, but not Norman Baillie-Stewart,

a conceited buffoon whom David Niven, a Sandhurst contemporary before becoming an actor, recalled as ‘a singularly unpleasant piece of work’. He considered the offer for a few minutes in awkward silence, then petulantly turned it down. The Provost Marshal formally charged Baillie-Stewart with offences under the Official Secrets Acts and, six days later, on 26 January 1933, he was bundled into a car and:

I soon recognised that we were on the London road. All my wonders and doubts again came back to me. Where the devil was I being taken? Was it to the War Office itself for further examination? In what seemed a very short while we were driving through the thick of the London traffic in parts that I did not know. Then suddenly a notice: ‘To the Tower of London’. Good heavens, I thought, can it be possible that I am being taken there of all places?¹²

The Tower might have been the most secure detention barracks in London, but it was also one of Britain’s most popular museums and tourists were soon flocking to gawp at the ‘Officer in The Tower’ cutting a dash in the tartan trews and Glengarry bonnet of the Seaforths as he took his daily exercise.

The court martial opened on 20 March 1933 with Baillie-Stewart admitting that he had gone to Berlin, but claiming that, while sitting alone in a café, he had met an Otto Waldemar Obst who offered to introduce him to a girl who would show him the sights. The attractive blonde, whom Baillie-Stewart said he only knew as Marie-Louise, promptly fell for his charms and they had energetically consummated their relationship in woods beside Wannsee, a lake in the south of the city. He strenuously denied giving away secrets and, much to the amusement of the packed public gallery, portrayed himself as a sexual athlete whom women would gladly pay for his expert favours, hence the £90 from a suitably appreciative Marie-Louise.¹³

Baillie-Stewart’s brother Eric confirmed that ‘Women are on his mind the whole time’, and a visibly distressed Mrs Suzanne Hickey,

the French-born wife of a fellow officer, admitted that she had spent the evening with him in London on Saturday, 27 August 1932, then saw him off from Liverpool Street Station on his first trip to Holland. German girl Lotte Geiler, discreetly identified in court only as Miss D, described meeting Baillie-Stewart on the boat train that same night and tearfully confirmed that, 'Yes, we got very friendly,' during the ferry crossing. A court official was overheard commenting wryly that Baillie-Stewart had 'made the most of his short acquaintance of her'. Indeed, such was the accused's growing fame as a latter-day Casanova, the War Office was being deluged with gushy letters from women pleading for his release. One woman admirer even offered to die for him, while a Belgian woman ran a bizarre fan club, *Les Amis du Baillie-Stewart*, for her 'cher petit Norman'. Mme de Renoz had, of course, never met the object of her distant admiration.

Appearing as Major A, Edward Hinchley Cooke told the court that the Berlin contact address Baillie-Stewart had given his regiment before leaving for Germany was actually that of Kaufhaus Nathan Israel, a department store. A search of the accused's room had revealed a scrap of paper with the Berlin telephone number of the Reichswehrministerium, the high command of the post-1918 German Army, another scrap of paper between the pages of Baillie-Stewart's driving licence with a Berlin address for Otto Waldemar Obst, photographs of an experimental British tank and several restricted British Army manuals including one entitled *The Tactical Handling of Army Tank Battalions*.

Baillie-Stewart tried to pass this off as study material for promotion and, amid hoots of derision from the public gallery, maintained that he only had the Reichswehrministerium phone number because he planned to offer himself as a liaison officer between the Reichswehr and the British Army. Backtracking furiously when Hinchley Cooke pointed out that he had also found, stuffed into the pocket of a brown tweed jacket in his wardrobe, a list of information that the Germans wanted on British tanks, Baillie-Stewart then tried to claim that he had actually gone to Berlin to pull off an intelligence coup that would so impress the British intelligence services that they would at once offer him a job.

The defence did their best, but their suggestion that only a complete fool would have kept such damning evidence of espionage in his quarters did not have quite the intended effect as few now doubted that Baillie-Stewart was indeed a very complete fool. They did pull one rabbit out of the hat in the form of bandleader Victor Silvester who said that a 'pretty, young and fair' Marie-Louise, who claimed to be 'very fond of ze Eengleeshmen', had accosted him in the ballroom at Berlin's Eden Hotel on 19 August 1932, the same night Baillie-Stewart had left the city. But most observers agreed with prosecutor Major Henry Shapcott when he snarled at the pale and trembling accused, 'I am not mincing words, the prosecution contend that Lieutenant Baillie-Stewart sold his country for £90.' On 13 March 1933, he was found guilty, cashiered and sentenced to five years in jail.¹⁴

In Berlin, meanwhile, a small army of journalists was hot on the trail of the mysterious Marie-Louise. Reports all too obviously planted to throw the journalists off the scent suggested that she had died of pneumonia, then Sefton Delmer of the British *Daily Express* tracked down one Olga Israel, an attractive Berlin Jewess who admitted that she had gone dancing with Baillie-Stewart but vigorously denied that she was 'Marie-Louise' or that she had, as he was now claiming, spent a day with him at a nudist colony.¹⁵

And there the trail would have gone cold were it not for two seemingly unrelated events in France. First, even as the former Lieutenant Baillie-Stewart, now prisoner B.1.13, joined the admissions queue at Wormwood Scrubs on that March afternoon, French newspapers were reporting that there could be a link between him, the still enigmatic Marie-Louise, a German spy known as 'La Belle Sophie' and a French Army officer and suspected German agent named Georges Frogé. 'La Belle Sophie' was actually a German-born woman named Sibela Drosd who ran a seedy café and brothel in the northern border town of St Avold. Intriguingly, Sibela Drosd's husband, Joseph, an odious creep who pimped underage girls, admitted under interrogation that he was a German courier and claimed that he had made several trips to Britain. There was also a striking similarity between the Marie-Louise letters sent to Baillie-Stewart and letters sent by one 'Germaine' to Frogé.¹⁶

Then, just as the La Belle Sophie story broke in the French press in October 1933, German courier and French double agent Wilhelm Gustav Geissmann told his Deuxième Bureau handlers that he had seen Parisian woman Lydia Stahl with German officers at Lindau in southern Germany. Whether there was any truth in Geissmann's tale about the Russian-born Stahl's contacts with the German military is unclear, but it turned out that she had spent several years as a Soviet agent in New York and was now part of a network spying on the French military for the Soviet military intelligence directorate, Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravleniye (GRU).¹⁷

Rounding up the Stahl ring in December 1933 proved simplicity itself as its members were invariably stupid. Despite an anonymous telephone tip-off, 'Prenez garde! Vous êtes Américains? Oui? Eh bien, vous feriez fort bien de quitter Paris . . .' (Take Care! You are Americans? Yes? Well, you would be well advised to leave Paris). American communists Gordon and Marjorie Switz still had stolen documents and a wad of cash hidden behind the wardrobe when detectives burst into their Paris hotel room. New York City-born Vassar graduate Marjorie simply refused to answer questions about the photographic negatives that had been rolled up in the cigarettes she was furiously chain smoking while detectives searched the room. Not that the Sûreté needed the smouldering evidence in the ashtray; both Gordon's and Marjorie's fingerprints had been found in a packet of films intercepted in Switzerland while en route to Russia.¹⁸

It was all thoroughly embarrassing for the Soviets, not least because Gordon Switz, the ring's paymaster, wasted no time in handing over his detailed account books in exchange for an early release, thus compromising Soviet agents and sympathisers across Europe. Worse still for the Soviets, the French had passed copies of intercepted correspondence between Lydia Stahl and Helsinki-based GRU agent Ingrid Bostrom to the Finnish state security police, Etsiva Keskuspoliisi (EKP), and this led the EKP to another 30 GRU spies operating in Finland, among them one Marie-Louise Martin.

Initially at least, both the Finns and the French suspected that the Marie-Louise languishing in a Helsinki prison might be the same

Marie-Louise with whom Norman Baillie-Stewart had allegedly cavorted in the Wannsee woods the previous summer. This raised the intriguing prospect that, if the girl now locked up in Helsinki and the blonde who had supposedly entertained Baillie-Stewart in Berlin really were one and the same, then Baillie-Stewart, who was many things unsavoury but no communist, had been duped into joining a Soviet spy ring. But neither Baillie-Stewart nor Victor Silvester recognised the Helsinki Marie-Louise's photograph and it turned out that she was really a Latvian farmer's daughter, former Riga barmaid and low level GRU asset named Marija Emma Schul who just happened to be using the alias Marie-Louise Martin.¹⁹

So now there had to be two Marie-Louises, one a Soviet agent languishing in a Finnish jail, the other a German agent still at large. Once again, however, the trail went cold until, in December 1936, several newspapers named Marie-Louise as civil servant's daughter Marie-Louise Bäckendorff. It seems, if the newspaper accounts are to be believed, that she had seduced British spy Robert Wendell, a German-born engineer of British descent who was handing MI6 details of fortifications on Heligoland, an island fortress off the entrance to the River Elbe. Marie-Louise found the evidence needed for Wendell's conviction, but had fallen in love with her target and, after Wendell was executed, fled to a Swiss convent.²⁰

With so much espionage-related mayhem splashed across newspaper front pages, it is hardly surprising that Christopher Draper took an attack of cold feet, abandoned his plan to spy for Germany and turned British double agent. Yet, just as MI5 officers Oswald 'Jasper' Harker and Edward Hinchley Cooke had suspected, there was much more to Draper's story than he was letting on, and it is now possible to piece together what really happened.

Early in 1933, Draper, fellow RAF veteran 'Captain' Guy Nugent and business associate Baron Martin Kristensen de Trairup had hatched a crazy get-rich-quick scheme that involved setting up an air taxi service in the Labrador goldfields, bribing miners to steal choice nuggets and mooring a large yacht off the tiny Inuit

settlement of Rigolet ready to make off with the loot. Another even more far-fetched scheme involved flying stolen Inca gold out of South America.

Neither Draper nor Nugent had any money while de Trairup was on the brink of his second bankruptcy and in no position to finance their plans. But one of them seems to have realised that, thanks to his Thames bridges flight, his friendship with von Schleich, his meeting with Hitler and his connections to right-wing British airmen like the Master of Sempill, Draper would be able to pose as a convincing spy in return for Nazi cash to finance the gold smuggling enterprise. A company rather indiscreetly named Inca Aviation (Overseas) Ltd was formed and, in a letter intercepted by MI5 at the end of June 1933, more than a month before his interview with Harker and Hinchley Cooke, Draper contacted Thost, who had indeed lunched with him and von Schleich at Oddenino's the previous year, to offer his services as a spy.

De Trairup, a half-Russian, half-Danish one-time minor functionary at the court of the last Tsar whom MI5 suspected of involvement in illegal arms trading, was right about the Germans being interested in the RAF. But, as Kell and Harker had guessed, Draper must have had second thoughts once he considered the prison sentence that awaited him if caught, not a pleasant prospect for anyone, but infinitely worse for a homosexual man like him. One thing is certain: while MI5 was aware of his links to Thost from the latter's intercepted mail, Draper's trip to Hamburg was not, as the MI5 official historian has suggested, made with their foreknowledge and approval; the dates simply do not match.²¹

Espionage was not, thanks to Degenhardt's insistence on payment by results, going to be the money-spinner that Draper and his accomplices had hoped it would be, so de Trairup contacted MI5 and a contrite Draper was able to clear his yardarm by becoming a double agent. Guy Nugent, who handled the Canadian end of the scheme, turned up in a Los Angeles courthouse a few weeks later charged with passing counterfeit \$20 bills and only escaped a prison sentence by claiming to be a war hero with a British DSO and a French Légion d'Honneur when he was actually just an

undecorated, non-commissioned despatch rider. Inca Aviation was put into liquidation only to be reborn as Plane Publicity Ltd, a legitimate banner-towing concern that once again failed to prosper and collapsed in 1938.²²

As for Draper's recruiter Hans Thost, he was kept under close surveillance with one MI5 informant, Thost's barber at Harrods department store in London, reporting that the German was oddly curious about fellow customers including senior staff at the Foreign Office and US Ambassador Robert Bingham. Thost was booted out of Britain 'in the public interest', in November 1935. But who was Draper's Hamburg spymaster Degenhardt, who was he working for, and why was Germany, supposedly demilitarised after the First World War, trying to steal British military technology?²³

The First World War had fostered at least as many problems as it resolved. Not least of these was that the weak post-war German government, in hock to the victorious Allies for war reparations, printed shoals of money to buy off its own embittered extremists. As many Western governments would rediscover a century later following the coronavirus pandemic, ill-judged, panic-driven fiscal stimuli inevitably trigger dangerous levels of inflation and the German economy was already in freefall when, in December 1922, beleaguered Berlin ministers decided to test Allied resolve by defaulting on reparations shipments of coal and timber. The French, itching to avenge their vast losses in the war just ended, promptly sent 60,000 troops on a smash-and-grab raid amid the industrial riches of the Ruhr. Overnight, Germany's communists and nationalists, workers and industrialists alike, were united in common cause and passive resistance brought her staple industries shuddering to a standstill. Tax revenues collapsed, the mark plummeted to an eye-watering 4.2 trillion to the dollar and unemployment rocketed to 30 per cent.²⁴

Berlin had gambled with Germany's economy and lost. But they had been right about one thing; the grand alliance that had won the First World War was falling apart under the new strains of peace.

London and Washington had refused to get involved in the Ruhr occupation, the enormous cost of which was now crippling an already ailing French economy. Worse still for Paris, everyone from the Vatican to the Kremlin was condemning French atrocities against German workers and, in just a few days, Germany had gone from a nation of belligerent militarists responsible for a war that had cost 16 million lives to the plucky victim of ruthless French aggression. A humiliated Paris was finally forced to accept an Anglo-American exit strategy, the Dawes Plan, that set a timetable for withdrawal, rescheduled reparations and, much to Gallic disgust, granted a substantial American loan to Germany.

It was victory of a sort for Berlin, but millions of ordinary Germans had been ruined, the country's embryonic democracy had been dealt a fatal blow and the only ones to profit were extremists whose paranoia found an audience amid the misery. Communists were first to the barricades, though their Moscow-orchestrated uprising in Hamburg was a fiasco. At the other end of both Germany and the political spectrum, membership of the Nazi Party in Munich shot up to 35,000 and, thus emboldened, Adolf Hitler and his cronies organised the Bierkeller Putsch, a risible attempt to overthrow the Bavarian government that left four policemen and fourteen Nazis dead. Sadly, on this occasion Hitler reneged on a promise to shoot himself should the uprising fail, choosing instead to spend a few months honing his bigotry and paranoia in a suspiciously comfortable prison cell.

Germany might have been in turmoil, but the wartime Allies could at least take comfort from claims that their weapons inspectors had reduced its immense wartime military machine to a lightly armed gendarmerie of 104,000 men, the Reichswehr, and removed the threat of German aggression for the foreseeable future. Yet the reality was that nothing had been done to reorder German society away from Prussian militarism and, worse still, the German High Command, the Reichswehrministerium, had made good use of the hiatus between the 1918 armistice and the arrival of weapons inspectors in January 1920. Train loads of armaments had vanished into the vast German rail network, warplane makers Heinkel and

Junkers had set up plants in Sweden, Dornier had moved across Lake Constance to Altenrhein in Switzerland and Anton Fokker had spirited airframes, engines and equipment into his native Holland. It was also proving a simple matter for the supposedly 104,000-strong Reichswehr to conceal its true numbers with paramilitary organisations like the civil police being used to provide basic military training.

The covertly expanding Reichswehr now needed discreet locations where armaments factories and training facilities could be set up well away from prying Allied eyes and in 1922 there was only one option: Russia. Post-war Germany and Russia had much in common; Germany had bankrolled the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in the hope that Lenin would take Russia out of the war, both countries had been defeated, both had undergone a radical change of government and both were groping towards a foreign policy fit for the post-war world. A rapprochement was clearly in their best interests and in April 1922 the two countries signed a treaty restoring diplomatic ties, waiving war reparations and embarking on a new era of economic cooperation.

The Treaty of Rapallo drove a coach and horses through the fragile post-war European settlement, but worse was to come when secret military codicils initialled a few weeks later in Berlin saw Germany's reactionary right-wing Prussian Junkers making common cause with the hated Bolsheviks. Rearmament could now start in earnest and a flight training school equipped with 50 Dutch-built Fokker fighters began operations at Lipetsk, a bleak Soviet airfield south of Moscow. A tank training school was opened at Kazan in Siberia, a chemical weapons factory was built at Chapayevsk in the Volga valley and German firm Junkers set up an aircraft factory at Fili on the outskirts of the Soviet capital.²⁵

It was a start, but successful rearmament must be guided by accurate intelligence on the military and industrial capabilities of friend and potential foe alike. Banned from any form of military intelligence organisation by the post-war peacemakers, the Reichswehrministerium had only been allowed to maintain a small counter-intelligence cell named *Abwehr*, an innocuous term that

literally translates as 'Defence'. But they did have an established espionage proxy in the *Deutscher Überseedienst*, an organisation set up by German industrialists during the war to spread propaganda and carry out low level espionage against the Allies. Post-war, and with covert Reichswehr funding, the *Überseedienst* absorbed talented former officers, among them one Hermann Göring, and expanded its operations into military intelligence.²⁶

The British were well aware of what the Germans were up to and had infiltrated an agent, Captain Kenneth Stott, into the *Überseedienst*. Abandoned into the Tranmere workhouse when his alcoholic Liverpool accountant father attempted suicide by walking into the Mersey in August 1896, Stott had subsequently emigrated to South Africa. There, according to a sternly disapproving MI5, 'he gave information to the Boers about the British and to the British about the Boers', during the Second Boer War. Serving in the King's Liverpool Regiment of the British Army during the First World War, he was wounded and commissioned. His medal card suggests that he cheekily asked for permission to wear the Boer Burger Medal in addition to his British decorations.²⁷

Employed by the fanatically anti-communist Sir George Makgill's Industrial Intelligence Bureau, a privately funded right-wing organisation uncannily similar to the *Überseedienst* and closely linked to both MI5 and MI6, Stott and his young 'secretary', Esther Le Roy, made several visits to Europe and reported that *Überseedienst* agents were funding left-wing British politicians and trades unions to stir up industrial unrest, thus opening the door to German competitors. Clearly calculating that a touch of melodrama would add weight to his reports, he claimed to have deposited a list of German spies in Britain at his bank with instructions that, should anything untoward happen to him, it was to be passed to MI6.

Makgill passed Stott's reports to MI6 Head of Production Desmond Morton who seems, initially at least, to have taken them seriously. MI5 on the other hand found Stott 'a most dangerous individual', and dismissed his material as 'extraordinarily fantastic . . . valueless . . . entirely erroneous'. And MI5 were right to be sceptical; the *Überseedienst*'s precious few British agents were ludicrously

amateurish and none more so than former RAF officer and serial bigamist Vivian Stranders. Recruited by the Überseedienst in 1925 to steal British and French military technology, Stranders had inadvertently engaged a Sûreté de l'État belge agent as an accomplice and, by the time he was arrested in 1926, had unwittingly provided the British, French and Belgians with a more reassuringly accurate picture of Überseedienst activities than the overheated fantasies of Kenneth Stott. The unlamented Überseedienst was wound up in 1928.²⁸

Abwehr had meanwhile expanded under the capable leadership of First World War intelligence veteran Major Friedrich Gempp and, despite still limited resources, now comprised two divisions, one looking east and the other west, each of which contained subdivisions Abwehr I (espionage), Abwehr II (signals intelligence) and Abwehr III (counter-espionage). Further expansion and reorganisation came when, in March 1928, just as the Überseedienst was closing down, Abwehr absorbed the small intelligence cell operated by the Reichsmarine, the contemporary name for the German Navy, and was itself transformed into an independent command directly responsible to the Reichswehrministerium.²⁹

On paper at least, Abwehr now looked impressive with its three divisions, the Abwehr I espionage division being further divided into Eins Heer (IH) dealing with army espionage, Eins Marine (IM) dealing with naval espionage and Eins Luft (IL) dealing with air espionage. Abwehr II was now responsible for sabotage, Abwehr III retained responsibility for counter-espionage, the Amtsgruppe Ausland (Foreign) division collected largely open source material from overseas sources and the Zentrale (Z) division was responsible for administration and records. There was also an extensive network of Abwehrstellen out-stations (Ast for short) and Nebenstellen sub-stations (Nest for short) scattered across Germany's Wehrkreis military districts, most with their own army, naval and air intelligence desks. Prior to the outbreak of war in 1939 the whole labyrinthine structure was under the control of Oberkommando des Heeres, in other words the Wehrmacht high command as then still distinct from the Nazi Party machine.

There would be further growth, particularly following a 1938 overhaul and the outbreak of war the following year, yet the outcome of this rapid expansion was an organisation with too many roles across both espionage and counter-espionage. Its espionage priorities were muddled, its operations dogged by amateurish methodology and its agent recruitment woefully naïve. Restricted opportunities for promotion made Abwehr an unpopular posting for talented officers so its staff, many of them time-servers or Kaiser-era officers doggedly resistant to change, tended to be intellectually ill-equipped for the work they were doing. Its decentralised structure coupled with a lack of effective oversight meant that the growing network of Abwehrstellen and Nebenstellen were all too often running operations against the same intelligence targets.

In truth, Abwehr's spymasters, like their predecessors in the Überseedienst, were merely building on a tradition of failure set by Germany's First World War military intelligence service Abteilung IIB, an organisation whose record is exemplified in the short, inglorious career of the Dutch stripper, prostitute and failed double agent Margaretha Zelle, better known as 'Mata Hari'.

As for Christopher Draper's spymaster the mysterious Degenhardt, he may have been Oberst Dr Ludwig Dischler, then a Hamburg-based Abwehr officer responsible for espionage in Britain. Dischler had first come to the notice of MI5 when, on 1 May 1930, he had stepped ashore at Southampton, England, unaware that, thanks to his part in a cack-handed attempt to burgle a French Sûreté safe, he was already on a watch list at British ports of entry. His efforts to appear inconspicuous on this and several subsequent visits to Britain were somewhat stymied by his wooden leg.³⁰

Unlike the Master of Sempill and Norman Baillie-Stewart, Christopher Draper was neither obnoxious nor even particularly devious. His poor choice of friends and his flirtation with Nazism suggest naïvety, but he was really just a ham actor and inept con artist out to make a fast buck in the bleak years of the Depression. Vulnerable at a time when homosexuality was illegal, he at least had the sense to call a halt to his idiotic scheme to fleece Abwehr once the risks became clear.

Draper then operated as the first British double agent against the Nazis until, according to MI5, ‘nothing of great interest came of this [case] and the matter lapsed completely’. In truth, without the cooperation of the Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force, MI5 simply ran out of a sufficiently credible mix of falsehoods and chicken-feed intelligence to keep Abwehr interested. The lessons of the Draper case were not forgotten, and when the British turned captured enemy agents against the Germans during the Second World War, the inter-service Twenty Committee, an unsubtle reference to both the Roman numeral XX for 20 and the expression double-cross, was formed to ensure a ready supply of plausible fabrications.³¹

Christopher Draper must have imagined that his foray into espionage had ended with a last letter from Hamburg in January 1934, but he could hardly have been more wrong. His career as a double agent was only just beginning and he would soon be drawn into an extraordinary international conspiracy that included, amongst others, an infamous New York Nazi, a drug-addicted US Army deserter, a treacherous Scottish hairdresser, a renegade French naval officer and anti-Nazi Hollywood movie stars.

Abwehr might have given up on Major Draper for the present, but now it had two new aviation spies waiting in the wings, one bound for Britain and the other for the United States. Both would become notorious in the months and years ahead, one languishing for years in British and Irish prisons, the other featuring in a best-selling book by a former FBI special agent. But first, Germany would shock the world with a graphic demonstration of the terrible fate that awaited its home-grown traitors.