

## The Albert Briefcase Affair: A 100-Year Cover-up of a British Propaganda Coup

*Heribert von Feilitzsch and Charles H. Harris, III*

---



German Commercial Attaché Heinrich F. Albert was the central figure in a counter-intelligence case that gripped America in 1915. (Library of Congress)

---

Arguably the most publicized “counterintelligence coup” of World War I occurred in mid-August 1915, when the contents of German Commercial Attaché Heinrich F. Albert’s stolen briefcase found their way into the editing rooms of the *New York World*. A sensational exposé of German intrigue in the neutral United States ran August 15–18, supplanting news of a devastating hurricane in Texas. Banner headlines blared, “HOW GERMANY HAS WORKED IN U.S. TO SHAPE OPINION, BLOCK THE ALLIES AND GET MUNITIONS FOR HERSELF, TOLD IN SECRET AGENTS’ LETTERS”; “NO DENIAL OF WORLD EXPOSURES BY AGENTS OF GERMANY”; and “NATION-WIDE SENSATION OVER SECRET ACTIVITY OF GERMANY.”<sup>1</sup>

Years later the former US Secret Service (USSS) Chief William J. Flynn and his former boss, Treasury Secretary William Gibbs McAdoo, credited Secret Service agent Frank Burke with the daring feat, billed as the most successful US counterintelligence operation of the Great War.<sup>2</sup> Upon thorough scrutiny of available archival documentation, the story of Albert’s briefcase theft was not a “counterintelligence” coup after all, at least not one to be credited to US intelligence organizations. It rather

appears to have been one of the most successful, long-lasting, and elaborate cover-ups of a British propaganda plot.

The theft of Albert’s papers and the sensationalist revelations had far-reaching immediate, medium, and longterm effects. When Albert noticed his briefcase missing on Saturday, July 24, 1915, around 4:00 p.m., the German commercial attaché and his colleagues scrambled to find the culprit and recover the briefcase. At the time Albert did not know who had taken it. Paul König of the German secret service investigated. König located a “former British detective,” possibly a member of the William J. Burns International Detective Agency working for Great Britain in the United States, who had information about the theft. The informant told König that a certain “independent newspaper writer” had proffered a selection of the papers to the *New York World* on August 2, a week after the theft.<sup>3</sup> According to König’s source, the “writer” had shadowed Albert for several weeks, indicating that he may not have been a mere reporter.<sup>4</sup>

While a small chance existed that a common thief had just been looking for valuables and may have discarded the “worthless” papers, it was unlikely. Still, on Monday, July 27, König placed an ad in the

---

The views, opinions, and findings of the author expressed in this article should not be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations or representing the official positions of any component of the United States government.





*New York Tribune*, in case someone found the bag: “Lost on Saturday. On 3:30 Harlem Elevated Train, at 50th St. Station, Brown Leather Bag, Containing Documents. Deliver to G. H. Hoffman, 5 E. 47th St., Against \$20 Reward.”<sup>5</sup> Hoffman was Albert’s servant. The briefcase did not turn up.

### The New York World Connection

With the briefcase and the compromising papers at large, and with König having accurately traced the papers to the editing rooms of the *New York World*, Ambassador Count Bernstorff, Albert, German naval attaché Karl Boy-Ed, and military attaché Franz von Papen went into overdrive to determine the contents and assess the potential damage that disclosure would cause. The group concluded that most of the information was of a financial nature: embarrassing yes, but not necessarily illegal. The papers revealed the German ownership of a shell company in Connecticut, the purchase and storage of arms and munitions, industrial market-cornering efforts, financing of labor unrest, as well as investments in newspapers, most notably the *New York Evening News*, which Albert had purchased in the spring of 1915.

The documents also detailed bribes to US politicians, links of the Deutsche Bank to the German clandestine operations, and payments to a wide range of editors, most notably to George Sylvester Viereck and his English language weekly, the *Fatherland*. Nonetheless, the publication of the Albert papers would be disastrous, both with respect to the US public’s perception of Germany, and ongoing clandestine activities. The group decided to try to convince the US government to intervene and stop the publication.

As soon as König had traced the papers to the *New York World* on August 2, Ambassador Bernstorff sent prominent New York lawyer Samuel Untermyer to intercede on his behalf with the *World*’s influential editor-in-chief Frank Cobb to prevent publication. Untermyer had worked with Albert on several legal cases surrounding Albert’s attempts to circumvent the British blockade and the purchase of the *New York Evening News*.<sup>6</sup> The emergency meeting with Cobb on August 2 yielded no results.<sup>7</sup>

Untermyer also worked as an official adviser to the Treasury Department at the time. Bernstorff now decided to use Untermyer’s connections to Treasury Secretary William G. McAdoo and get the lawyer to speak directly with President Wilson the next day. McAdoo, who was Wilson’s son-in-law and who, according to the president, had “a very warm feeling of friendship” for Untermyer, indeed organized a meeting the next day, August 3.<sup>8</sup> Wilson’s papers dealing with the meeting suggest that neither Wilson nor McAdoo had any prior knowledge of the briefcase and its contents.<sup>a</sup> The president seemed favorably inclined to look into the issue. It is at this juncture, that McAdoo likely asked USSS Chief Flynn to procure the papers from the *New York World*.<sup>9</sup>

Wilson delegated the briefcase matter to his confidante, Colonel Edward M. House. House, together with McAdoo and Secretary of State

a. Wilson considered Untermyer’s request to prevent the publication of Albert’s papers in the *New York World* “not a matter of general interest at all, but one in which he [McAdoo] thought we might do Mr. Untermyer a good turn.” Arthur S. Link, the prominent historian and editor of Wilson’s papers wrote that McAdoo informed Wilson that a Secret Service agent had taken Albert’s briefcase. It seems that Link failed to see the connection of Untermyer as a German emissary to get help on the briefcase issue. The secret service matter, Wilson mentioned in the letter to Galt, did not consist of McAdoo telling the president about the briefcase. More likely the “matter” was the directive to McAdoo to use the USSS to get the briefcase. Link made an assumption in this case, using the commonly accepted turn of events after 1918, rather than actual notes or evidence.

### **Foreign Intelligence Operations in the United States**

At the beginning World War I, German, British, French, Russian, and Austrian buying agents, spies, and saboteurs entered the United States and roamed the country largely untouched. During the Neutrality Period (1914–17) the legal framework for limiting and controlling foreign intelligence operations in the United States was woefully inadequate. Agents of foreign governments did not have to register, nor were activities such as spying on US industry, sabotaging agents of enemy countries, and engaging in propaganda illegal. US law enforcement agents could shadow foreign agents and investigate their activities but could only intervene in cases of violation of US neutrality laws (making it illegal for an American to wage war against any country at peace with the US) or other criminal statutes.

Robert Lansing, but without including Attorney General Thomas Watt Gregory, reviewed the contents of the briefcase after Flynn had secured them the week after Untermeyer's entreaty.<sup>10</sup> The daily report by New York USSS agent-in-charge John McHenry on August 5 documented that agent Frank Burke worked on a "special investigation" directed by Flynn.<sup>11</sup> He may have been sent to recover the Albert papers from the *World* that day.

The *New York Tribune*, in a well-researched exposé in November 1918, spoke to the fact that the attorney general was not involved in the efforts to locate the papers or in decisions about what to do with them: "...it was perfectly possible—even one might imagine, advisable—for Secretaries Lansing and McAdoo to inform the Attorney General. Yet, as a matter of fact, a representative of the Department of Justice was sent to the 'New York World' to say that the Albert documents seemed too serious and important to remain in private hands, and to request the paper to turn its 'discoveries' over to the Attorney General."<sup>12</sup> If the *Tribune's* reporting is accurate, the Bureau independently

tried to prevent the publication of Albert's papers around the same time that Untermeyer made his requests to Frank Cobb.<sup>13</sup>

### **Sabotage of German War Strategy in the US**

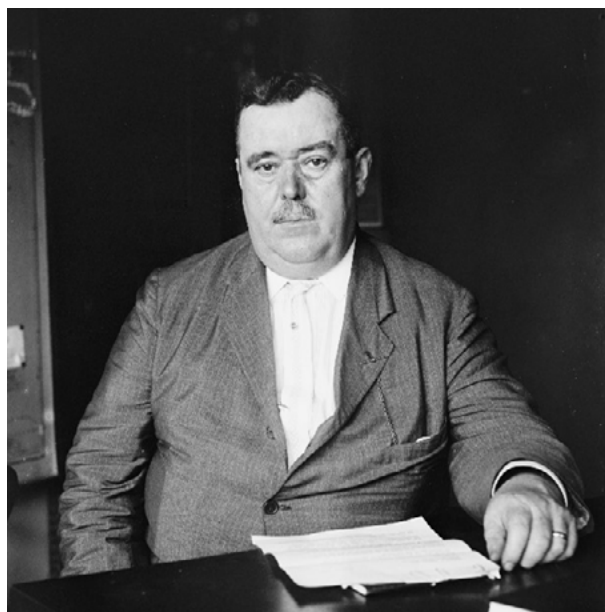
The theory that the Justice Department would have sought to prevent the publication makes perfect sense: There were dozens of active investigations under way in July and August 1915, from the prosecution of falsified shipping manifests, to the attacks on Canadian railroads, to the discovery of the schooner *Annie Larsen* with German-owned arms for the Indian resistance.<sup>a</sup> Without analyzing the Albert papers, and the chance to withhold information that may affect these and other active investigations, the work of the BI could be severely damaged, and arguably it was, as the Albert organization quickly shuttered propaganda and industry-cornering efforts. Frank Cobb not only refused the German entreaties but also must have denied the request of the Bureau if it was ever made.

Colonel House notified President Wilson on August 10 that the group recommended to not intercede on behalf of the German government and let the *New York World* proceed. House also reported in the same letter that two editors of the British propaganda outlet, the *Providence Journal*, had lunched with him: "You know, of course the work they are doing," indicating that the President was aware of known British propagandists in close contact with his confidante during the deliberations.<sup>14</sup> It also implies Wilson's tacit approval of such contacts.<sup>15</sup>

The *New York World* officially notified Albert and House on August 13, that the papers in their possession would be published shortly. In a last-minute effort, the German embassy sent Untermeyer and Hermann Prinz Hatzfeld zu Trachenberg (the second counselor in Washington, a member of the royal aristocracy of Prussia, and former member of the German parliament) to speak with Secretary of State Robert Lansing. The secretary was unwilling to assist the German delegation.<sup>16</sup>

The revelations published August 15–18, 1915, in the *New York World* and, as expected, were devastating for the German war strategy in the US. Using American cut-outs, Albert had indeed succeeded in securing contracts from Dupont's Aetna division to buy one year's worth of smokeless powder, severely hampering production of munitions. The monthly deliveries were stored in the Bridgeport factory, and subsequently sold off to the Spanish government.<sup>17</sup> The Thomas A. Edison Corporation

a. The *Annie Larson* affair was a convoluted scheme involving India's Ghadar Party, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and the German Foreign Office to supply arms to the Indian independence movement as a way to damage the British war effort. The plot was uncovered and became the subject of long and costly proceedings in San Francisco that became known as the Hindu-German Conspiracy Trial.



Former Chief of the US Secret Service, William J. Flynn, published a “novelized” autobiography of his exploits during World War I. He claimed until his death in 1928 to have the Albert briefcase. (Library of Congress)

had also agreed with the CEO of the Bayer Corporation in the United States (a German military intelligence agent) to sell the entire annual phenol production to the German concern. Phenol was vital in the production of aspirin but also the main ingredient in picric acid, a compound used for explosives.

These contracts came under public scrutiny and, in the case of Edison, abruptly ended. Other companies, such as hydraulic press manufacturers who sold their production capacities of vital presses to produce cartridges and artillery shells to Albert’s cut-outs, now realized who they were really dealing with and canceled their contracts. The German propaganda efforts, already in shambles after the RMS *Lusitania* sinking by a German U-boat on May 7, 1915, collapsed with the news of the clandestine

German ownership of the *New York Evening News*.<sup>a</sup> Readership caved and the paper was sold at a huge loss a few months later.

### ***Bovine Stupidity***

Albert personally suffered the consequences of his carelessness. Not only should he not have carried such sensitive and classified documents, he would have done well to have stayed awake on the train that fateful Saturday afternoon. A New York paper called Albert’s briefcase theft

a case of “bovine stupidity,” a description Albert admitted to his wife a few months later was “not so entirely unjustified.”<sup>18</sup>

Earlier in June, worried about potential criminal liability for Albert, Amb. Bernstorff had elevated Albert’s status from financial adviser to commercial attaché without approval of the Imperial Foreign Service.<sup>19</sup> After the briefcase scandal in August, the German chancellor now personally demanded Albert’s recall.<sup>20</sup> Albert in fact wanted to return to Germany to personally defend himself (and, according to a letter to his superior, he also wanted to return home to his family after two years on the “stressful” US assignment).<sup>21</sup> However, Bernstorff’s blunder of giving Albert diplomatic status without registering with the German foreign office

prompted London to refuse safe passage. Without an alternative, Albert stayed. The public embarrassment faded over the next few years, a new German chancellor even supported a defamation lawsuit against Albert’s detractors in 1917 (which he won in 1918), and his career propelled him all the way to secretary of treasury in 1922, albeit being publicly ridiculed as “Minister without Portfolio.”<sup>22</sup> Ironically, the British government had arguably salvaged Albert’s job in 1915 and promoted his career.

Just who stole the papers remained shrouded in mystery until 1918, when former USSS Chief William J. Flynn, published a “novelized” autobiography of his exploits during the war, which became a movie a year later.<sup>23</sup> In it, he intimated that one of his agents (not the experienced career agent Frank Burke who was later credited, but rather unflatteringly an amateurish skinny boy named “Jimmy”) had snatched the satchel.<sup>24</sup> To support his claim, Flynn included a photograph of the purported briefcase with a USSS evidence tag attached, albeit looking black rather than brown as the text and Albert’s advertisement claimed. The evidence tag reads, “Portfolio taken from H.F. Albert July 24, 1915, at 5:30 pm, containing documents relating to German intrigue [illegible], W. J. Flynn.”<sup>25</sup> Flynn claimed until his death in 1928 to have the briefcase in his possession.

By 1917, Attorney General Thomas Gregory could no longer stomach Flynn’s public grandstanding and interference with BI investigations in New York. As a result of Gregory’s pressure, Flynn was

a. On May 7, 1915, a German U-boat sank the RMS *Lusitania* off Kinsale, Ireland. Among the 1,199 passengers and crew who died were 128 Americans.

forced out. To supplement his income and feed his ego, he started to write adventure, detective, and spy stories that were widely published in New York papers. Within a year Flynn had completed a novelized memoir, *The Eagle's Eye: A True Story of the Imperial German Government's Spies and Intrigues in America from Facts Furnished by William J. Flynn, Recently Retired Chief of the U.S. Secret Service*, and was promoting it. The book became successful enough to be adapted into a movie in 1919.<sup>26</sup>

Probably as part of Flynn's publicity campaign, Frank Burke was first named the agent who pulled off the Albert briefcase feat in New York papers in November 1918.<sup>27</sup> Burke and Flynn's careers continued to blossom when Flynn became chief of the Bureau of Investigation (BI, forerunner to the Federal Bureau of Investigation) in 1920. Flynn took Burke, now a fellow counterintelligence legend, with him to become assistant chief.

Former Treasury Secretary William G. McAdoo's biography, *Crowded Years*, which appeared in 1931, cemented the Flynn and Burke story to become the official and authoritative version of what happened. According to the memoirs, McAdoo received authorization to surveil German diplomats from President Wilson on May 14, 1915, one week after the sinking of the ocean liner RMS *Lusitania*, in the form of an executive order. In his book, McAdoo quoted Burke's account. Burke described that together with another agent they shadowed the German-American propagandist George Sylvester Viereck and Heinrich F. Albert on the 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue elevated train going uptown on the afternoon

of July 24, 1915. Burke's partner exited the train staying with Viereck after a few stops. Burke remained on the train, seated behind the German commercial attaché. Albert fell asleep, woke up in a panic when the train stopped, and left the train forgetting his satchel. Burke saw an opportunity, grabbed the portfolio, and evaded an irate Albert.

According to Burke, Albert had noticed him and pursued him down the platform. Burke jumped on a streetcar and told the conductor to speed up as a crazy person was after him. At a stop a few streets down, Burke phoned Flynn who "came up in his machine [automobile] and we drove to the office."<sup>28</sup> After looking through the contents of the briefcase with Burke, Flynn took the papers to McAdoo's vacation home in Maine the next day. The treasury secretary then claimed that he unilaterally decided to give the papers to the *New York World* for publication.<sup>29</sup>

### **Separating Legend from Fact**

Burke received widely reported recognition for his daring counterintelligence success upon retirement in 1942.<sup>30</sup> President Roosevelt gave him a signed photograph, "To my friend, Frank Burke, Franklin D.



Public outrage after a German U-boat sank the RMS *Lusitania* on May 7, 1915, was significant but supporters of continued US neutrality counseled against US involvement in Europe's war, as in this editorial cartoon showing Uncle Sam urging President Wilson to be steady in his response. (Library of Congress)

Roosevelt."<sup>31</sup> Countless historians have adopted this version at face value.<sup>32</sup> The USSS website not only recounts this feat by one of their own but also bases the birth of the service's counterintelligence mission on the Albert briefcase affair. Yet the story told in Flynn's books and McAdoo's memoirs, quoting Burke's recall of the event, probably never happened.

One of the foundational claims for the USSS having captured Heinrich Albert's documents is the supposed existence of an executive order, dated May 14, 1915, which authorized the Treasury agents to shadow German diplomats.<sup>33</sup> This





Joseph Murphy (left) and Frank Burke, 1942. (Burke Personnel file, NARA)

order is crucial since the mission of the USSS since May 1908 consisted only of presidential protection and counterfeiting investigations.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, the mission of the Bureau of Investigation was to enforce federal laws on a national level. Since 1908, BI agents had investigated land fraud, Mann Act crimes, and violations of the neutrality laws. German intrigue, such as supplying the German fleet from US harbors using false manifests, sending reservists with false passports to Germany, and mounting attacks on Canada from US soil clearly fell under potential violations of the neutrality laws. As a consequence, and despite Flynn's frequent and public claims to the opposite, the USSS had no authorized role in these investigations until the purported executive order.<sup>35</sup>

The presidential authorization of sweeping investigative powers for the USSS in May 1915 would have marked not only a surprising departure from previous departmental separation of responsibilities. It

also would have likely triggered congressional scrutiny as the founding of the BI was the result of an express congressional ban on using Secret Service agents in the enforcement of federal law other than counterfeiting.

The literature covering the briefcase affair includes the current official USSS, FBI, and Homeland Security website and well over a hundred books and peer-reviewed articles.<sup>36</sup> The main justification, also

listed on the USSS website as the historical beginning of that agency's counterintelligence mission, is that "Before President Wilson signed an executive order on May 14, 1915, authorizing surveillance of German Embassy personnel in the United States, the Secret Service was limited to watching clerks, technicians and errand boys for the Germans." The USSS site adds, "During World War I, President Woodrow Wilson directed the Secretary of the Treasury to have the Secret Service investigate possible espionage inside the United States. He wanted the Service to uncover and disrupt a German sabotage network that was believed to be plotting against France, England, and the United States. To do this, an 11-man counterespionage unit was established in New York City. Their most publicized investigation concerned the activities of Dr. Heinrich Albert and his infamous briefcase."<sup>38</sup> According to the site, Burke was the leader of this unit.

One reason there never was a congressional inquiry or investigation into the use of the Secret Service for counterespionage during World War I is that there neither was an executive order from the president on May 14, 1915, nor was there a Secret Service counterintelligence unit in New York under Burke's leadership. President Wilson issued 40 executive orders in 1915, two of them in May. He did not issue a numbered and registered executive order on May 14, 1915. None of the known executive orders in 1915 pertains to the Secret Service or investigations of German subjects in the United States.

To be sure, a registered executive order does not account for all presidential directives. A president can also issue a memorandum, directive, or sign a departmental memorandum thus authorizing its content. A thorough scan of the papers of Woodrow Wilson, Robert Lansing, William J. Bryan, Edward M. House, and William G. McAdoo reveal no such alternative. Most importantly, President Wilson's papers do not contain any written interaction with Secretary McAdoo between May 7 (*Lusitania* sinking) and August 3 (when McAdoo and Untermyer informed the president).<sup>39</sup>

Could Wilson have given an oral directive to McAdoo without any documentation, counsel of other cabinet members, or legal advice, which counteracted a 1908 congressional law? Considering the far-reaching legal implications, it does not seem plausible. Moreover, such an oral directive would certainly have triggered inner-departmental memorandums within the Treasury and the Justice Departments; none has come to light.

***There is no evidence in the daily reports that a counterespionage task force existed, or that Frank Burke shadowed George Sylvester Viereck and Heinrich Albert on July 24, or that Burke indeed stole Albert's briefcase.***

---

Absent authorization, the ambitious Flynn and McAdoo could have taken the liberty to mount a rogue operation against German agents in summer 1915. However, USSS agents' daily reports dispel the purported existence of a counterintelligence unit in New York for the weeks or months of related shadowing of German agents and diplomats before and after the briefcase affair.

***A Question of Capability***

Before considering further detail, the USSS in summer 1915 also lacked the manpower and resources to mount such an operation. The complexity and necessary resources of such shadowing operations is well documented in the declassified files of the Bureau of Investigation.<sup>40</sup> Although the BI employed 219 agents in a dozen field offices in 1915, not including special employees and informants, the USSS staff in 1915 amounted to 50 men, including the presidential protection detail and counterfeiting investigators on a national scale.<sup>41</sup>

In New York in July 1915, the USSS employed 12 agents, one of whom was permanently detailed to Boston, another to Buffalo, and a third to presidential protection at Wilson's summer retreat in Cornish, New Hampshire.<sup>42</sup> The agent whom Burke mentioned as his Secret Service companion on July 24 was not attached to the New York field office. He was a member of the presidential protection detail in Washington, DC, and was not in New York in July 1915. With only nine

agents available, it is inconceivable that there was any organized and regular surveillance of German and Austrian diplomats and officials in New York. Agents would have had to shadow not only the German and Austrian diplomats, but also their main staff members, amounting to more than two dozen potential targets.

The nine USSS agents working in the New York office during the time of Albert's briefcase theft also did not dedicate their time to shadowing Germans. All agents worked on non-connected cases. Rather than shadowing Germans in the week before the briefcase theft, Burke worked in Boston on a counterfeiting investigation.<sup>43</sup> He briefly returned to New York to investigate a case in Albany, NY, on July 19.<sup>44</sup> Another agent worked on a counterfeiting investigation in Bradley Beach, New Jersey, in July 20–24.<sup>45</sup> A letter threatening the president arrived on July 18, and three agents of the New York office were investigating this threat.<sup>46</sup>

On July 23, the day before Burke allegedly snatched the briefcase, he worked on a counterfeiting case on "special assignment" from Chief Flynn. The investigation took him to Ashbury Park, Ocean Grove, and Allenhurst, New Jersey, where he tried to locate a suspect. Burke returned to New York from Allenhurst at 6 p.m., July 23, and went home.<sup>47</sup>

The next day, the New York office's daily reports show activity in several counterfeiting investigations. Burke reported, "At the office at 9 a.m. and balance of the day I was

engaged on special investigation under directions of the Chief." This special investigation probably referred to the case he had investigated the day before. According to Burke's account in McAdoo's memoirs, the agent had planned to take the afternoon off after a long week on the road.<sup>48</sup>

According to the ad König placed in the papers, Albert's briefcase disappeared on the 3:30 p.m. train on July 24. The agent in charge of New York's Secret Service field office was present when Burke and Flynn supposedly arrived with the briefcase, but went home at 5 p.m., only to be roused an hour later when the New York Customs House reported the arrest of a counterfeiting suspect. Had Burke and Flynn brought the Albert briefcase to the field office as Burke claimed in McAdoo's memoirs, it does not seem plausible that the agent in charge went home and later preoccupied himself with a counterfeiting investigation.

Rather than going to the "office," as Burke had written, he could have brought the briefcase to Flynn's home. There is a potential problem with this theory: in the agents' daily reports for that week, messages to Chief Flynn are addressed to Washington, DC.<sup>49</sup> He may not even have been in New York at the time. In any case, Burke clearly recalled coming to the office with Flynn in the chief's "machine" (automobile).

On July 25, Sunday, Burke came into the office at 10:00 a.m. and left at 2:00 p.m. He was working on an unspecified special investigation under the direction of Flynn. The "special investigation" continued through August 5, when another agent joined Burke.<sup>50</sup> August 17, a third agent





Born in Australia in 1869, Guy Gaunt served in Washington, DC, as the Royal Navy attaché and liaison officer during World War I. He played a major role in guiding the United States into the war. (Guy Gaunt, *The Yield of the Years*)

joined in Burke's special investigation. The investigation may have come to a close that day, because Burke and the other agents worked at the office on August 18 without specifying a "special investigation."<sup>51</sup> In September Agent Burke once more is detailed to a "special investigation." The agent who had supposedly joined Burke on the elevated train in July, and who at that time was not even attached to the New York field office, appears only briefly in the agent's daily reports in August. He is also mentioned in the *Sunday Telegram* a few months later as a member of a counterfeiting arrest in Washington, DC, led by Chief Flynn. He was then still assigned to the DC office.<sup>52</sup>

The sporadic assignments of agents to special investigations seem to have consisted of investigations in jurisdictions other than the New York field office, as with Burke's trips to Boston and Allenhurst in the week before the briefcase affair. They also

included investigations where the agents reported directly to Flynn and not to the agent in charge of the field office. However, the sporadic nature and the lack of assigned resources does support the assumption that Burke and his colleagues worked on counterfeiting investigations, as well as investigating threats to the president, rather than shadow German subjects. Burke, for example, worked on counterfeiting cases in the months and weeks before the Albert affair, and also in the weeks and months after.

There is no evidence in the daily reports that a counterespionage task force existed, or that Frank Burke shadowed George Sylvester Viereck and Heinrich Albert on July 24, or that Burke indeed stole Albert's briefcase.

### ***Alliance of the "Little People"***

The collection of declassified Bureau of Investigation files shows that the BI had nothing to do with the theft of Albert's briefcase. And if the USSS did not have the manpower or authority to follow German officials in New York in 1915, who did? In the fall of 1914, the British naval attaché Captain Guy Gaunt had received an offer from the leader of the Bohemian National Alliance, Victor Emanuel Voska, to provide intelligence and manpower to the British government. Gaunt lovingly referred to Voska's organization as the Alliance of the "Little People," referring to the small European countries such as Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Bosnia, and Serbia they originated from.<sup>53</sup> Most interesting for Gaunt was the ability of Voska's people, many of them working class, to infiltrate

German and Austro-Hungarian consulates and businesses. For example, the first Czech consul in the US after World War I was one of Voska's key men in the Austro-Hungarian consulate in New York during the war.<sup>54</sup>

Revelations of Austrian efforts to foment strikes, falsify passports, and hamper US munitions factories led to the expulsion of the Austrian ambassador on September 9, 1915. The most devastating information about the Austrian plots came from Voska's discovery of an American journalist carrying papers for the German government to Berlin. The journalist was arrested at Falmouth, England, in August 1915, and the papers taken. Once again, the British government turned the documents over to the *New York World*. The resulting scandal in the beginning of September rivaled that of Albert's exposé. Among the discovered letters was one that von Papen had written to his wife, referring to Americans as "idiotic Yankees."<sup>55</sup> It was a propaganda bloodbath.

Compared to the resources of the BI and the USSS, Voska had a virtual army of agents in New York of 84 men and women.<sup>56</sup> These volunteers had been carefully filtered from the Slavic organizations that existed in many of the Eastern and Midwestern states. Altogether, Voska claimed to have had 320,000 members nationwide in 1917.<sup>57</sup>

Voska provided the manpower for most clandestine operations of the British Naval Intelligence in the US during the Neutrality Period (1914–17), providing intelligence, shadowing German operatives, and sabotaging German propaganda efforts. John R. Rathom, editor of the *Providence*

---

### ***Voska provided the manpower for most clandestine operations of the British Naval Intelligence in the US during the Neutrality Period (1914–17), providing intelligence, shadowing German operatives, and sabotaging German propaganda efforts.***

---

*Journal*, became Gaunt's main propaganda agent in September 1914, and was paid by the admiralty for his services.<sup>58</sup> For the next two years, in a propaganda "triangle" Voska and his organization retrieved intelligence from their various sources, submitted them to Gaunt for analysis, who then released selected parts for Rathom to publish.

Rathom, with frequent first scoops on German scandals, also contacted the *New York Times* and *New York World* with information. These papers prefaced their reports with "the *Providence Journal* will say to-morrow morning..." and published British propaganda unchecked.<sup>59</sup> Not being allowed to divulge the identity of his sources, Rathom claimed that he ran his own intelligence network. This and many falsehoods he published over the years became exposed in February 1918, when Attorney General Gregory forced the editor to issue a sworn statement as to his being an utter fraud.<sup>60</sup>

---

### ***The Case for a British Influence Campaign***

Voska's story of how the briefcase came into his hands seems embellished.<sup>a</sup> Supposedly, his men had an identical portfolio made, with Albert's inscription "HA" on the lock.<sup>63</sup> This does not match the Flynn photograph. The Voska shadow then followed Albert on the train

and switched the briefcase when the latter dozed off.<sup>64</sup> According to Voska, Albert had not noticed the switch and went home with a briefcase full of newspapers. Upon realizing that his papers were missing, Albert, according to Voska, called the police. There is no record in Albert's papers that he called the police. Given his official position and the sensitive contents of the satchel, that would have been a highly unlikely move.

That said, Voska had the resources, motivation, and connections to steal the briefcase and make it available to British intelligence. The theft occurred on July 24 and the papers arrived at the *New York World* on August 2. In a week's time, Gaunt and his superiors could easily have analyzed the contents, translated the parts they wanted published, and prepare one of the greatest propaganda coups of the war.<sup>65</sup> With Untermeyer alerting the US government to the existence of the papers, Gaunt did not even have to hand the documents to the Wilson administration. Not knowing where they had come from and obviously assuming the veracity and completeness of the information, Wilson, House, McAdoo, and Lansing went along with the British coup.

Other than Voska, who else believed that British agents were responsible for the briefcase theft? Albert, Bernstorff, von Papen, Boy-Ed, and König all believed British intelligence was culpable.

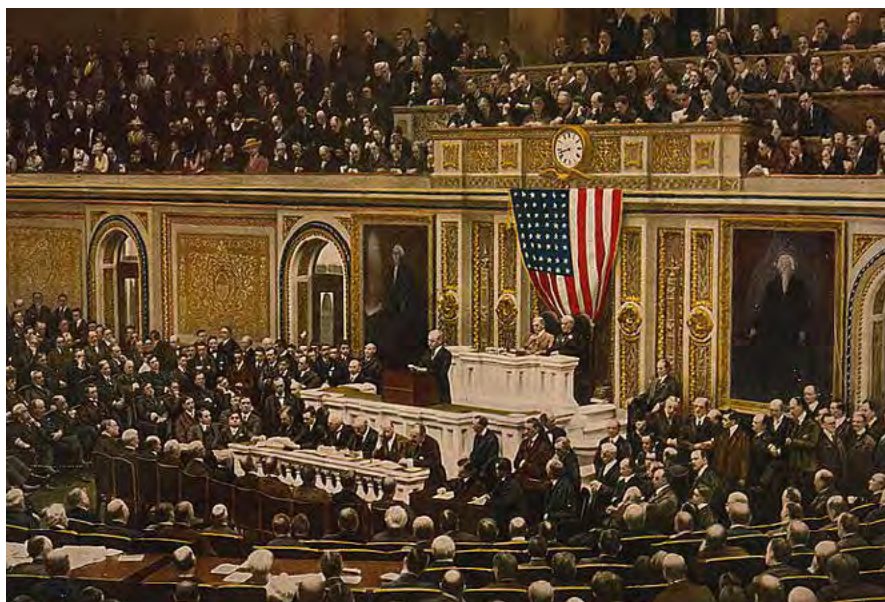
Guy Gaunt, somewhat sheepishly, wrote in his memoir, "Suggestions appeared in the pro-German press that agents of mine had robbed him. Quite untrue, however; the Doktor's papers were in the possession of the secret police and my friend, Captain Flynn, kindly returned them to their owner – after they had been carefully photographed."<sup>66</sup>

Gaunt's explanation is telling. It is true that "his agents" had not robbed Albert. The Czechs were unpaid and technically not his agents. The papers also were in the possession of the USSS at some point. The more interesting part would, of course, be how and when "his friend, Captain Flynn" came into possession of the papers. Gaunt did not elaborate on that point. That the papers were dutifully returned is not true. The Albert papers in the US National Archives, captured in 1917 by the Bureau, do not contain the contents of the briefcase. It was not only the German-friendly press who suspected the British were behind the theft. Most US papers agreed with the suspicion, at least until 1918.<sup>67</sup>

Most telling, however, is a comment in a collection of Major General Ralph H. Van Deman's papers, *The Final Memoranda*, written on June 5, 1950, long after McAdoo's memoirs appeared with the Burke and Flynn storyline dominating the historiography. Van Deman, often dubbed the father of US military intelligence, was closely working with the Bureau to identify German intelligence operations in 1915. Voska cooperated with Van Deman just like he did with the Bureau during the neutrality years

---

a. One of the curious claims Voska made in his memoir is that his 17-year-old daughter Villa worked in Albert's office in 1915 as a stenographer and "rummaged discreetly in his files." The assertion is plausible but cannot be verified because Albert's accounts do not list his administrative staff.



On April 2, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson addressed a joint session of Congress to request a declaration of war against Germany. (Half-tone image, NARA)

and became a MID agent in 1917. The two men had a close working relationship. In his recall of events during the World War I, Van Deman wrote: “He [Voska] worked for the British Intelligence in 1914–15 and 16 and did some exceedingly clever work... It was Voska who got the handbag from Dr. Albert.”<sup>68</sup> He should have known.

The revelation of the Albert papers in the *New York World* and other dailies in summer 1915 coincided with a massive effort of the British government to capitalize on the US public’s outcry over the sinking the *Lusitania*. A thorough reading of the front pages showcasing the contents of Albert’s briefcase reveal a clever sprinkling of more scandalous—and untrue—news on the same pages: “EVIDENCE IS GIVEN TO DANIELS ABOUT GERMANY’S

SPYING: Providence, R.I., Aug 17. – The *Providence Journal* will say to-morrow morning...” Also, “GERMANY CHARGED WITH HAVING SPIES IN OFFICES OF U.S.: The *Providence Journal* in its issue to-morrow will make the following charges...”<sup>69</sup>

The British propaganda campaign did not rest there. Embarrassing revelations of captured German papers in September 1915 caused another huge scandal. The entire campaign yielded great success: The German propaganda chief had to leave the country in the end of May 1915. The Austrian ambassador was expelled in September. The German military and naval attachés followed in December. Albert remained the lone accredited German attaché in New York.

None of the revelations showed “sufficient criminal evidence” on his part, and Secretary of State Lansing thought Albert too important for trade than to send him packing. President Wilson admitted to Secretary Lansing, “Albert has been able, and willing, to tender our trade in many particulars.”<sup>70</sup> However, after the scandal the discredited attaché sequestered himself in a suite at the Astor Hotel and rarely ventured out in public. His work lay in shambles. The German propaganda operation, blockade running, and efforts to find a *modus vivendi* with the Wilson administration faded.

### *The Gloves Come off*

Instead, a lower cadre of German operatives took charge of clandestine efforts and concentrated on new deadly ways to stop the US support of the Allies.<sup>71</sup> Dozens of ships, factories, and logistics installations burned throughout fall 1915.<sup>a</sup> In March 1916, Pancho Villa attacked Columbus, New Mexico, causing virtually the entire US Army and reserves to be stationed in Mexico or along the border. Fomenting a US military intervention in Mexico had been personally authorized by the German chancellor. A few months later, in July 1916, a huge explosion ripped through the Allied loading terminals in the New York Harbor, causing an earthquake that could be felt as far as Baltimore, where the responsible German agents toasted their success.<sup>b</sup> The Zimmermann Telegram and resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare in February 1917 sealed the

a. See von Feilitzsch, *The Secret War on the United States in 1915: A Tale of Sabotage, Labor Unrest, and Border Troubles* (Henselstone Verlag, 2015).

b. See Michael Warner, “Protecting the Homeland the First Time Around: The Kaiser Sows Destruction,” *Studies in Intelligence* 46, no 1 (s00s) See David Welker, “Explosive Coal: Bombs Hiding in Plain Sight,” *Studies in Intelligence* 66, no. 1 (March 2022).

## An Early Influence Operation

---

fate of America's fragile neutrality.  
The United States officially joined

the war on the side of the Allies on

April 6, 1917, finally fulfilling Great  
Britain's greatest desire.



*The authors:* Heribert von Feilitzsch is a writer and historian with degrees from the University of Arizona and Wake Forest University. He has written several books on the German Secret Service in North America in 1908–18, including *In Plain Sight; The Secret War Council; The Secret War on the United States in 1915;* and *Felix A. Sommerfeld and the Mexican Front in the Great War*. Charles H. Harris, III, is professor emeritus of history at New Mexico State University, Las Cruces. He has written and co-authored 10 books, including *The Texas Rangers and the Mexican Revolution; The Secret War in El Paso; The Plan de San Diego; The Archaeologist was a Spy;* and *The Great Call-Up*.



### Endnotes

1. *New York World*, August 15–18, 1915.
2. See for example, Philip H. Melanson, Peter F. Stevens, *The Secret Service: The Hidden History of an Enigmatic Agency* (Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2002), 38.
3. Albert Papers, Box 23, König to Albert, undated memorandum, RG 65, NARA. It is reasonable to assume that König found out within a week of July 24, that the *World* had the papers, because the lawyer hired by Albert met with President Wilson on August 3, 1915.
4. Albert Papers, Box 23, Memorandum Paul König to Albert, undated (August 1915), RG 65, NARA.
5. For example, *New York Evening Telegram*, July 27, 1915.
6. Subcommittee of the Judiciary Committee of the US Senate, *Testimony of Samuel Untermyer, Brewing and Liquor Interests and German and Bolshevik Propaganda*, vol. 2 (Government Printing Office, 1919), 1835ff.
7. *Ibid.*, 1866, 1936–37. Untermyer saw Wilson on August 3. According to Paul König, the *World* did not have the papers until August 2. The first Untermyer meeting must have occurred on that date.
8. Arthur S. Link, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 33, WW to Edith Bolling Galt, August 3, 1915.
9. *Ibid.* US Senate, Testimony of Samuel Untermyer, 1867. Untermyer allows for the “possibility” that he had known about Albert’s briefcase before the publication and “could” have been hired to prevent its publication. Although there is no available record that proves Flynn’s involvement at this juncture, it seems reasonable for McAdoo to have asked Flynn to get the papers. Another possibility would be that Flynn received the papers from the *World* without asking after the McAdoo-Wilson meeting.
10. While Lansing is not mentioned specifically by House, Lansing later told tHatzfeld that he had advance notice of the existence of the briefcase.
11. Daily Report of Agent, August 5, 1915, New York: Volumes 46–48 February 1, 1915–November 30, 1915, RG 87 US Secret Service, NARA.
12. *New York Tribune*, November 8, 1918.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Link, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 33, House to Wilson, August 10, 1915.
15. Link, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 33, House to Wilson, Aug 13, 1915; Albert Papers, Box 23, Letter to Wife Ida, August 14, 1915, RG 65, NARA; Memorandum Paul König to Albert, undated (August 1915), RG 65, NARA.
16. Albert Papers, Box 23, Memorandum Paul König to Albert, undated (August 1915), RG 65, NARA.
17. Albert Papers, Box 5, Memorandum from Carl Heynen, Bridgeport Projectile Company, June 30, 1915, RG 65, NARA.
18. Albert Papers, Box 23, Letter to Wife Ida, January 17, 1916, RG 65, NARA.
19. Albert Papers, Box 24, Count Bernstorff to Robert Lansing, June 22, 1915, RG 65, NARA; Albert Personnel File, Foreign Office to Bernstorff, October 13, 1915, GFM 33-4186, British National Archives, Kew, UK.
20. Albert Personnel File, von Jagow to Count Bernstorff, October 13, 1915, GFM 33-4186, British National Archives, Kew, UK.
21. Albert Papers, Albert to Secretary Trautmann, December 5, 1915, RG 65, NARA.
22. Albert Personnel File, Chancellor von Bethmann-Hollweg to Hamburg District Court, July 24, 1917, GFM 33-4186, British National Archives, Kew, UK.
23. *New York Sun*, February 16, 1919.
24. William F. Flynn, Courtney Riley Cooper, *The Eagle's Eye: A True Story of the Imperial German Government's Spies and Intrigues in America from Facts Furnished by William J. Flynn, Recently Retired Chief of the U.S. Secret Service* (Prospect Press, 1919), 133–47.



25. Ibid., 133–47.
26. Ibid; *New York Tribune*, January 5, 1918.
27. *New York Tribune*, November 8, 1918.
28. William Gibbs McAdoo, *Crowded Years: The Reminiscences of William G. McAdoo* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931), 327.
29. Ibid., 327–28.
30. Personnel File of Frank Burke, newspaper clippings, NARA St. Louis.
31. *Washington Evening Star*, June 3, 1942.
32. James D. Robenault, *The Harding Affair: Love and Espionage during the Great War* (St. Martin's Press, 2009), 150; Chad R. Fulwider, *German Propaganda and U.S. Neutrality in World War I* (University of Missouri Press, 2017), 223; Richard A. Hawkins, *Progressive Politics in the Democratic Party: Samuel Untermyer and the Jewish Anti-Nazi Boycott Campaign* (I.B. Tauris, 2022), 89; Edward Mickolus, *The Counterintelligence Chronology: Spying By and Against* (McFarland and Company, 2015), 24; Kathleen Hill, Gerald N. Hill, *Encyclopedia of Federal Agencies and Commissions* (Facts on File, 2014), 196; Marcia Roberts, *Moments in History: Department of Treasury United States Secret Service* (PU Books, 1990), 12; Barbara Tuchman, *The Zimmerman Telegram* (Ballentine, 1958), 74; Arthur S. Link, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, Vol. 33 (Princeton University Press, 1966–1994); Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: The Struggle for Neutrality, 1914–1915* (Princeton University Press, 1960), 554–5.
33. See for example, Philip H. Melanson, Peter F. Stevens, *The Secret Service*, 36.
34. William M. Oliver, *The Birth of the FBI: Teddy Roosevelt, the Secret Service, and the Fight over America's Premier Law Enforcement Agency* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), 166.
35. Flynn fashioned himself as the German spy hunter of 1916–17, when Attorney General Gregory forced his firing. See *New York Evening World*, October 28, 1915, November 1, 1915, and October 24, 1917.
36. A few are Frank J. Rafalko, ed., *A Counterintelligence Reader, Volume I: American Revolution to World War II* (Military Bookshop, 2011); James D. Robenault, *The Harding Affair: Love and Espionage during the Great War* (St. Martin's Press, 2009), 150; Chad R. Fulwider, *German Propaganda and U.S. Neutrality in World War I* (University of Missouri Press, 2017), 223; Jamie Bisher, *The Intelligence War in Latin America, 1914–1922* (McFarland and Company, 2016), 366; Richard A. Hawkins, *Progressive Politics in the Democratic Party: Samuel Untermyer and the Jewish Anti-Nazi Boycott Campaign* (I.B. Tauris, 2022), 89; Edward Mickolus, *The Counterintelligence Chronology: Spying By and Against* (McFarland and Company, 2015), 24; Kathleen Hill and Gerald N. Hill, *Encyclopedia of Federal Agencies and Commissions* (Facts on File, 2014), 196; Marcia Roberts, *Moments in History: Department of Treasury United States Secret Service* (PU Books, 1990), 12; Barbara Tuchman, *The Zimmerman Telegram* (Ballentine, 1958), 74.
37. <https://www.secretservice.gov/about/history/timeline>, viewed March 21, 2023.
38. <https://www.secretservice.gov/history-espionage>, viewed March 21, 2023.
39. Link, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 33; AP Dispatches, May 1915, Library of Congress; Library of Congress Digital Collections: Robert Lansing Papers, April to August 1915; US Department of State, *Documents Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, vol. 2 (Government Printing Office, 1919); Robert Lansing Papers: Private Memoranda, 1915-1922; Originals: 1915–1917, Library of Congress Manuscript Division, mss29454, box 63, reel 1; William Gibbs McAdoo: A Register of His Papers in the Library of Congress, Library of Congress Manuscript Division, 1959); Charles Seymour, *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House*. 2 vols. (Houghton Mifflin, 1926), 2:339; Edward Mandell House Papers, Correspondence and Letters, 1915, Yale University Archives, call number MS 466.
40. For example: the disappearance of Bernardo Reyes in 1914, Victoriano Huerta and Pascual Orozco in spring 1915.
41. Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *The FBI: A History* (Yale University Press, 2007), 62; John F. Fox, Jr., “Bureaucratic Wrangling over Counterintelligence, 1917-18,” *Studies in Intelligence* 49, no. 1 (2005), 15, n.2;
42. The agents were John J. Henry, Agent in Charge; Agents Burke, Savage, Kavanaugh, Schlamm (who resigned on July 25 and was replaced by James Carvey), Merillat, McCahill, Rubano, Howell, Manasse (Boston), Connolly (Buffalo), and Rich (Cornish, New Hampshire, presidential detail); New York: Volumes 46–48 — February 1, 1915–November 30, 1915, Daily Reports of Agents, RG 87, NARA.
43. New York: Volumes 46-48 - February 1, 1915-November 30, 1915, Daily Reports of Agents, RG 87, NARA.
44. Daily Report, July 20, 1915.
45. Daily Report, July 24, 1915.
46. Daily Report, July 24, 1915.
47. Ibid.
48. McAdoo, *Crowded Years*, 325.
49. For example, Daily Report, July 22, “At 7 a m sent the following telegrams: W. J. Flynn, Washington D.C. Leave at 7 a m for Marion. Address care postmaster. (signed) Burke.”
50. Daily Report, August 5, 1915.
51. Daily Report, September 5, 1915.
52. *Sunday Telegram*, October 24, 1915.
53. Sir Guy Gaunt, *The Yield of the Years: A Story of Adventure Afloat and Ashore* (Hutchinson and Co, 1940), 67. Voska's organization comprised the small Slavic countries of Europe, hence the tease.



## An Early Influence Operation

---

54. Thomas Garrigue Masaryk, *The Making of a State: Memories and Observations, 1914-1918* (Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1927), 259; Emanuel Victor Voska and Will Irwin, *Spy and Counterspy* (George Harrap and Co. Ltd., 1941), 38.
55. Franz von Papen, *Memoirs* (E.P. Dutton and Company, 1953), 50.
56. Voska, *Spy and Counterspy*, 34.
57. *Ibid.*, 33.
58. . Case 8000-80773, John R. Rathom, undated memorandum, RG 65, BI, NARA. “At the beginning of the War... Rathom met in Washington, D.C. a member of the British Government, at which time it was alleged a fund was set aside by the British Government, guaranteeing the “Providence Journal” against loss through publishing articles exposing German propaganda...” Gaunt, *The Yield of the Years*, 138.
59. *New York World*, August 17, 1915.
60. Case 8000-80773, John R. Rathom, Signed and witnessed statement of John R. Rathom, February 6, 1918, RG 65, BI, NARA.
61. Voska, *Spy and Counterspy*, 42, 92–95.
62. Voska, *Spy and Counterspy*, 96.
63. *Ibid.*, 97.
64. *Ibid.*, 98–99.
65. The contents of Albert’s briefcase appear to be lost. Extensive searches of the British Admiralty records and US Treasury, State, and Justice archives have not yielded the “smoking gun.”
66. Gaunt, *The Yield of the Years*, 147.
67. For example, *Seattle Star*, March 14, 1917; *Tacoma Times*, March 19, 1917.
68. Ralph E. Weber, ed., *The Final Memoranda: Major General Ralph H. Van Deman, USA Ret. 1865–1952, Father of U.S. Military Intelligence* (Scholarly Resources Inc., 1988), 54.
69. *New York World*, August 17, 1915.
70. *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 35, President Wilson to Robert Lansing, December 5, 1915.
71. Without knowing exactly what was originally in the briefcase, the names of several lower-tier agents appear in Albert and von Papen’s papers that were taken in 1917: Carl Heynen, Hans Tauscher, Paul König, Frederico Stallforth, Felix A. Sommerfeld, Walter Scheele, Hans Walter Luigi Böhm, and Paul G. Hilken.

