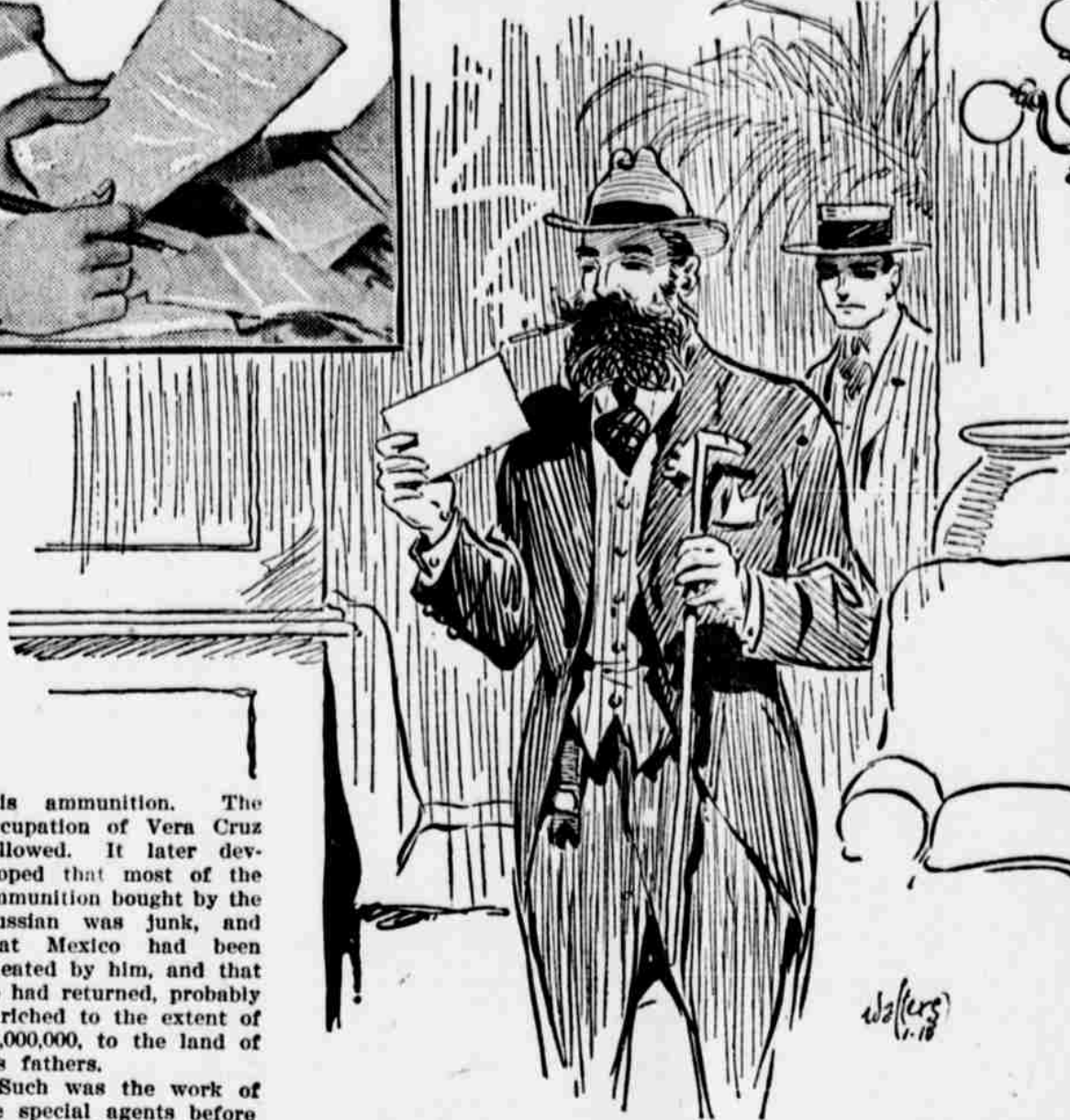


Kaiser's Spies Beaten At Their Own Game



A. BRUCE BIELASKI

Remarkable Organization Built Up by Uncle Sam Since World War Began



THREE years ago it began to dawn upon American officials that the great German conspiracy—concerning which the few revelations so far made have electrified the nation—was under way. To meet it they had only the agencies which were barely adequate for peace; there was hardly a man who had ever matched wits with the foreign government experts. The story of how this menace was met can as yet be told only in part. But not the least interesting part concerns the men who have done the work.

Chief of the weapons which were at hand was the secret service of the department of justice. Its agents were an unobtrusively efficient lot, but woefully small in numbers and, for the most part, inexperienced in international affairs. "White slaves" and predatory business had been their chief game. The even smaller force of the treasury secret service was almost fully occupied with its routine duties of guarding the currency and the president's life. It, too, has rendered amazing service against the spies, but upon the department of justice agents fell the chief burden.

They were called upon to match the craft, the experience and the ruthlessness of the keenest of German spies, who were backed by a renowned secret service organization and unlimited funds.

Their chief, the man who had developed the government detective force, who had laid the foundation for an extensive, loosely geared, even running mechanism, and who promptly assembled it when the need came, is Alexander Bruce Bielaski ("Home Run") Bielaski they called him in his high school days. He entered the department a dozen years ago, when the development of a bureau of investigation to handle secret work for which no other provision had been made was started.

This bureau was commissioned to wrestle with violations of neutrality, with those of the national banking laws, with antitrust cases, bucket shop cases, "white slave" cases; it was to prosecute those who impersonate an officer of the government, to pursue those who flee the country and seek to evade the long arm of the federal law.

There were already several detective agencies in the government, each created for a specific purpose and limited by law in its operations. For instance, there was the secret service in the treasury department. There were customs agents to prevent smuggling, land agents to protect the public domain, post office inspectors to make difficult the misuse of the mails. But the special agents of the department of justice had a field many times as broad as that occupied by any other detective agency. One phase of its work alone—that of circumventing violations of neutrality—became a herculean task when the war broke.

The department of justice refused to follow precedent in its creation of a detective agency. It built a staff of operatives that was a new thing in the field of detective work. In doing so it made brains its first requisite of selection of men and held that education was a developer of brains.

The youngsters of this service have succeeded where veteran police have failed. Every case an operative undertakes is an entirely new problem, in which his past experience is by no means an infallible guide. It needs brains and initiative.

A young agent of the bureau of investigation, formerly a salesman for a wholesale grocer, went into the Alleghenies on his first case and cleaned up a nest of moonshiners that had defied local authorities and United States marshals for years. Another of these men worked as a laborer on the docks of New Orleans and found out the methods employed by the sugar samplers in so grading imported cargoes that the loss to the government was hundreds of thousands in duties every year. Still another "roped in" with Mexican revolutionists in El Paso.

The importance of the work of these special agents may be measured by an account of the circumstances back of the seizure of the port of Vera Cruz in April, 1914, and the part played in that event by one of those ingenious men. It was some months before that event that a huge, bearded Russian attracted the attention of a house detective in a New York hotel by the display of a draft for \$3,000,000 signed by President Huerta of Mexico. The house detective telephoned the special agents, who watched the operations of the Russian.

That individual bought firearms and ammunition in sufficient quantities to load a ship. It was the business of the government to see to it that he did not send this to Mexico, as there was an embargo on firearms to that country. The ship, however, cleared for Odessa, Russia, and the special agents traced it to that point and witnessed the refusal of the Russian government to allow the ammunition to be landed, because of a fear that it was to be used by revolutionists. They saw the ship again traverse the Mediterranean and unload its cargo at Hamburg. The special agents noted, however, that the Russian had disappeared, and suspected that he was more loyal to his own pocket than to the Mexican government.

The ammunition was reshipped from Hamburg to Vera Cruz. As it approached the latter port the United States, under the influence of the information furnished by its special agents, entered and seized the port that Huerta might not get

this ammunition. The occupation of Vera Cruz followed. It later developed that most of the ammunition bought by the Russian was junk, and that Mexico had been cheated by him, and that he had returned, probably enriched to the extent of \$1,000,000, to the land of his fathers.

Such was the work of the special agents before the war. Bielaski, in Washington, sat at the center of the web which covered the nation. In other important cities, such as New York, Chicago, New Orleans, there were lesser web centers. In the federal building in each important city was an office of special agents with a group of operatives which revolved about it. In the smaller centers were single representatives who could call for re-enforcements whenever an emergency developed. Then there were the free lances of the service, those who could be shuttled to whatever point required the attention of especially skilled men.

Bielaski is the silent man with every mesh of the web in his sensitive fingers. His career is one that might well be an inspiration to any ambitious youngster. He entered the department of justice 12 years ago as a laborer and for a compensation of \$600 a year. Soon he was a clerk of special agents, then an examiner, a special examiner, an assistant to the attorney general, acting chief and chief of special agents. This latter post he has held since 1912. These have been the years during which the newest and greatest of the government's detective agencies has been taking definite form. Bielaski has been molding it.

Then the great war came, and the United States found itself a non-participant faced with the necessity of maintaining neutrality within its borders. Finally this country was itself in war and must combat the much vaunted secret service of the Germans, and must watch those millions of people living within its borders that had been born in enemy countries and whose allegiance was sufficiently in doubt to make their surveillance necessary.

During the period of neutrality scores of unpleasant situations arose because of the insistence of Germany upon abusing the hospitality of the United States. Almost the first of these resulted from a plan laid by Capt. Franz von Papen, military attache to the German embassy, for obtaining false passports for the use of German reservists. First through Lieut. Hans von Wedell and later through one Ruroede he operated an office in New York which sought to get vagabonds around the wharfs and cheap boarding houses and to induce these men to apply to Washington for passports, which he purchased and used in returning reservists to Europe. The plan had not been working long when a special agent from the New York office was on the trail. He succeeded in representing himself as the proper sort of man to secure fraudulent passports, and was soon deep in the confidence of the Germans. Ruroede was sent to prison; von Wedell fled, but was intercepted by the British and imprisoned, and the whole scheme was broken up. Van Papen was recalled at the request of the state department because of "improper activities," of which this was but one.

The watchfulness of the special agents was evidenced by the fact that they knew the exact hour when, on April 19, 1916, Wolf von Igel had taken 70 pounds of secret papers out of various hiding places and assembled them for transfer to Washington. Von Igel operated from an office at 60 Wall street. Though he was an employee of the German embassy, there was a question as to whether his papers were immune from seizure, as they would be in the embassy. So he was making ready to transfer them to unquestioned safety. He claimed that his papers were exempt from the right of seizure. The German ambassador backed his claim. The special agents admitted that if they were official papers of the embassy they should be returned. They took them to Washington, where, at the state department, they met the German ambassador. Through long hours of night that official dug through those papers. They placed him in a most embarrassing position. If he claimed them as state papers he admitted an official part in their revelations. If he failed to claim them he left this incriminating evidence in the hands of the American authorities. He decided that the latter course was the less embarrassing. Practically all the papers were left with the special agents. These papers revealed a degree of scheming and intrigue against a neutral country that is almost beyond conception.

When Capt. von Papen laid his plans in the German club, in New York, for the invasion of Canada by Germans in the United States, the special agents knew of his plans. The flasco of the Welland canal, the unavailing activities of Paul Koenig, chief detective of the Hamburg-American line; the machinations of Capt. Karl Boy-Ed—all came to naught and were well known by the American authorities.

Finally came the master spy of them all, Capt. Franz von Rintelen, intimate of the kaiser, a man of highest social rank and vast wealth, with plans to overturn all in America that worked against the interests of Germany. He poured out money like water and met enthusiastic co-operation on all sides. It seemed almost as if every man in America was willing to help to the extent of accepting large amounts of money from von Rintelen. In fact, Americans took his money right and left, and rendered no service in return. Great quantities of German money were spent, but little progress was made toward attaining the results for which Germany strove.

When these activities are surveyed as a whole, the effort of German intrigue in America is seen to have been astonishingly fertile. In the face of such a lack of results it is difficult to believe in the excellence and cleverness of Prussian espionage. This newly organized agency of the United States, intended for application to the tasks of peace, crossed swords with what is termed the greatest spy system in the world, and thus far it has not been bested.

Then, suddenly the United States itself was thrust into the war. With tens of thousands of German reservists, hundreds of thousands of German citizens, millions of people of German blood, this country would appear to have been in a position of great danger from within. Certainly there was need of sharp watchfulness. No other belligerent nation was confronted by an internal alien-enemy problem of such magnitude.

The government in this emergency offered Bielaski the assistance of representatives of its other departments elsewhere. There were, for instance, certain representatives of the department of agriculture, scattered from coast to coast, who knew their communities well. These were instructed to watch for individuals who gave evidence of disloyalty to the United States and report back to the department of justice, when there was time, or to the nearest United States attorney when quick action was required. The post office sent instructions to 45,000 postmasters, 33,000 letter carriers and 43,000 rural delivery men. Each of these was instructed to keep his ear to the ground for any showing of disloyalty from within and report promptly. The land office, the Indian office, the public health service, the reclamation service—all those governmental agencies that spread out among the people were officially instructed to help protect the nation from any possible foe from within.

Those other detective agencies of the government such as the secret service, the post office inspectors, the customs agents, were called upon for skilled assistance. On the instant, almost, and entirely aside from these government agencies, there was built up in silence a secret service of volunteers which is today effectively at work. Its tentacles steal out through newspaper offices, banks, hotels, over railroad systems, into municipal governments, through the radiations of traveling salesmen. It is a loose organization, but it works under instructions and knows what to do when it finds a plague spot.

And this vast machine has been placed in the hands of a young man, who, 12 years ago, fresh from high school, entered the government service as a laborer at \$600 a year. "Home Run" Bielaski, son of a minister, grandson of Capt. Alexander Bielaski, who died in battle at Bull Run, descendant of a Polish patriot who fought that America might become a nation, is making operation difficult for the spies of the enemy.

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