

# The Building of Moscow's WWII Europe-Wide Spy Network

# RED ORCHESTRA



Intelligence Historian PETER MATTHEWS who was stationed in Berlin in 1948, examines the work and legacy of one of the most famous Soviet intelligence spy networks ever created... the Red Orchestra

**E**ven before Hitler attacked Russia during the Second World War in 1941, Soviet Intelligence were laying the foundations of a major espionage network in Germany and Europe under the watchful eye of NKVD spy chief Nikolai Yezhov. In 1936, Colonel Aleksandr Korotkov, was appointed military attaché at the Soviet Embassy in Berlin. He was also the NKVD's spymaster in Germany and set about building an incredibly effective spy network, the operation of which was triggered by Hitler's panzers crashing across Russia's border in August 1941 (Operation Barbarossa).

Germany's Gestapo and intelligence service - the Abwehr - had little indication of the huge intelligence network Korotkov had built and left in their midst when he returned to Moscow. The network of agents in all levels of German life would prove a thorn in the German's side for the duration of the war. When he came to power in 1933, Hitler had ruthlessly suppressed all German Communists and their organisations so that party members and political sympathisers went underground. It

was among these Communist adherents that Colonel Korotkov recruited his many dedicated agents who then sank without trace into the German population.

A few agents were detected by the Nazi regime, mainly because they had remained in touch by wireless with their political friends in Russia. Wilhelm Flike, a wartime German signals intelligence agent told me, just after the war when I was in Berlin, that he and his colleagues detected only occasional transmissions to a control station in Moscow during that time.

## SOVIET COMMUNICATIONS

The Germans were unable to break the Soviet codes that were being used so the Gestapo security services assumed that the messages were simply spreading the Communist gospel. How wrong they were.

Hitler's invasion of Russia immediately triggered a huge increase in the number of



NKVD monument in Volgograd

transmissions from the secret Soviet wireless network which overwhelmed Germany's wireless monitoring service in Lauf; their equivalent of Bletchley Park. The listening service counted over 600 transmissions in the Soviet code from every country in Europe but disturbingly most from within Germany.



Colonel Aleksandr Korotkov



Aircraft factory at Flossenburg concentration camp. The Red Orchestra secured all manner of intelligence on Germany's aircraft production and losses



**August 1939. Stalin welcomes German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop to the Kremlin**

The wireless communications system of the Russian intelligence network that had been prepared years before had been activated and which Flike and his colleagues named WNA from the call sign of the Moscow station. German security services estimated that there were over 120,000 agents and fellow travellers serving the network. Up to that time they had kept a low profile by reporting intelligence findings through the Soviet Embassy.

Communist sympathisers and ordinary Germans opposed to the Nazi regime had been recruited from the Foreign Office, Ministry of Labour and even the Berlin Council to report on production facilities, military



**Molotov, Stalin and Ribbentrop sign the German-USSR Friendship Treaty**



**NKVD spy chief Nikolai Yezhov**

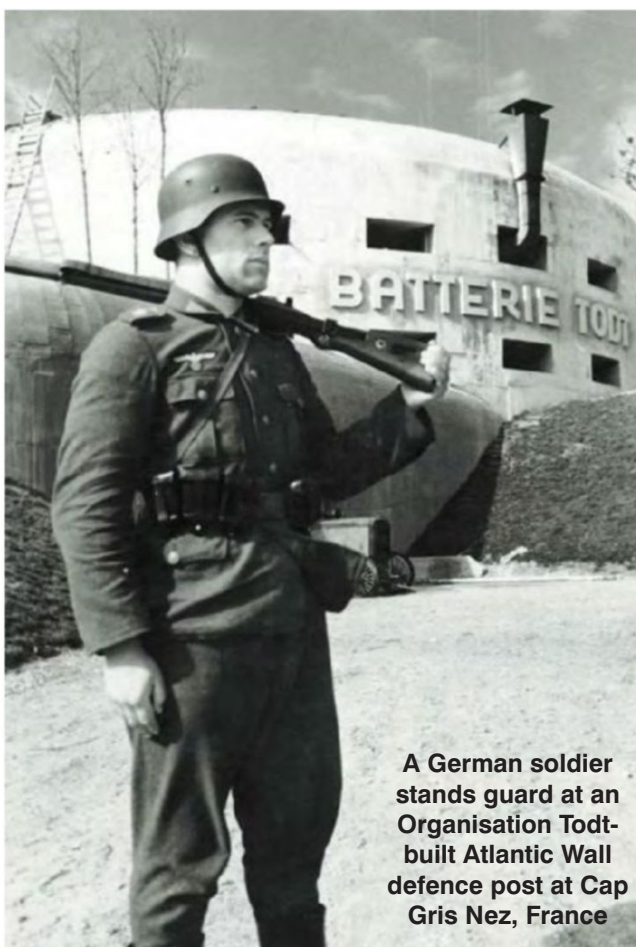
capabilities, and Hitler's plans for the future. Now, without an Embassy to report to they had to send information direct by wireless transmission - Colonel Korotkov's work in establishing a huge intelligence network was paying off. The powerful Russian Intelligence network became known to the German security services as the Rote Kapell or the Red Orchestra.

Red Orchestra transmissions were in code of course and like most Russian cryptographic



**June 1941. Operation Barbarossa. German troops pass a Russian state border post**

coding during the war, extremely difficult to penetrate. It took the Abwehr some time to decode their interceptions but when they finally did they were horrified at the high level and quality of intelligence. It indicated many highly placed informants and sources of secret information so a frantic Gestapo hunt for Red Orchestra agents began among the



**A German soldier stands guard at an Organisation Todt-built Atlantic Wall defence post at Cap Gris Nez, France**



**Arvid Harnack**



**Harro Schultz-Boysen**





**Wilhelm Canaris Abwehr spy chief**



**Harro Schultz-Boysen, Arvid Harnack and John Sieg featured on a 1983 East German stamp**

highest level of Nazi government figures until the end of the war.

#### QUALITY INTELLIGENCE

Details of Germany's war effort were revealed to Moscow such as the Luftwaffe's strength of 22,000 machines of first and second line aircraft that were available, but losses were also indicated; only ten machines were being built for every forty-five lost. The army was moving thirty divisions from west to east;



**Berlin 1941. L-R: Rudolf Hess, Heinrich Himmler, Philipp Bouhler, Fritz Todt founder of Organisation Todt and Reinhard Heydrich listen to Konrad Meyer at a Generalplan Ost exhibition in the city. Todt was superceded by Albert Speer following his death in February 1942**

400,000 men were stationed in Italy to ensure that the Italians did not make a separate peace; no large movement of troops went unnoticed by Red Orchestra agents.

High level political decisions were also exposed such as Hitler's willingness to allow Finland to make peace with Russia once he had occupied Leningrad (which he never did). Strategic ones were also reported to Moscow such as the decision to shorten the German Army's line of defence in Russia to enable them to supply their troops more easily. This rich vein of intelligence being supplied by the Red Orchestra had several parts to it, one of which was run by two dedicated Communists, Harro Schultz-Boysen and Arvid Harnack. The group had over a hundred agents but the network was eventually penetrated by the Gestapo; their interrogators were shocked to find how many Soviet agents had worked themselves into positions of trust in Germany over many years.

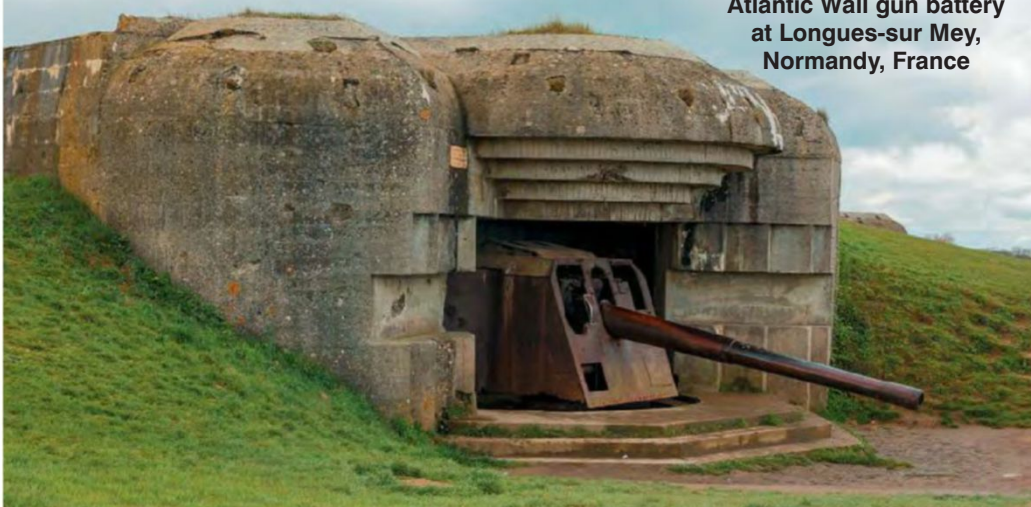
**Atlantic Wall gun battery at Longues-sur Mey, Normandy, France**



**Fritz Todt**

Later in the Cold War, British and US Intelligence identified the same long-term strategy of Soviet Intelligence, recruiting agents early and patiently watching them to grow into trusted leaders of the community and even the security services. This type of agent infiltration continues today, with Russia's FSB and SVR being most prominent in the art.

Another faction of the Red Orchestra was run by a staunch Communist, Leopold Trepper. He took over much of the intelligence role of Schultz-Boysen and acted as a businessman supplying the notorious Organisation Todt (OT). OT was the main contractor to the Nazi war machine and responsible for all manner of building and factory production, often using forced labour as the war status of Germany worsened. Now Trepper was in a position to identify many of the major construction







**Leopold Trepper**

projects in Germany and Europe so that the fortifications being built were known to the Russians. Trepper's group was eventually penetrated by the Gestapo and he was 'turned' to send disinformation to Moscow. However, he survived the war and returned to his life as a businessman.

The Red Orchestra's most effective part of its network, according to Herr Flike, was operated by Alexander Rado, a Hungarian living at 22, Rue de Lausanne in Geneva, next door to the Soviet Comintern offices. Rado's group had



**Alexander Rado**

been established in 1937 (shades of Colonel Korotkov) and was seen as the most dangerous. German security services could not touch them

in neutral Switzerland. By coincidence (or was it) a British secret service agent, AA Foote, was a near neighbour who later wrote a book about his exploits but never mentioned the Red Orchestra, so speculation about a possible connection have run rife ever since.

#### FULL CIRCLE

The Soviet Union's espionage record in WWII is extraordinary and that of its Red Orchestra spymaster Colonel Korotkov is rated as outstanding. But his career did not end as war finished in 1945. As the Red Army fought its way into Berlin, Stalin appointed Korotkov to head the KGB Intelligence station in the Karlshorst Residency so Russia's most brilliant spymaster was, once more returned to Germany's capital city.

He confronted MI6 operations as the Cold War began and the Berlin Airlift started its commencement, but to counter the Soviet espionage offensive the Allies employed some brilliant intelligence operators of their own. The German General Reinhard Gehlen created an outstanding espionage network which laid the foundations of the CIA together with yet another brilliant spymaster, Allen Dulles.

Gehlen was spymaster of the anti-Communist Gehlen Organisation for the United States (1946-56); and the first President of the Federal Intelligence



**Allen Dulles**



**Reinhard Gehlen**

Service (Bundesnachrichtendienst, BND) of West Germany (1956-68). Thus the Cold War conflict created the world class CIA and German BND intelligence services which helped shaped today's intelligence community. They created a fresh purpose for what had been, up until then, the militaristic purpose of the secret intelligence services - but were to maintain peace in Europe as the intelligence gathered in the Cold War prevented it from turning hot.

#### PETER MATTHEWS:

Eye Spy Associate Editor - Peter Matthews is author of two intelligence books *SIGINT: The Secret History of Signals Intelligence 1914-1945* and *House of Spies: St Ermin's Hotel - The London Base of British Espionage*



Nazi artefacts on display at the Atlantic Wall Museum near Ostende, Belgium - note the street plate 'OT. Regiment Speer'. Albert Speer assumed control of Organisation Todt in 1943. Unbeknown to him and his predecessor, the Red Orchestra had successfully penetrated the organisation

