



Alfred Redl.

Redl, Alfred (1864-1913)

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Alfred Redl rose from poverty to the highest rank in the Army of the Austro-Hungarian Empire during the politically tumultuous years of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He was the Army's Chief of Counterintelligence for many years, and is, by any measure, one of the fathers of modern espionage techniques.

A homosexual in a society that would end his career if his sexuality had been revealed publicly, Redl was blackmailed into becoming a spy for Russia in the critical early years of the twentieth century. For almost a century, his unmasking and subsequent suicide have fueled homophobic campaigns about the alleged security risks posed by homosexuals in government and military service and inflamed the imaginations of filmmakers and dramatists searching for sensational plots involving sex, spying, and violent death.

Alfred Redl was born on March 14, 1864, in Lemberg, Galicia. (Lemberg, now Lvov in the Ukraine, was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the time.) His father was a railway clerk, and Alfred was the ninth child added to a poor family that would grow even larger and more economically challenged.

On March 14, 1881, his seventeenth birthday, Redl joined the Austro-Hungarian Army. He was a good student and eventually won a place in the Imperial War College. Whereas others chafed under the discipline of the all-male army, Redl thrived in the homosocial environment. He made the army his true home.

Every Appearance of a Brilliant Military Career

From the beginning of his military career, Redl received glowing reviews: he was regarded as diligent, intelligent, and soldierly. He was singled out for his service on maneuvers and was given the highest grades on fitness reports. His prospects seemed brilliant.

In 1898, Redl traveled to Kazan (Russia), ostensibly to perfect his Russian. There, the Russians paid close attention to him, just as they would any member of the Austro-Hungarian Army stationed under any pretext in their midst. This short stay in Kazan would prove critical to Redl's place in history.

On April 15, 1899, Redl was transferred to the General Staff in Vienna and promoted to Captain First Class. On October 1, 1900, he joined the Counterintelligence Corps. As a 36-year-old protégé of General Arthur von Giesl, he was clearly a star on the rise.

As Chief of the Operations Section, Redl became responsible for recruiting, training, and dispatching agents for spy missions. Redl's contributions and achievements in that position did not go unrecognized: in 1905 and 1906 alone, he was awarded the Military Service Cross, the Military Service Medal, and the Royal Spanish Military Service Order.

In 1907, Redl was appointed Chief of Intelligence for the Army. During a tenure that lasted until 1912, he was known as an innovator: he was among the first to record conversations (on early wax cylinders), to use

secret cameras, to adopt a systematic policy to intercept mail, to dust for fingerprints, and to "shadow" suspects. Redl also spearheaded a collaborative exchange of intelligence with Germany and trained an entire generation of Austro-Hungarian spymasters.

On April 18, 1911, Redl received the ultimate award to add to his other decorations: the Expression of Supreme Satisfaction, a personal citation from Emperor Franz Josef. In 1912, when General von Geisl became commander of the Eighth Army Corps in Prague, Redl went with him. On May 1, 1912, Redl was one of only eight lieutenant colonels promoted to colonel. After 31 years of distinguished military service, he had risen into the highest ranks of the elite: there were only 54 colonels in the entire General Staff Corps of the Austro-Hungarian Army.

The Tarnished Reality Underlying All the Brilliance

For all its public brilliance, however, Redl's career was shadowed by two extreme handicaps: money problems and the need to hide his sexuality. The army did not pay its officers well, but nevertheless expected them to live at a level befitting their status. Redl, as it happened, had expensive tastes in uniforms, living accommodations, and everything else. With no family wealth to draw upon, Redl's everyday financial reality was killing debt.

The stress of Redl's situation was exponentially increased because he was homosexual and had to hide that career-ending fact at all costs. One method he used to deflect suspicion of his sexual orientation during his time in Kazan was to pay court to a (supposedly) married woman. Her reluctance to commit while "married" and Redl's need for a "safe" woman made for a perfect match.

While the Austro-Hungarian Army officers may have been in Kazan simply to learn Russian (as opposed to spying as well), the Russians were not shy about spying on them. The Russians did the math and deduced Redl's financial situation: a poor boy rising through the ranks had to have incurred large debts to maintain an officer's lifestyle. Since the Russians knew from experience that those with debts were often susceptible to offers of income from other sources, they kept close tabs on Redl.

Later, the "married" woman was revealed as someone assigned to shadow and inform on Redl. When the Russians discovered Redl was a homosexual, he became doubly vulnerable. The Russians moved in to offer a deal for money and silence. Colonel Nikolai Batjuschin, Chief of Espionage Center, West, Warsaw, became Redl's Russian contact. The homosexual, debt-ridden Redl was blackmailed (and bribed) into spying for Russia and betraying his country, his Army, and his Emperor.

The arrangement seems to have been more complex than a simple exchange of information and money, however. In court on July 27, 1904, during the trials of Russian spies Simon Lawrow and Bronislaus Drycz, for example, Redl testified as their discoverer; and his purported role served to firm up his reputation as an effective head of counterintelligence. In fact, these two Russian spies had been set up by Batjuschin so that Redl could "discover" them.

Redl in his capacity of the Chief of Counterintelligence also sent Austro-Hungarian agents into Russia only to sell them out. Add to that the fact that Redl double-crossed Austro-Hungarian agents he had buried in the Russian imperial staff, and the damage he orchestrated assumes diabolical proportions. Scholars have asserted that Redl essentially paralyzed Austro-Hungarian espionage inside Russia at the very time he earned a prodigious reputation as a brilliant patriot.

Some researchers claim that Redl began spying for the Russians as early as 1902. The highly suspect official Austro-Hungarian Empire story constructed after Redl's death, however, pegged 1912 for Redl's first sales of information to the Russians. No matter when the arrangement actually started, there is no question that

Redl passed a great deal of information to the Russians. When the German army captured Warsaw early in World War I, they found proof of spy-trading deals between Redl and Batjuschin as well as a large number of secret Austrian and German documents in the headquarters of the Russian Espionage Center, West.

Hidden in Plain Sight

The society he lived in was a perfect setting for Redl to hide his secrets in plain sight. The Austro-Hungarian Army was so socially stratified that those at the top had very little to do with the daily life of those under them and barely knew anything personal about them. In general, most people's private lives went unexamined, and the topics of money and sex were tactfully avoided.

Redl, an officer in the General Staff Corps, was honored without question in a society where people were evaluated by their titles. Redl appeared exemplary to his military colleagues. He was well liked, respected, and prominent. His name, after all, was constantly associated with the successful prosecution of a string of enemy spies.

The extraordinary ability of Viennese society to deny, or not see, the obvious is clearly illustrated by Redl's very public relationship with Stefan Hromodka, which lasted for several years. Redl was a veteran of a long and active sexual life when he met and fell in love with Hromodka.

A handsome young cavalry officer, Hromodka had tastes and requirements as refined as Redl's and proved to be an expensive obsession. The modest monthly allowance Redl provided Hromodka in 1909, for example, reportedly increased over ten-fold by 1912. In addition to the allowance, Redl kept Hromodka in the highest style, with an expensively furnished apartment, horses, and a custom-made Daimler. Although Redl and Hromodka both explained that their extravagant lifestyles were made possible by family money, Redl had to sell more and more information to the Russians to finance the arrangements.

When the couple attended public and official functions and Redl introduced Hromodka as his nephew, no one ever challenged him. If anyone had become suspicious about Redl's marital status and the constant presence of a handsome young cavalry officer who might or might not be his nephew, others could, of course, cite army regulations: officers had to obtain permission to marry, and there was a long waiting list because, at any one time, half the officers of the General Staff had to be single.

Perhaps uncertain about his hold on Hromodka, Redl took the precaution of having the young man sign an agreement that if he married, he would return the apartment and its furniture to Redl.

A Noose of His Own Making

When Redl was transferred to Prague, Major Maximilian Ronge, one of his protégés, became head of counterintelligence in Vienna. Redl had trained Ronge in every technique he had developed and adopted. He also lectured him over and over on the importance of patience in staking out suspects.

Early in April 1913, Ronge received word from his counterpart in the German General Staff about a suspicious letter. Addressed to Herr Nikon Nizetas, c/o General Delivery, Vienna, the letter, unclaimed in Vienna, had been returned to Berlin and opened by the German secret police. The envelope contained the substantial sum of 6,000 crowns and the addresses of espionage centers in Paris and Geneva. The Germans suspected that they had picked up the trail of an important spy.

Ronge then ordered a stakeout at the General Delivery office in Vienna. In early May, two more letters for Herr Nikon Nizetas arrived in Vienna. Ronge's men patiently waited for the mysterious Herr Nizetas to arrive to pick up his mail.

In late May, Hromodka raised the serious possibility that he would marry and break with Redl. In response, Redl rushed to Vienna to confront Hromodka. Once in Vienna, Redl stopped by the Post Office to pick up the mail he knew would be waiting for Herr Nikon Nizetas.

Ronge's men were able to track the man claiming to be Herr Nizetas to the Hotel Klomser. Only then did they realize that Herr Nizetas was, in reality, their own Colonel Redl. In one of the classic reversals in the annals of international intrigue, Redl had been caught not only by the very men he trained but also by his own methods. It fell to Ronge to inform his superiors of the discovery.

Settling of Accounts

On the evening of May 24, 1913, the General Staff sent four officers to Redl's room in the Hotel Klomser. Their mission was to find out how much damage Redl had done and who assisted him. They were also instructed to ensure that he would cease to be a problem. Under questioning, Redl reportedly admitted he had spied for Russia since autumn 1912. He claimed that he had been driven to it by the costs of his lifestyle, including keeping Stefan Hromodka.

With the implicit understanding that Redl himself would take the necessary steps to seal his lips for all time, the officers left a loaded Browning pistol on Redl's table and exited his hotel room. Outside on the street just after midnight, they waited until they heard the expected gunshot.

In his suicide note of May 25, 1913, Redl wrote: "Passion and levity have destroyed me. I pay with my life for my sins. Pray for me."

After Redl's suicide other General Staff officers broke into his apartment in Prague. They discovered, if we can believe the highly suspect official version, photographs of top-secret battle plans along with notebooks that listed the money he was paid and which military secrets he had sold to France, Italy, and Russia.

They also found Stefan Hromodka's signed agreement not to marry, as well as an array of women's cosmetics and sexually explicit photographs of Redl and other male Austrian officers.

Aftermath of the Scandal

The cover-up that followed Redl's suicide started at the top. Emperor Franz Josef himself was eager to minimize the effects of any scandal on the Army and the Empire. Since the official version based on an investigation following Redl's death did not satisfactorily explain some key circumstances, however, suspicions about the full extent of Redl's treason continued to grow. Rumors spread that crucial evidence had been destroyed and that the whole truth would never be known.

The scandal's psychological impact was immense: if one of the highest-ranking General Staff officers was spying for a potential enemy, who could be trusted?

The cost in human lives showed up later. Many historians think that the deaths of tens of thousands of men in the Austro-Hungarian Army killed in World War I can be attributed to Redl's sales of information to the Russians.

After World War I even more steps appear to have been taken to whitewash the affair. These efforts to bury the matter, along with the earlier ones, raised further serious questions about the accuracy of the official version of the story. As a result of these unanswerable questions and lingering suspicions, the Redl Affair has never really been put to rest in Austria.

Political and Artistic Legacies of the Redl Affair

The political fall out of the Redl Affair has by no means been limited to Austria. Redl quickly became a symbol of the vulnerable high-level government official ripe for blackmailing and enlisting in nefarious foreign plots. More specifically, he became the exemplar of the particular susceptibility of homosexuals to blackmail.

During the Cold War, the Redl Affair, along with the Whittaker Chambers-Alger Hiss affair of 1948 and the 1951 flight to the Soviet Union of gay British spies Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, helped justify the suspicion that homosexuals could not be trusted. Their examples justified the denial of security clearances and other forms of discrimination against homosexuals.

Senator Joseph McCarthy harangued that homosexuals in the State Department were national security risks bent on undermining democracy, freedom, and the American way. During the 1950s, the association between homosexuals and Communism led to a dramatic increase in harassment and persecution of homosexuals in the United States and Europe.

If the Redl Affair has always been a political hot potato, it has proven a gold mine for the entertainment industry. It has sex, spies, and treachery. It ends with a spectacular fall from grace, a shaming confession, and a blaze of suicidal gunfire.

At least three German films took on the subject before the highly publicized premieres of John Osborne's play *A Patriot for Me* (1965) and István Szabó's film *Colonel Redl* (1984), freely adapted from the Osborne play. Significantly, both Osborne and Szabó used the sensational outlines of Redl's story as a springboard for pursuing quite separate personal themes.

A Patriot for Me traces a dramatic arc covering 23 years, as Osborne's Redl advances from lieutenant to colonel and from patriot to traitor. Redl is depicted as duplicitous and cautious, while Osborne explores his own interests in the decline of empire and the perils of the nonconformist. The second act gave the hungry-for-scandal public a spectacular *coup-de-théâtre*: a (highly unlikely) drag ball supposedly attended by the closeted homosexuals of the Austro-Hungarian Empire's government and army.

The play was a scandal and a success in 1965. Revealingly, however, it now appears that even as Osborne dramatized Redl's secrets, he was engaged in a project of hiding some of his own. In 1995, soon after Osborne's death and coinciding with a revival of the play, actor Anthony Creighton revealed that he and Osborne had a long-running love affair during the 1950s.

At the time, Creighton said, "I think people should be able to appreciate that *Patriot for Me*, which stigmatizes homosexuality, is a projection of [Osborne's] own self-hatred." Buttressed by Creighton's statement, some reviewers of the 1995 revival remarked that the play's portrait of homosexual repression could now also be seen as a self-portrait. The revelation of Osborne's affair with Creighton was especially telling since Osborne had made a habit of denigrating homosexuality, once famously declaring, "Whatever else, I have been blessed with God's two greatest gifts: to be born English and heterosexual."

Whereas *A Patriot for Me* focused almost exclusively on Redl's homosexuality, Szabó took another tack in his film. He has said, "What drew me to the Redl story was that Redl didn't like himself. He wanted to be someone else. He was a poor Ukrainian and wanted to be an Austrian nobleman."

Szabó and co-writer Péter Dobai took liberties with the story in *Colonel Redl* and constructed Redl as a nearly perfect product of a corrupting, repressive social system, in effect rendering him a victim of the society he betrayed.

In the absence of absolutely reliable sources of information, many of the details of the life of Colonel Alfred Redl remain open to interpretation. We can, however, marvel that the Redl Affair, in rumor, fact, and fictionalized projections like those of Osborne and Szabó, continues to fascinate, even poisoning the air we breathe 100 years later.

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John McFarland is a Seattle-based critic, essayist, and short story writer. He is author of the award-winning picture book *The Exploding Frog and Other Fables from Aesop*. He has contributed to such anthologies as *Letters to Our Children: Lesbian and Gay Adults Speak to the New Generation*, *The Book Club Book*, *The Isherwood Century*, and *Letters to J. D. Salinger*.