Inventory of the Montclair Intelligence Division Records 1940-1942

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A Collection in theSpecial Collections Research Center Mss. Acc. 2007.116

Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary

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History

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Title Statement

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Overview of the Collection

Identification:

01/Mss. Acc. 2007.116

Language of Materials

The papers are in: English

Abstract:

The letters in the collection consist of correspondence between Thomas Randle, the head of the Intelligence Division of the Montclair Security Council, and various members of the organization dated from September 9, 1940 to August 9, 1942.

Creator:

Randle, Thomas arrangement

Quantity:

0.25

Repository:

Special Collections Research Center

Administrative Information

Conditions Governing Access

Collection is open to all researchers.

Conditions Governing Use

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Acquisition Information

The materials were acquired by Special Collections Research Center on 12/27/2007.

Preferred Citation

Montclair Intelligence Division Records, Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William and Mary.

Additional Information

Biographical Note

The letters in the collection consist of correspondence between Thomas Randle, the head of the Intelligence Division of the Montclair Security Council, and various members of the organization dated from September 9, 1940 to August 9, 1942.

Located west of New York City, Montclair, New Jersey had a population of approximately 40,000 in the late 1930s. At the time, a group of the citizens of the New York suburb, troubled over potential fifth column activity in their community, formed an intelligence gathering organization to expose perceived subversive activities. The organization eventually became part of the official civil defense apparatus of the town and was referred to as the Intelligence Division of the Montclair Security Council. Colonel Dallas Townsend, a New York attorney and Montclair resident, served as the town's Commissioner of Public Safety and the members of the Intelligence Division reported to him. Official recognition was granted to the group by Townsend in the Fall of 1941, giving it work space in the Montclair Municipal Building, where it held regular monthly meetings.

For purposes of their activities, the Intelligence Division partitioned Montclair into fifteen sections, each headed by a "key man." Ten to fifteen "thoroughly trustworthy", "good substantial Americans" of unquestioned patriotism were assigned to, or recruited by, each of the key men. They were from "different levels of society and various social groups." In this pyramidal structure, key men did not know the identity of other key men and the lower level informants only knew their own key man. Members of the Intelligence Division were to report to the next most superior authority on activities they "construed as subversive or un-American in any way." Correspondence from operatives was addressed to their key man in care of the office at municipal building. Townsend, the top of the intelligence gathering pyramid, would then turn over information to the FBI if he thought it represented information sympathetic to the Nazi cause.

As of July, 1941, according to the Montclair Times, the intelligence division had been operating for over a year. The newspaper claimed it was remarkably successful in uncovering potential subversive activities and fascist sentiment. Although the FBI never reported back to the intelligence division as to the outcome of information passed to it, the newspaper credited the intelligence division with 43 reports to the FBI resulting "in several arrest and convictions."

The term "fifth column" is attributed to Nationalist General Emilio de Mola who first used the phrase during the Spanish Civil War. Mola saw Nationalist sympathizers advancing towards Madrid from four directions and a fifth force ready to arise for the cause. The forces of this fifth column, having been previously involved in espionage, sabotage and subversion within Madrid, would leave Spain divided, demoralized and unprepared for war. They would then join the advancing armies in the fight against the Second Spanish Republic.

Subsequently, the term fifth column was more closely applied to, and has been identified with, the activities of the Nazis prior to and during World War II although Japan, Italy and the Soviet Union used the technique also. An analogy is made between subversives forming a fifth column to the Greek soldiers at the siege of Troy who infiltrated the city from the belly of a great wooden horse, the Trojan Horse.

Pre-war England and Europe were obsessed with spy hysteria. Given the closeness of the Nazi threat, it was reasonable to assume the presence of a covert domestic destructive force. Because of the large number of Fascist sympathizers in Latin America, concerns over the presence of a fifth column and the potential impact could also be understood.

A case for the fears and panic that arose in the United States concerning a Trojan Horse in America can also made. The notion that Hitler would use fifth column tactics in United States was fostered by German

activities in the United States prior to World War I. In 1917, German spies and saboteurs engaged in disruptions at defense plants in the United States. Incendiary devices were found aboard merchant ships and assumed to be planted by German agents or sympathizers. With the rise of the Nazi movement in Germany, the activities of the German American Bund and various other fascist groups in America began to arouse suspicion over loyalties. In the 1930s, government inquiries, conducted largely by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, broke several German spy rings, exposed clumsy Nazi propaganda efforts and thwarted several sabotage missions. In 1938, the FBI uncovered a German spy ring operating in New York City proving Hitler operatives were active. The breaking of the Duquesne spy ring received national coverage and increased public awareness of the presence of German operatives and resulted, after a lengthy investigation, in the conviction on espionage charges of 33 Nazi agents.

The panic escalated throughout 1939 and 1940 as Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium and France fell to the Nazis. In 1940, a Gallup Poll indicated that 48% of Americans were convinced that their communities had been infiltrated elements of a "fifth column" and another 26% could not be sure. The intensification of the panic can be measured by the number of complaints relating to potential fifth column activity submitted to the FBI. In the period between 1933 and 1938, the FBI received, on average, 35 potential cases per year. The number grew to 250 cases in 1938, 1,615 in the year 1939 and on one day in May, 1940 the FBI received 2,871 reports of suspected cases of espionage submitted mainly by sincere citizens troubled by events they perceived to be evidence of subversion. Newspaper articles, magazine features, personal memoirs, novels, comic books, radio programs promoted the idea of a covert subversive force. The media gave extensive coverage to stories of German espionage, sabotage, and subversion in legitimate stories of actual cases of "fifth column" activity uncovered by American intelligence. Released in 1939, the popular Warner Brothers motion picture, "Confessions of a Nazi Spy" is a prime example the movie industry encouraging fear among the public.

There was a gap, however, between the perception of a Trojan Horse activity in the United States and the reality of its magnitude and effectiveness. In hindsight, and partially through the admission of Hitler himself, fifth column activity in the United States was of a low priority to the Nazis. The espionage, sabotage and subversion in the America was modest and almost uniformly unsuccessful. But officials of the United States government did not discourage the media from promoting the belief of the high level of the threat of German subversion and did little to calm public fears. In fact, the government encouraged the mania.

The White House, Congress and the FBI all proclaimed it as an ominous threat to national security, and had reason to overstate its scope. Those in the Roosevelt administration, and Roosevelt himself, favoring intervention in Europe used it as an argument against the policy of isolation pointing out that the threat was already present and using subversive tactics in America. The Congress, and in particular the House Un-American Activities Committee, chaired by Martin Dies, used the threat of a Nazi "fifth column" to bolster its investigations into a Soviet "fifth column" and to criticize the isolationalists in the administration. The FBI promoted the idea that agents of the fifth column had penetrated every aspect of American life. J. Edgar Hoover spoke of the threat in alarming terms. At the time the FBI was a small organization given the enormously difficult task of domestic counterespionage. Hoover depended on public vigilance and cooperation and he made sure the nation took the threat seriously. He was able to receive the funding and manpower to fight the fifth column by overemphasizing the severity of the problem.

The panic reached a new level after December 7, 1941 with America's formal entry into the war against the Axis powers.

Beginning in the Fall of 1942, the fear declined sharply as Allies forces moved on the offensive. No major wartime spy ring emerged and governmental warnings of a threat subsided although anecdotal stories of a Nazi "fifth column" persisted.

Further information about this individual or organization may be available in the Special Collections Research Center Wiki

Scope and Contents

The letters in the collection consist of correspondence between Thomas Randle, the head of the Intelligence Division of the Montclair Security Council, and various members of the organization dated from September 9, 1940 to August 9, 1942.

The letters in the collection of the Intelligence Division of the Montclair Security Council are dated September 9, 1940 to August 9, 1942. They contain information pertaining to the organization of the division, prospective recruits and reports on potential subversive activity.

The tone of the letters change somewhat with America's entrance into World War II. In a letter, dated December 8, 1941, Randle asks his recruits to take stronger steps to stop subversive activities, indicating Montclair to be in a part of the country "riddled with foreign agents." He asks them to report any un-American activity to the division and to do so without arousing suspicion.

Index Terms

This Collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Genre/Form of Material:

Correspondence

Topical Term:

Subversive activities--United States--History--20th century
World War, 1939-1945--Collaborationists

Arrangement of Materials

The collection is arranged chronologically.