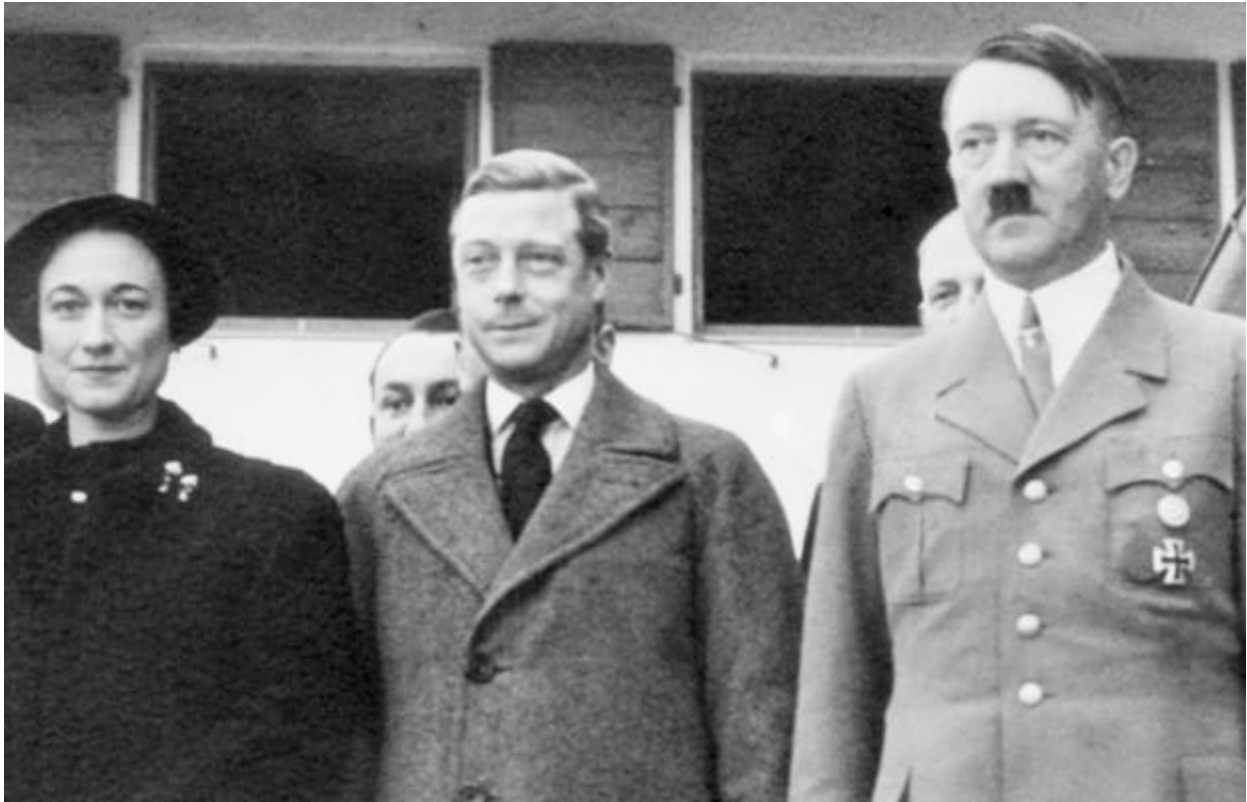


Noel Coward and the Duke of Windsor

by Michael Curtis



I've got my eyes on you, so best beware where you roam. I've set my spies on you, I'm checking all you do.

Espionage has been called the world's second oldest profession. Its practitioners are familiar in the book of Joshua, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, the Roman spies who used carrier pigeons, and notorious figures throughout history, Casanova, the great lover but Venetian spy, Francis Walsingham, spy master to Queen Elizabeth 1, Mata Hari, exotic Dutch dancer, to those of the World War II and Cold War periods, Alger Hiss, Anthony Blunt, Kim Philby, and George Blake.

During World War II, an unexpected array of diverse individuals of different talents and backgrounds engaged in

some form of espionage for the U.S. and its allies. Among them were U.S.-French renowned vedette Josephine Baker, U.S. State Department employee Virginia Hall, biracial Sufi woman Noor Inayat Khan, and Moe Berg, Jewish U.S. major league baseball player. One of the most surprising of those recruited for espionage was the then entertainer of the world, Noel Coward, the exuberant British playwright, actor, composer, known for his wit, flamboyance, chic, and poise.

Coward, though a prolific writer, had never spoken about his activity as a British spy until 1973 when he made his only public statement about his wartime espionage activity, though he had hinted at it in his autobiography, *Future Indefinite*, 1954. He was a perfect choice for the role: as he remarked, "No one considered I had a sensible thought in my head, and they would say all kinds of things that I'd pass along." His facade was to appear as a bit of an idiot, and a merry playboy. Coward behaved in the manner of his public and theatrical image at all times to keep anyone from suspecting his secret activities.

Coward was one of those unusual individuals recruited in 1938 by Sir Robert Vansittart, permanent Undersecretary at the British Foreign Office, an opponent of the appeasement policy of the Neville Chamberlain government, who had formed a network of unofficial agents. Coward, though generally non-political, had made known his criticism of appeasement of Nazi Germany. At first, he was sent to a number of European countries to gather information.

At the time, Britain was concerned about U.S. opinion, about isolationist forces in the U.S., and sought to influence U.S. opinion and policy in favor of Britain. American isolationism then was strong, financed, and advocated, among others, by Senators Robert Taft, and Hiram Johnson, Representative Hamilton Fish, ambitious Ambassador Joseph Kennedy, Robert McCormick, publisher of the Chicago Tribune, Charles Lindbergh, the American First Committee and the German-

American Bund.

As a result of a recommendation in August 1939 by Sir Campbell Stuart, managing director of *The Times*, Coward was sent to Paris where he set up a Bureau of Propaganda and worked closely with the French. When World War II started, Coward was enrolled in a secret intelligence unit at Bletchley Park, nicknamed the "dirty tricks department," which ironically also included Soviet spies Guy Burgess and Kim Philby. He was sent to various countries and then to the U.S. ostensibly on behalf of British War Relief. In the U.S. he joined the British Security Co-ordination, headed by William Stephenson, perhaps the inspiration for James Bond, which was located in Rockefeller Center in NYC. Its function was to investigate enemy activities, prevent sabotage, and mobilize pro-British opinion in the U.S.

In this unit, called by insiders the Baker Street Irregulars, amateur would-be Sherlock Homes, Coward was one of 3,000 agents in the U.S., a group that included other unexpected spies such as Cary Grant, Leslie Howard, David Niven, and Alexander Korda, a group that, among other things, sought to counter those, like Errol Flynn, suspected of being pro-Nazi.

Coward's non-theatrical activity, however, was not appreciated by Prime Minister Winston Churchill who met him twice, and he was twice turned down for a senior job in intelligence because he was thought too conspicuous. Churchill thought Coward was better suited to sing to the troops in the areas they were fighting. Instead of being the new Scarlet Pimpernel, Coward was the loyal trooper, consequently singing to the troops, some of his songs, including the comic ditty "Don't let's be beastly to the Germans, for you can't deprive a gangster of his gun, we mustn't prevent them from basking in the sun."

One of the people probed by Coward during his year in Paris was the Duke of Windsor, a man of whom he been suspicious and

disliked for some time. He believed that Windsor "had a common mind and liked second rate people. I am sure it is a good thing that he abdicated."

Coward was right to suspect the activities of Windsor who was, with his wife Wallis Simpson, friendly or sympathetic, if not fully pro-Nazi, to the German regime. After the end of the war a large cache of files of the Nazi foreign ministry was found at Marburg castle, and finally released in 1957. Among them were 60 documents and telegrams, that became known as the "Windsor file," dealing with correspondence between Windsor and high level Nazis. They included a plot, titled Operation Willi, to persuade Windsor officially to join with the Nazis, move him to Germany, and bring about peace negotiations. The Nazi plan was to reinstate Windsor to the throne, and to recognize Wallis as Queen.

Documents also alleged Windsor had encouraged Nazi bombing of the UK to force the British government to begin peace negotiations.

Noel Coward later said, the secret documents have disclosed Windsor's pro-Nazi perfidy, "of which, of course, I was perfectly aware at the time. What a monumental ass he has always been." Even without the documents the pro-German views of Windsor had been obvious.

While Prince of Wales, "David" was close to his German cousins and fond of German culture. In 1933 he pronounced "it was no business of ours to interfere in Germany's internal affairs either regarding Jews or anything else."

After abdication, in 1937 the Windsors visited Germany, where they were greeted by large crowds, saluted, flattered with lavish treatment. They dined with Herman Goering, and Joseph Goebbels, and visited the training school for future members of the SS guard, and on October 22, 1937 met Adolf Hitler at his Berghof retreat, the private residence in the Bavarian

Alps. Windsor is said to have greeted his host with "Heil Hitler."

It was commonly believed by British officials and journalists that Wallis Simpson, who was even more pro German than the Duke, had a long term affair with Joachim von Ribbentrop, Nazi ambassador to Britain, who later sent her 17 carnations a day in memory of the number of times they slept together. It is also alleged she had passed on confidential British secrets to the Nazis. In his turn, Windsor remarked it would be a tragic thing for the world if Hitler were to be overthrown, "Hitler is the right and logical leader of the German people."

Were the Windsor duo naïve, rather stupid, staunch Nazi sympathizers, or traitorous? The most damaging alleged event is that Windsor in February 1940 leaked Allied war plans for the defense of Belgium, after learning of them when attending the Allied War Council on military strategies. As a result, Hitler changed his battle plans, and conquered France in six weeks.

Noel Coward served his country better than the Duke. In addition to his spying, during the war Coward also composed the patriotic song *London Pride* and wrote the movie of the patriotic drama *In Which We Serve*. By contrast, Windsor was ordered by Winston Churchill to be Governor of the Bahamas to get him out of Europe and prevent his hostile actions.