

## Sabotage in America during World War I

Most U.S. History textbooks teach us that the United States entered World War I because of three events; Unrestricted Warfare – the German U-boats sinking “Neutral” American merchant ships, the sinking of the Lusitania, and the Zimmerman Telegram encouraging Mexico to attack the United States. There is a fourth, and just as important factor that was a reason why the United States finally entered the war, Espionage.

I have always tried to include local history within my curriculum and recently I came across two specific stories about incidents of espionage that kept me spellbound and consequently started me looking further into local history during World War I.

Between 1914 and the United States entering the war, there were 50 acts of terrorism recorded within the United States. Surprisingly, 30 of these “incidents” took place in the New York City and New Jersey area. Despite being “neutral”, the United States was shipping ammunition and dynamite to the Triple Entente members on a regular basis. This fact was well known to the Germans and their response was to stop these valuable war materials reaching their enemies in any way possible.

The German embassy in New York (as well as Washington, D.C.) was staffed by diplomats and workers who were known to be active spies. Perhaps the best-known diplomat was Count Johann Von Bernstorff who headed a regime of espionage agents including the German master spy Franz Von Rintelen. From various sources found, it appears that Von Bernstorff had an open checkbook from the German government; some sources say that it was close to \$150 million to spend on espionage. He is best known for using the “pencil” bomb and causing \$10 million in damage to 36 cargo ships and their cargo. (\$10 million then is worth about \$144 million today).

The bomb was the creation of a Dr. Scheele in Germany and was a simple, time-delayed device. It consisted of a pencil-like container, which contained two acids separated by a strip of copper. Once the acids corroded through the copper, the device ignited. Rintelen used different thicknesses of copper, either speeding up or slowing down the corrosion rates so that these fires could begin once a vessel was far out at sea.

What is amazing is that Rintelen and his fellow spies were easily able to put these devices into the ships cargoes while they were birthed at their piers. There appears to have been little or no security. What is also amazing are the quantities and frequency of these ammunition shipments exported from the port of New York/New Jersey. No source that I found states the exact destination of these munitions but I am certain that with a little more exploration, it will be easy to find.

There is no doubt that the Germans were able to set-up a large and effective spy ring within the United States. Hired professionals of various ethnic backgrounds were known terrorists and it appears that the ring was fronted by a man nicknamed "Graentnor." He was believed to have been a diplomat named Max Hinch. In addition, the names Kurt Jahnke and Lothar Witzke are linked to several attacks.

Where does it all fit in to history, we may never know but we do know that Germany did warn the United States on several occasions not to send arms and munitions to their enemies. Out text books tell of a story that America was "innocent" but, based on the following, I hardly think so. However, that is somewhat my opinion and I want you to form your own.

If you want to look into more about this article, the web sites below are full of information about the espionage situations prior to America entering World War I.

[http://www.njcu.edu/programs/jchistory/pages/b\\_pages/black\\_tom\\_explosion.htm](http://www.njcu.edu/programs/jchistory/pages/b_pages/black_tom_explosion.htm)

<http://www.answers.com/topic/black-tom-explosion>

<http://www.getnj.com/jchist/blacktoma.shtml>

<http://www.eastcoastchapter.wetpaint.com/page/Black+Tom+Explosion,+1916>

<http://www.capitalcentury.com/1915.html>

<http://cryptome.org/eyeball/black-tom/black-eyeball.htm>

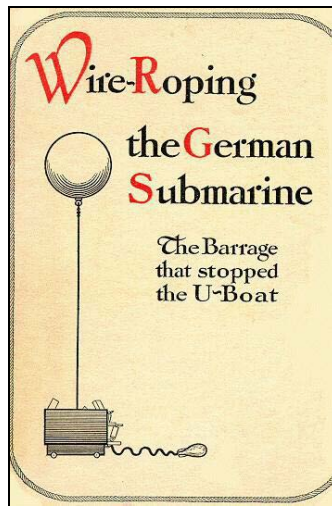
<http://time.com/time/magazine/article/0,917,740767,00.html>

Some of the photos from the above websites are included in the following. Of course, there are many others but the ones that I added here are the most graphic and detailed and of course, interesting.

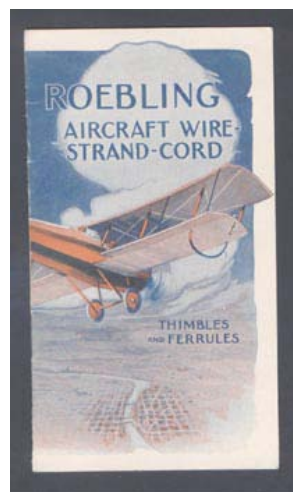
Here are two local incidents that took place and even though the United States government does not fully claim that they were acts of espionage, there is no doubt in my mind that German spies had a major role to play in these events. In addition, there appears to be more behind these events and I do not think that the proper correlations were made. The first event, the fire at the Roebling Plant, is somewhat straight-forward however the second event, The Black Tom incident is a story that is entwined with peculiarities as you will see.

## The Roebling Plant

On January 18<sup>th</sup>, 1915, the factory owned by John A. Roebling's and Son Co. in Trenton, New Jersey was the target of espionage. The Roebling factory was a very large facility produced structural steel and wire during peacetime but during the war, even though the family were of German decent, they designed and built wire netting to trap German U-boats and wire strands for the army biplanes.



Within a few hours, an eight-acre factory and several workers homes were burnt to the ground. There is no doubt that this was an act of espionage because the factory was in full production at the time of the fires. Fortunately, none of the 300 employees were killed.



## The “Black Tom” Explosion

Black Tom is an island at the rear of the Statue of Liberty which is currently part of Liberty State Park. During the early 1900s, it was used by the Lehigh Valley Railroad as a staging point for railcars of ammunition and dynamite prior to them being loaded onto ships heading for the ports in England, France, and Russia. In the early morning of June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1916 a massive explosion, equal to an earthquake of 5.5 on the Richter scale, killed seven people and destroyed the island. Estimates of the damage were in the millions. Included in the damage was the arm of the Statue of Liberty.



Even though there were only seven people killed, the above headline was released as an “extra” edition and it appears that “Yellow Journalism” drastically increased the death toll.

The biggest question of all is who was responsible for this explosion. The person most associated with the blast is a 23 year old from Bayonne, New Jersey called Michael Kristoff. He was turned in by his aunt, who was also his landlady. Her story was that he used to work at the rail yard but keep “strange” hours and would come and go throughout the night. On the day of the incident, her testimony was that he came home shortly after the blast, visibly shaken, mumbling about the damage that he caused. Ironically, Kristoff died at an early age while in the custody of federal officials.



Photo of the rail yard terminal building after the explosion

Then there are the two Norwegians who lived in the same boarding house in Jersey City. According to an article in The New York Times of August 10, 1916, Erling Iverson and Axel Larsen were detained by Jersey City police on the charge of being suspicious persons in the complicity of the Black Tom fire and explosions. Larsen worked on a Pennsylvania Railroad tugboat on the night of the explosion. Iverson was stated as being unemployed at the time.

Two local detectives went to their boarding house and noted that their bags were packed and the two men were about to leave town. Upon a search of their room, the detectives found "a mass of papers" which included drawings of a United States naval submarine capable of traveling 73 miles per hour. The submarine was to be built by Iverson and Company in London, England. Ironically, Iverson's mother was living in London at the time! The name and the military bureau on these plans were, according to the report, not authentic and not verified as active departments. However, in addition to these plans, the detectives found several bundles of personal letters and a book written in shorthand. Also stated was that the letters contained details that they were both pro-German.

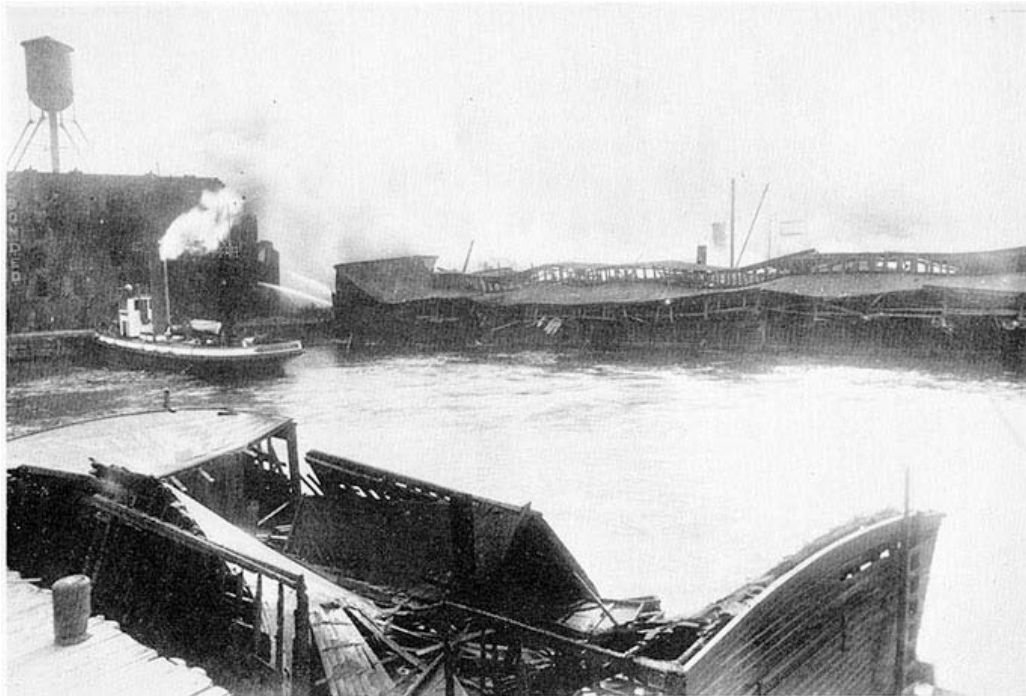
Strangely, the details about what happened to Iverson and Larsen are not easy to find and I plan to investigate further into their whereabouts at another time.



Then there is the affidavit taken from James Larkin who said that he knew in advance of the German plans to attack Black Tom Island. His name was found in another New York Times article written on April 7, 1934. The Black Tom explosion and fire was still under investigation eighteen years later. It is somewhat strange that the government was still looking into this incident a long time after it happened but what is stranger is the story behind James Larkin.

James Larkin, at the time of the explosion, was a high-ranking union official in New York. Prior to coming to America he was the head of the Irish Trade Unions in Dublin and was known for his "fiery cross: speech against capitalism. Larkin is the protégé of James Connolly, the union leader that was killed by the British in the Easter uprising of 1913 in Dublin. There is no doubt that Larkin was anti-British and of note is the fact that before World War I, Britain promised the Republic of Ireland their independence. Once the war started, the British held off this treaty allowing Ireland to become free. Many Irish radicals helped the Germans during the war. It appears that Larkin was involved in the Black Tom incident. Also of note is the fact that Larkin was deported by the American government in 1923, four years after the Treaty of Versailles. Nothing is definite but it is very interesting that an Irish labor activist was also part of the investigation! It is also strange that this statement came under review four years after the "official" reason cited by the government for the blast.

And the official reason was - mosquitoes! That's right, small, flying insects that come out on those hot, summer nights and bite people. How could such a bug cause so great a damage you may ask? Well, according to the government, it was a hot, sultry night back then in 1916 and the night-watchman, according to the official report, was being eaten-alive by mosquitoes. To stop these pesky insects, he made a small, smoky fire to keep the bugs away. The report then states that a spark from this fire was carried by the wind and caused a larger fire which in turn caused the explosion. Yeah right! Just look at the photograph below and tell me if this was caused by mosquitoes and a careless night-watchman. I think not.



This photo appears to me to have been taken not longer after the blast, the evidence being the water being sprayed onto the building. The two structures front and back, are loading/unloading piers for the barges. The building to the left with the water tower on the roof is a storage warehouse and probably at the end of the line for the railway. The location does not appear to be the epicenter of the explosion but it certainly shows severe structural damage, probable from the blast and shock-waves that followed the explosion.

At the end of the August 10 article in *The New York Times*, it tells of the raising of the barge Isabel that sunk during the explosion. This last paragraph totally destroys Woodrow Wilson's stance of isolationism and neutrality. There is no doubt as to where these shells were going. Below is the exact wording from *The New York Times* article:-

*"In the hulk was found about 10,000 shells. Nearly 200 of them were of the twelve-inch type and about three feet long. Many shells had shot the bottom out of the barge.*

*The police of Jersey City will permit these shells which can be utilized to be returned to the Bethlehem Steel Company, which will refill them. The shells are in damaged condition and not regarded as dangerous by the police"*

[Hulk - cargo hold of the barge Isabel]

It is 1916 and the question remains, why is Bethlehem Steel Company in the explosives business? Were those German spies correct in having their embassy take out an ad opposite the sailing schedule of the Lusitania? I think that we have to look no further than Jersey City to find the evidence. Just in case this is not enough for you, the above quote was the final paragraphs of an article entitled "HALT A CAR OF DUMDUMS." (The New York Times, August 10, 1916)

*A carload of dum dum bullets on the Lackawanna Railroad was found by the Jersey City police yesterday morning, but after inspection was permitted to proceed from Secaucus, the inspection station, into Hoboken to be loaded on barges. The car came from some Western point and was reshipped from East Buffalo. The contents were consigned to a Broadway firm for exportation, the Jersey City police stated.*

*The car contained 800 cases of the bullets. Each case contained a gross of boxes with a dozen bullets in each. The bullets, according to the police, were about three inches long and flattened at the nose. They counted 518,400 in the car.*

Now I may be wrong but I did use a calculator. A gross is 144 so that means the following:-

$800 \times 144 \times 12 = 1,382,400$  bullets and not 518,400 as stated. No matter which way you look at it, they were going for export and it does not take a rocket scientist to guess where!

I am not going to write a conclusion, you can make your own out of what I have presented. If you don't believe me about Black Tom then next time you are sailing out toward the Statue of Liberty look over at Liberty State Park. You will see a circle of U.S. Flags by the water's edge. That was once the site of Black Tom.

Oh by the way, why was the island called Black Tom? Well, from what I found, it was named after its first resident who himself appears to have been quite a character. The Black Tom mystery will be continued at a later date.

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