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The Sisson Documents

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## THE SISSON DOCUMENTS

GEORGE F. KENNAN

IN THE winter of 1917-18 the Committee on Public Information, which was the official American propaganda agency of World War I, stationed in Petrograd a special representative, Edgar Sisson, formerly an editor of *Cosmopolitan Magazine*. In February and March 1918, Sisson purchased and removed from Russia a number of documents and photographs of documents purporting to prove that the leaders of the Bolshevik government were paid agents of the German General Staff. Translations of sixty-nine documents of this nature, accompanied in some instances by facsimiles of the originals, were published in the fall of that year by the Committee on Public Information in a pamphlet which formed a part of its official "War Information Series."<sup>1</sup> The following is an effort to appraise, in the light of evidence available today, the authenticity and significance of these documents.

### I. THE NATURE AND BACKGROUND OF THE DOCUMENTS

Sisson arrived in Petrograd at the end of November 1917 and remained there throughout the winter. At the beginning of February there came into his hands a set of documents which were just then being surreptitiously circulated in Petrograd. They consisted of what appeared to be some official circulars of the German government from the early period of

the war and some private communications exchanged between individuals in Scandinavia in the summer of 1917. The general tendency of these documents was to suggest that the Bolsheviki were serving as paid German agents, although in certain instances the relevance even to this thesis was obscure.

Some of these documents, or their content, had been first brought to notice at the time of the Petrograd disorders in July 1917. A portion of the material had been leaked to the Petrograd press at that time by Minister for Justice Pereverzev, as a means of discrediting the Bolsheviki. The documents had then been published in full, in December 1917 and January 1918, by newspapers in the anti-Bolshevik Don Cossack territory. It was shortly after this that copies of them began to circulate in Petrograd. Such copies came to Sisson's attention from several sources; he was able to obtain sets both in Russian and in English translation. He was much interested in their implications. Care should be taken not to confuse this older material, included only in Appendix I to the official American pamphlet, with the main documents to be discussed below.

Shortly after Sisson learned of this first body of material, the American ambassador, David R. Francis, told Sisson (February 5) of a visit he had received from a Petrograd journalist, Eugene Semenov, who had provided him with a photograph of what purported to be an official and confidential document in the Soviet files: a letter from a member of the Soviet delegation at Brest-Litovsk

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Committee on Public Information, George CREEL (chairman), *The German-Bolshevik conspiracy* ("War Information Series," No. 20 [Washington, October, 1918]).

(Joffe) to the soviet of people's commissars in Petrograd. In the ensuing days Semenov brought to the ambassador photographs of two or three other documents, similarly supposed to be in the Soviet files. Sisson then got in touch with Semenov, himself, and succeeded in purchasing from him, during the remainder of February, photographs of a number of other such documents. Whereas the initial series (the ones published in the newspapers in the Cossack territory) had contained material relating only to the period prior to the Bolshevik seizure of power, the documents now being supplied by Semenov related to the period subsequent to November 1917 and showed the Bolshevik leaders as taking orders, most abjectly and at that very time, from secret offices of the German General Staff situated in Russia.

Sisson pressed to obtain the originals of these documents. He was told that for this purpose a raid would have to be carried out on the official files at the time the Soviet government began to move to Moscow in early March. On March 3, he was given to understand that the raid had been successfully conducted. He met later that day with Semenov and a number of the latter's associates and was supplied, in return for generous cash payment, with what purported to be the originals of fourteen of the documents he had seen.<sup>2</sup> For the rest, he had to be content with photographs.

Sisson, convinced that the material was of enormous importance, left at once for the United States, with a view to placing it in the hands of the American government. He brought with him both sets of documents: the earlier ones, al-

<sup>2</sup> These originals were, with one exception, all documents purporting to have originated from the German offices. For all the Russian ones, except Document No. 3 in the published series, he had only the photographs.

ready published in Russia, and the ones he had obtained from Semenov. After a long and arduous journey, he reached Washington in early May. To his amazement and anger, the department of state (to which he was first required to address himself) failed to show much enthusiasm or interest in his documents and declined to authorize their publication at that juncture. For a time the matter was stymied; but in September 1918 the Committee on Public Information, by-passing the department of state, succeeded in obtaining the president's personal authority for publication of the material. Release of the documents to the American press began on September 15, over the protest of the state department, which was apprehensive for the effect on American personnel still in Russia.

Most of the American press, relying on the government's implicit endorsement, accepted the material as genuine.<sup>3</sup> Sharp questions were raised, however, in some quarters, particularly in the *New York Evening Post*. The Committee on Public Information had intended, in any event, to follow up release of the documents to the press by publishing the entire collection in pamphlet form. In view of the questions raised as to authenticity, it was now decided to obtain expert opinion to reinforce their credibility. The National Board for Historical Service agreed, on request, to give such assistance. The board appointed J. Franklin Jameson, founder and long-time editor of the *American historical review* and director of the department of historical research of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, and Samuel N. Harper, professor of Russian language and institutions at the Uni-

<sup>3</sup> The *New York Times*, September 16, 1918, concluded from the documents that "the Bolsheviks . . . have ruled [Russia] as German valets, and are despicable."

versity of Chicago, to inquire into the authenticity of the documents.

In the brief space of one week, Harper and Jameson studied the sixty-nine document the committee proposed to publish and drew up and presented a 2,300-word report of their findings. Of the fifty-four documents which constituted the main body of the collection<sup>4</sup> and related to the period after the November Revolution (i.e., those produced for the first time by Semenov in Petrograd), they said: ". . . we have no hesitation in declaring that we see no reason to doubt the genuineness or authenticity of these fifty-three documents." In the older documents, relating to the period preceding the November Revolution, they saw "nothing that positively excludes the notion of their being genuine, little in any of them that makes it doubtful . . ." but felt they had insufficient means of judgment and could make no confident declaration. In the case of two of the alleged German circulars for which—alone—German originals were available, Harper and Jameson said that while they did not consider these to be "simply forgeries" they did not consider them ". . . in their present shape, documents on whose entire texts historians or publicists can safely rely as genuine."

Jameson appears never to have doubted the correctness of this judgment. ". . . I firmly believe the main series of fifty-three Russian documents to be genuine," he wrote to a friend in 1919, "and nobody ought from the phrases Harper and I used to draw the inference that we do not so believe." Jameson, it should be noted, knew no Russian, could

<sup>4</sup> *The German-Bolshevik conspiracy*, pp. 29-30. The reference in the Harper and Jameson report to "fifty-three" documents is to be explained by the fact that one document was numbered 37A, so that the numbers of the fifty-four documents in the main series ran only to fifty-three.

not read the documents, and described his role in the investigation as that of "vulgar innocence."<sup>5</sup> The burden of investigation had thus fallen on Harper alone.

In his posthumously published memoirs,<sup>6</sup> Harper commented as follows on the background of this advisory opinion:

We flatly refused to comment on Sisson's conclusions as to what the documents proved, namely, that Lenin not only had had contacts with the German general staff when he journeyed across Germany but had been and still was a German agent. Jameson and I were ready to state that in the given circumstances, by starting a social revolution in Russia, Lenin was objectively aiding the enemy from a military point of view. We were told that such a statement would not help to promote that emotional upsurge necessary for the mobilization of all our resources to be thrown into the struggle. We stood our ground, however, as our statement on the pamphlet will show. But the general view current at this time was that we had declared all the documents genuine beyond any question. In addition, Sisson's conclusions as to what the documents showed were also laid upon our shoulders. This last phase gave me much concern at the time. With his country at war, the academic man, when called upon by his government to use his academic talents for a war purpose, often faces a problem of duty in two directions and finds difficulty in properly protecting himself.

The original draft of Harper's memoirs contains a further passage, not included in the published edition, which makes even clearer his unhappiness over this incident:

My experience with the Sisson documents showed clearly the pressure to which University men are subjected in time of war. My position was particularly difficult because my area

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth DONNAN and Leo F. STARK (eds.), *An historical world: selections from the correspondence of John Franklin Jameson* (Philadelphia, 1956), letters of Jan. 24, 1919 to Arthur I. Andrew and of Oct. 30, 1918 to Andrew C. McLaughlin.

<sup>6</sup> Paul V. HARPER (ed.), *The Russia I believe in: the memoirs of Samuel N. Harper* (Chicago, 1945), p. 112.

of study was under the control of a new group which was talking peace, and I felt it was my academic duty to explain why the Bolsheviks were working against a continuation of the war, not only on the part of Russia but in general. Thanks to the support of Professor Jameson I was able to hold out to a certain degree against a complete abandonment of the rules of the student but it was impossible for a University man not to make a contribution to the development of the war spirit, even if this involved the making of statements of a distinctly biased character.<sup>7</sup>

The governmental pamphlet containing the documents, together with the report of Jameson and Harper, appeared at approximately the end of October 1918. Its effect on public opinion seems to have been largely lost in the excitement over the simultaneous ending of World War I.

Since doubt continued to be thrown on the authenticity of the documents from a number of sources, the department of state, at the urging of Sisson (who was sure further investigation would support his belief in their genuineness), proceeded in 1920 and 1921 to make further inquiry into the background and substantiality of the documents. A good deal of contributory evidence was assembled from various sources. But efforts to obtain the originals of the documents from President Wilson, to whom they had been delivered after the pamphlet was published, were sharply rebuffed by the president. He sent back word that at the moment he did not have time to lay hands on the documents but would "make the proper disposition of them" when he did.<sup>8</sup> When Wilson left the White House in March 1921 the incoming White House secretary was unable to find any trace of this material. In view of the unavailability of

the originals, the official investigation was dropped and never resumed.

In December 1952, as President Truman was preparing to leave the White House, the originals of the documents were found in a White House safe. Those who found them naturally had no idea what they were. They were sent to the National Archives, and are now in the justice and executive section of the legislative, judicial, and diplomatic records branch. The file of materials about the Sisson documents, accumulated in the course of the state department's abortive 1920-21 investigation, gathered dust in various department offices for thirty-four years. It was finally delivered in January 1955 to the National Archives, where it is now in the foreign affairs section of the same branch.

Other documents, plainly emanating from the same sources as those supplied by Semenov, were procured by British intelligence officers in Petrograd; and a further number were delivered, after Sisson's departure, to other American representatives in Russia. Of the former, at least two and possibly more were identical with ones that appeared in the published pamphlet. Of the additional American holdings, only one was published in the Sisson series; the remainder (some thirty-seven documents) were kept with the investigatory material.

Of the fifty-four documents published in the main body of *The German-Bolshevik conspiracy* pamphlet, the most numerous group is made up of eighteen communications purporting to emanate from a subordinate office of the German Great General Staff (*Grosser Generalstab*), entitled "Nachrichten-Bureau." While the stationery of the Nachrichten-Bureau does not indicate the seat of its activity, the inference from the content of the documents is that it was situated in

<sup>7</sup> Samuel N. Harper MSS, University of Chicago Library.

<sup>8</sup> National Archives, Washington, Sisson documents file, letter, White House Secretary Tumulty to Arthur Bullard, Dec. 20, 1920.

Petrograd. Sisson himself seems to have drawn, and never to have questioned, this inference.

The next most numerous category was composed of fifteen documents purporting to emanate from the chiefs of the counterespionage bureau at the old Russian army field headquarters (Stavka), which continued a sort of rudimentary existence for some time after the revolution.

A third series, of eight documents, bears the letterhead of a "central division" (*Central Abtheilung*) of the German *Grosser Generalstab*; and these are signed by one who gives his title as "chief of the Russian division." Again, the seat of this entity is not indicated; one is permitted to infer that it was in Russia and almost certainly in Petrograd.

Of the remaining documents, several purport to emanate from other German offices, and four bear the letterhead of the "commissar for combatting the counterrevolution and pogroms."

All these documents, including those from the official German military offices, are in the Russian language. The dates run from October 27, 1917 to March 9, 1918.

Appendix I consists of translations of eight German governmental circulars from the years 1914 to 1916, and six letters supposed to have passed between individuals in Scandinavia, Switzerland, and Germany in the summer of 1917. Appendix II consists only of one intercept of a telegraphic conversation between Chicherin, at Petrograd, and Trotsky, at Brest-Litovsk.

## II. EVIDENCE AS TO AUTHENTICITY

### A. GENERAL HISTORICAL IMPLAUSIBILITY

The state of affairs suggested in the main body of the documents is of such extreme historical implausibility that the

question might well be asked whether the documents could not be declared generally fraudulent on this ground alone.

Whoever credits the authenticity of these documents must be prepared to accept the following propositions:

1. That at all times between the November Revolution and the conclusion of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the Soviet leaders actually stood in a position of clandestine subservience to the German General Staff—a relationship which they succeeded in concealing not only at the time but for decades to come from even the most intimate of their party comrades;

2. That this subservience went so far that the German General Staff actually controlled the elections to the central executive committee in January 1918 and dictated the election of a large group of people, including most of the Communist leaders;

3. That the German General Staff secretly maintained, during this period, two full-fledged offices in Petrograd (one of them being its own "Russian division") which succeeded in establishing and observing such fantastic security of operation that no hint of their existence ever leaked out from any other source; and

4. That the Brest-Litovsk negotiations, together with the negotiations conducted simultaneously in Petrograd by Count Mirbach and Admiral Keyserling, were an elaborate sham, designed to deceive public opinion everywhere, the Soviet negotiators being actually under clandestine German control the entire time through other channels.

It hardly needs to be said that such a state of affairs cannot conceivably be reconciled with known historical truth. Surely no one familiar with the life of Lenin, the history of the Bolshevik

movement, and the internal debates among the Russian Communist leaders over the problems presented by the Brest-Litovsk negotiations could question the reality from the Soviet standpoint of the issues at stake in the Brest-Litovsk talks or the sincerity of the discussion of them in senior Communist circles. It is not conceivable that in these moments of deepest crisis Lenin should have concealed from his associates political circumstances of highest relevance to the great questions at hand. Lenin, whatever one may think of him, was not a conspirator against the Russian Communist movement.

Similarly, from the German side, the captured German foreign office files dealing with the Brest-Litovsk negotiations, which appear to include practically all relevant material, contain nothing to indicate that any of the Germans concerned with these negotiations—including Foreign Minister Kühlmann, the German military leaders, and the kaiser himself—was aware of any such relationship to the Bolshevik leaders as that suggested by these documents.<sup>9</sup> On the contrary, the captured German material contains a great deal of solid evidence that no such relationship existed at all.<sup>10</sup>

In general, neither the Sisson documents nor Sisson's own explanations afford any plausible reconciliation of the situation of complete Bolshevik subjection to Germany, as suggested by the documents, with the known facts of the tremendous political tension between the two governments that marked and accompanied the Brest-Litovsk negotiations. It is wholly absurd to suppose that the Germans, at that time absorbed in preparations for their great final offen-

sive in the west and having most urgent need for the establishment of a clear and dependable military situation in the east, would have failed to exploit to the utmost any such clandestine channel of authority over the Bolshevik leaders as that indicated by these documents. Yet nowhere do the documents suggest that the Germans used this extensive implied authority in Petrograd to break the recalcitrance of the Soviet negotiators at Brest.

It should also be noted here that had there existed, as between the Germans and the Bolsheviks, any such relationship as that suggested here, this situation could not have failed to become a subject of attention in the subsequent German parliamentary investigation into the causes of the German breakdown in 1918.<sup>11</sup> In this investigation the policies of the German high command with rela-

<sup>10</sup> Note for example: Ludendorff's obvious surprise on learning of the first Soviet armistice approach (*ibid.*, telegram, Nov. 21, 1917 from *Grosses Hauptquartier* to foreign office, reel 1123); Kühlmann's wire to Mirbach in Petrograd in beginning of January telling him to be prepared to leave, because negotiations might soon be broken off (*ibid.*); Kühlmann's admission in mid-January in a telegram to Zimmermann at the foreign office that he had no means of insisting on better treatment of the German Balts by the Russian Communists but would take the matter up at Brest-Litovsk as soon as he could (reel 1125); and particularly the flat rejection by the German foreign office, on January 24, 1918, of a suggestion emanating from intermediaries in Stockholm that a disguised loan to the Bolsheviks might expedite the negotiations at Brest-Litovsk (reel 9300 H, letter Erzberger to Baron v. Bergen, Jan. 22, 1918, text made available to me by a friend working on the German documents on deposit in England).

<sup>11</sup> See published series entitled *Die Ursachen des Deutschen Zusammenbruchs im Jahre 1918*, Albrecht PHILIPP (ed.) (Berlin, 1925). The actual files of this investigation, containing a good deal of confidential and unpublished material, are also in the captured German foreign office documents; they, too, appear to contain no reference whatsoever to any relationship such as that suggested by the Sisson documents, and nothing that would support the thesis that such a relationship could have existed.

<sup>9</sup> See captured German foreign office documents in the National Archives, Washington; particularly microfilm reels 1123 and 1125.

tion to the Brest-Litovsk talks were subjected to an intense and critical scrutiny, to which any clandestine channels of authority over the Bolsheviki would have been highly pertinent. Yet no mention of the Sisson documents or the situation they suggest seems ever to have been made in all this prolonged and intensive inquiry, the authors of which had access to all of the relevant secret German files.

The very suggestion that there should have been actual offices of the German General Staff in Petrograd in the winter of 1917-18 is in highest degree implausible and at variance with known historical circumstance. It is absurd to suppose that the Germans should have decided to station highly sensitive military offices, in wartime, in what was still officially enemy territory, well outside the German lines and removed from any possible prompt protection by the German army. There were, of course, two real German official missions in Petrograd at that time, headed by Count Mirbach and Admiral Keyserling. What is known of the position and treatment of these missions does not check in any way with the situation suggested by the Sisson documents. The memoirs of Zalkind, at that time Trotsky's deputy in the Soviet foreign office, reveal clearly the drastic and humiliating restrictions placed on this official German personnel by the Bolsheviki, despite Mirbach's earnest protests.<sup>12</sup> This situation is confirmed by the captured German documents. Clearly, such difficulties could and would have been promptly remedied had there been, in the same city, German General Staff offices with huge power over the Bolshevik authorities as the Sisson documents imply. It is further significant that when

the crisis was reached in the Brest-Litovsk negotiations, the German official missions in Petrograd were promptly removed, in the interests of their own safety; and the resumption of the German offensive was even delayed pending their safe arrival on German-held territory. Yet the Sisson documents show the supposed German General Staff offices as remaining peacefully in Petrograd and exercising undiminished authority over the Soviet leaders, through the entire period of resumed hostilities pending final conclusion of the treaty.

#### B. SPECIFIC INSTANCES OF HISTORICAL IMPLAUSIBILITY

Both individually and collectively, the documents abound in specific suggestions that are irreconcilable with historical fact. It would be redundant to attempt to list any great number of these. The following is a good example.

The Nachrichten-Bureau series are signed by a certain Colonel R. Bauer. When, at a much later date, Allied officials complained to Semenov that it had never been possible to discover in the German army lists any officer who could have played this role, Semenov explained that the signature "R. Bauer" was only a cover for one Bayermeister, whose name appears elsewhere in the Sisson documents. Semenov was undoubtedly referring, here, to Lieutenant A. Bauermeister, who was indeed a real person—a senior Russian-speaking German intelligence officer who served on the eastern front in World War I. Bayermeister's name had appeared in the Russian press in 1915 in connection with the charges advanced against the Russian officer Myasoyedov, executed in 1915 as a German spy; and it was no doubt from this episode that Semenov was familiar with it.

<sup>12</sup> "NKID v 1917-om godu" [The Narkomindel in 1917], *Mezhdunarodnaya Zhizn*, No. 10 (1927).

But the real Bauermeister's memoirs have subsequently been published;<sup>13</sup> and while they are lurid and unconvincing in many details, there is no reason to doubt the main facts of Bauermeister's wartime service as related therein. These facts leave no room for any such whereabouts and activities as the Sisson documents would suggest.

At the time his memoirs were written (1933-34), Bauermeister seems to have heard of only one of the documents of this series: apparently, from his description, one not printed in the American pamphlet nor present in the American files, but plainly of this same origin. In this document it was evidently suggested that Bauermeister had conferred with the Bolshevik leaders in Kronstadt in midsummer of 1917. (The allegation that such conferences took place, with Lenin's participation, is found in Document No. 5 of the official American pamphlet; it was unquestionably false, and is another striking instance of historical implausibility.) Bauermeister, who was at that time serving as intelligence officer to the Austrian Third Army in the Carpathians, ridicules the allegation of his participation in such a conference. It is particularly significant that this is clearly all he had heard, as late as 1933-34, of the Sisson documents. A real "R. Bauer" would hardly have remained for sixteen years ignorant of the publication by the United States government of eighteen of his most important secret communications to another government.

The Sisson documents were plainly drawn up by someone who had something more than a good Petrograd-newspaper-reader's knowledge of historical fact; and an impressive effort was made to weave this fact in with the abundant

fiction. The result remains nevertheless unconvincing. At every hand one finds serious discrepancies between circumstances suggested by the documents and known historical fact.<sup>14</sup>

#### C. LACK OF ACCORD WITH NORMAL GOVERNMENTAL USAGE

At almost every turn, the content of these documents reveals features which do not accord in any way with the nor-

<sup>14</sup> Here are some examples:

Document 5: Lenin was not in Kronstadt in July 1917.

Document 7: Martov was not a Bolshevik, and would scarcely have been included in such a list.

Document 9: Shindler, Keberlein, and Diese, shown as German agents in Vladivostok, had all left that city years earlier.

Document 15: Trotsky's alleged statement at Brest-Litovsk is sheerest nonsense, as the official records of the negotiations show.

Document 16: Passage through Finland was at that time extremely difficult even for bona fide Allied diplomats.

Document 17: Schneur, a real person, had insinuated himself onto the first Soviet armistice delegation and had later tried to seize control at army headquarters upon Dukhonin's murder. He was at this time, and throughout most of January and February, in prison and under investigation in Petrograd.

Document 19: There was, at this time, no Japanese "occupationary detachment" in Siberia.

Documents 22 and 23: Vladivostok was not yet fully in Bolshevik hands, and Allied warships were at anchor in the roadstead; the German naval command would have been extremely frivolous in ordering disassembled submarines to be sent to such a place.

Document 27: The British and French missions, as well as a large part of the American staff, actually left Petrograd for good that very day, which makes this communication rather redundant.

Document 37A: The captured German documents reveal no conversation of this nature whatsoever between General Hoffmann and Trotsky.

Document 43: This is in part simply a restatement of the German terms at Brest-Litovsk; the remainder of it is a vast oversimplification of a very complicated situation.

Document 53: That there was a division of the German General Staff in Helsinki in 1916 is on a par with the suggestion that there was such a division in Petrograd in 1918

The above are only a few random selections. They could be matched by many more.

<sup>13</sup> A. BAUERMEISTER, *Spies break through* (London, 1934).

mal practices of governments. Organizations that deal with matters requiring privacy and secrecy of treatment tend not to put down on paper, and still less to preserve, data of a self-incriminating nature. It is unusual for governments to record unnecessarily in written documents, and particularly in communications to other governments, data that could be used against them, especially in wartime. Yet in the Sisson documents there are repeated instances of gratuitous and apparently wholly unnecessary inclusion of data of this nature.

The very first document, for example, purports to be a written communication from two subordinate foreign office officials to the chairman of the soviet of people's commissars, confirming that they have removed from the archives of the old tsarist ministry of justice certain items, including ". . . the order of the German Imperial Bank, No. 7433, of the second of March, 1917, for allowing money to Comrades Lenin, Zinovieff, Kameneff, Trotsky, Sumenson, Koslovsky and others. . . ." There was plainly no need here to cite the incriminating content of the documents removed; the chairman of the soviet of people's commissars would have been fully aware of it. If, as the documents suggest, he was concerned to suppress the evidence, the last thing he would have wanted would have been to have it spread out in another official document.

In a number of documents we find the German officers recording in formal communications to the Soviet government the names of German espionage agents in various parts of Russia. Anyone with the most elementary knowledge of the principles of intelligence work knows that no experienced intelligence organization, particularly in wartime, would list the names of its agents even in its internal

correspondence, much less in official communications to a foreign government. To do so would be to consign those names to processes over which the respective intelligence organization could have no control. The administrative procedures of the Bolshevik authority in the early period were necessarily hastily improvised and notoriously chaotic, and the Germans were under no illusions about the personal reliability of the Bolshevik leaders in their dealings with capitalist governments. No German military intelligence officer could, in these circumstances, have committed highly classified confidential information of this nature to the Bolshevik leaders in wartime, in the manner indicated by these documents, without rendering himself subject to disciplinary action.

A further body of material is simply of such a nature that for reasons of sheer political prudence it would scarcely have been committed to intergovernmental correspondence. Document No. 7 purports to inform the commissar for foreign affairs of the names of those persons on whose re-election to the central executive committee the German General Staff "insisted." Is it conceivable that the Germans should have put such a demand in a formal communication? Or that the Soviet leaders should have accepted such a communication and put it in their files where it could be seen by others of their associates and thus become a matter of common gossip in the party?

#### D. TECHNICAL ASPECTS

In addition to the point of historical implausibility, the authenticity of the documents is open to question in a large number of technical aspects.

Many of these technical imperfections were described in an official German government pamphlet published in Berlin in

1919 with a foreword by the German premier, Phillip Scheidemann.<sup>15</sup> In this pamphlet the German government formally declared the Sisson documents to be wholly fraudulent. General Groener, signing on behalf of the German army command, officially denied the existence of a number of the German officers mentioned in the Sisson documents.

The reliability of this pamphlet was rejected a priori by Sisson, as coming from a prejudiced source. But one must remember that the statements it contained bore the full authority of the German government, and it is not probable that they would have involved direct misstatements about the German official establishment. Such statements could easily have been spotted and picked up for criticism by thousands of people in Germany.

1. *Letterhead*.—It was pointed out in the German pamphlet that the letterhead of the alleged divisions of the German General Staff, as shown in the Sisson documents, was obviously false. The *Grosser Generalstab*, the name of which appeared there, had actually been abolished on August 2, 1914, and was not re-established until after the war. The General Staff organization never included a "Nachrichten-Bureau." It *had* had, up to the summer of 1917, a "Nachrichten-abteilung" (changed in 1917 to "Abteilung Fremder Heere"), from which the name was perhaps taken. It had no Russian division as such. These and other statements in the German pamphlet concerning the German military establishment were confirmed to the state department by the director of the military intelligence division of the war depart-

ment, Colonel Mathew C. Smith, in a letter of January 17, 1921.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to these defects, it should be noted that the spelling on the letterhead (as also on the German circulars included in Appendix I to the Sisson documents) was in several respects archaic or unusual, and would scarcely have appeared on authentic German documents in 1918 (i.e., "Bureau" instead of "Büro"; "Abtheilung" instead of "Abteilung"; "Central" instead of "Zentral").

2. *Language*.—The letters from the German officers are all written in excellent Russian. This in itself would be most unusual, particularly in Russia. Even the Russian government did not always use its own language for diplomatic communication. It would have been particularly unnecessary in the case at hand, since most of the Bolshevik leaders had a fully adequate knowledge of German. Beyond that, this would imply that, attached to their General Staff offices in Russia, the Germans had staffs of interpreters and typists for whom Russian was the first language. Such people could probably have been found in Germany; but they would have been unlikely to be ones who could be given highest security clearance; their enlistment and employment in Petrograd would not have been easy to reconcile with the extreme security precautions necessary to keep such operation secret. A curious touch in the documents is the fact that certain of the senior German officials involved, including the head of the Russian section of the General Staff, signed their names in Cyrillic characters. This would have been both unusual and unnecessary.

<sup>15</sup> *Die Entlarvung der "Deutsch-Bolschewistischen Verschwörung" mit einem Vorwort des deutschen Ministerpräsidenten Phillip Scheidemann, Herausgegeben vom Dr. Ernst Bischoff* (Berlin, 1919).

<sup>16</sup> Harper was greatly disturbed by Colonel Smith's letter and pointed out, in a memorandum he attached to it, that this "certainly" cast doubt on the genuineness of the documents (Sisson documents file).

3. *Dating system.*—In the winter of 1917–18 the Soviet government was in a state of transition from the old Julian calendar to the western Gregorian calendar, thirteen days in advance. The change was made formally on February 1/14, 1918. Both immediately before and after, the double date was widely used as a means of avoiding confusion.

Not one of the Sisson documents, curiously enough, bears a double date or indeed anything to indicate whether the dates were in the old calendar or the new. Those relating to the last months of 1917 and January 1918 were obviously dated by the old calendar.<sup>17</sup> This included those from the German offices. Documents from the latter part of February, on the other hand, also emanating from the German offices, were equally clearly dated by the new calendar. At some time, therefore, these German offices presumably switched from the old to the new calendar. And since they were supposed to be in correspondence with the highest offices of the Soviet government, this would presumably have been at the time the change was officially effected, i.e., February 1/14.

Now it is strange enough that a German official office should have used the Old Style date alone, in any circumstance; for this would have been at odds with all other German official usage and would have complicated the integration of the correspondence into the German governmental files. If the Germans had used the old calendar at all, they would surely have used the double date. It is even stranger that they should have failed, at the very time of transition, to employ some device to mark the change

and to indicate which system of date they were using at any given time. But beyond this there is the most curious fact that the dating of the letters from the German offices carries right or through the dates from February 1 to 14 six documents being dated in this period. For anyone making the change from the old dating system to the new, at the time fixed by the government decree, it was impossible to have any dates in this period, since one skipped directly from January 31 to February 14 in order to catch up with the Gregorian calendar. Conceivably the Germans might have made the switch at some other time, for there *are* gaps of over thirteen days in the sequence of their dates at other periods; but had they done this, it would have been by arbitrary decision on their own part, in conflict with the official Russian usage; and it is incredible in such an event that they would not at least have employed the double date to avoid confusion.

In summary, the dating on the German documents up to the middle of February is most implausible, and could—if genuine—only have been extremely confusing to anyone receiving the communications.

4. *Form.*—The letters from the German offices are all signed both by a senior official and by a second official described as “adjutant.” This system of signature, common in Russian usage, was never employed in the German army.

5. *Seal.*—The documents purporting to emanate from the “Russian division of the German General Staff” bear no seal at all, nor do a portion of the documents from Russian offices.

The seal affixed to the letters from the “Nachrichten-Bureau” is an extremely primitive one and bears no resemblance to the official seal actually in use in the

<sup>17</sup> One, dated October 25, 1917, even refers to the existence of the Soviet government, although the date of the revolution was November 7–8, New Style—or October 25–26, Old Style.

German army. It consists only of crude lettering, includes no emblem, and appears to have been made by fitting type letters into the end of a metal tube. It could only have been homemade, or made by some local Petrograd firm. That a highly sensitive German military office, concerned to keep its presence in the Russian capital a profound secret, would have ordered a seal from a local shop is scarcely conceivable.

6. *Handwriting*.—The documents purporting to emanate from the German offices bear two kinds of handwriting: the signatures of the German authors and the marginal notes of the Soviet recipients. This handwriting can be tested for the following points: (a) fluency and consistency of execution in the signatures; (b) similarity of handwriting as between signatures and the marginal notes, and as between signatures supposed to be those of different people; (c) in the case of known historical personages, relationship of their genuine signatures to those on the documents; and (d) relationship of handwriting on the documents to that of persons known to have been involved in their origin. The last of these points will be examined in a later context. Of the first three, the following may be said.

Documents from this source were examined by a handwriting expert of the British intelligence service in 1918 and, somewhat later, by two American experts: Captain Harry Given, of the United States Army, and James B. Green, of Washington, D.C.

On the first of the above points, the British expert came to the conclusion that “. . . a careful examination of all the signatures, . . . showed very great variation. . . . Distinct traces of indecision are to be met with in some of the signatures and these point also to their being forgeries.” The British report referred

particularly, in this connection, to the series of signatures by “R. Bauer,” which, it was said, “. . . show far greater discrepancies than would, in our opinion, be found in the same number of genuine signatures of the same person.”<sup>18</sup>

The American experts came to a diametrically opposite conclusion, namely, that each set of signatures appeared to stem from the same hand, and the signatures were executed with sufficient fluency and consistency to suggest genuineness. This judgment related, however, to a different set of documents, obtained at a later date. The American experts never saw the originals of the documents published in *The German-Bolshevik conspiracy* pamphlet, where the signatures show far greater signs of uncertainty and labored execution.<sup>19</sup> Nor do they appear to have given any attention to the published facsimiles of those documents. They also seem not to have inquired into the similarities between the signatures and the marginal notes—an omission difficult to explain in the case of trained graphologists, examining documents for evidence of fraudulence.

In the case of the signatures of real historical personages, none of the official handwriting experts had the necessary material for comparison, nor did the American ones address themselves to this question at all. Today, a considerable basis for comparison is available. The Gumberg papers, in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin at Madison, contain one authentic Dzerzhinski signature and six of Trotsky. Facsimiles of two genuine Joffe signatures, affixed to the Soviet-Latvian treaty instruments of 1920, are

<sup>18</sup> Report of Wilfred Mark Webb, dated Mar. 17, 1918, Sisson documents file.

<sup>19</sup> The British experts, on the other hand, had at least two of the Sisson series, probably more. As evidence of labored execution the Bauer signature on Document No. 12 is a striking example.

available in the National Archives.<sup>20</sup> None of these signatures bears any particular resemblance to the signatures and initials that appear on the Sisson documents.<sup>21</sup> The differences are, in fact, so great as to preclude, in the opinion of this writer, any possibility of a common authorship. A further and particularly flagrant discrepancy exists between the handwriting and initials of the secretary of the soviet of people's commissars, Gorbunov, as they appear on the Sisson documents, and Gorbunov's genuine signature on the original text of the decree creating the Red Army, as reproduced in the second volume (opposite p. 26) of William Henry Chamberlin's *The Russian revolution*.<sup>22</sup>

With regard to the relationship between the signatures and the marginal notes, and between various signatures, the British handwriting expert came to the conclusion that there were marked and abnormal similarities here. In particular, he noted that the flourishes at the end of certain of the signatures were virtually identical with those on some of the marginal notations, supposedly executed by the recipients of the documents. Actually, these resemblances are so striking as to be apparent to the most unpracticed eye. Examination of only those few documents of which facsimiles were printed in the government pamphlet will suffice to suggest that there were at the most three or four hands involved in the production of the numerous signatures and marginal notes to be found on these documents, and possibly only one.

Particularly damaging evidence in this

<sup>20</sup> Sisson documents file.

<sup>21</sup> Document No. 29 contains two words and initials supposed to have been executed by Dzerzhinski; Documents 26 and 27 contain similar handwriting and initials by Trotsky. Documents 3 and 32 have signatures by Joffe.

<sup>22</sup> New York, 1935.

direction is to be found in a document procured after Sisson's departure from Russia and not published in the government pamphlet but unquestionably emanating from the same source as the published ones. This communication, dated April 3, 1918, is another of the "Nachrichten-Bureau" series, and is among those held in the National Archives. Attached to it are two certificates, supposed to have been prepared in the office of the commissar for internal affairs of the "St. Petersburg Labor Commune"—by persons who, presumably, had nothing to do with the origin of any of the other Sisson documents. Yet handwriting and signatures of these certificates, including the writing of the actual text of one of them, bear an unmistakable similarity to signatures and marginal notes of the published series.

7. *Typing*.—A close examination of the typing in the main body of the documents published in the official pamphlet (all were typed) reveals quite plainly that five different machines were used in the preparation of these documents.<sup>23</sup>

In the preparation of the eighteen documents of the "Nachrichten-Bureau" series, machines 1, 2, 3, and 4 were used, Number 1 being used most frequently. Documents from the "Russian division of the Great General Staff" were typed on machines 1 and 2. Two documents from the "General staff of the high seas fleet" were typed on Number 1. All these documents, therefore, obviously emanated from a single center. On the other hand, three documents from a mysterious official in the "Reichsbank" were all typed on machine Number 5; and they were the only ones of the entire series typed on this machine.

<sup>23</sup> Of the Appendix documents no typed originals or photographs appear to be available in the National Archives; hence this test could not be applied to them.

For all the documents from the Russian offices, including such varied establishments as the Soviet foreign office, the office of the "commissar for the struggle against counterrevolution and pogroms," and "Counterintelligence at headquarters" (presumably several hundred miles from Petrograd), only machines 1 and 2 were used. Thus the documents from alleged Russian sources were actually prepared in the same place as those purporting to come from the German offices—a clear indication of fraudulence.<sup>24</sup>

This conclusion checks with that arrived at by the British postal censor, working on a set of documents known to include at least two of the published American series. He found that ". . . the same type-writing machine, with the same faults, must have been used to type original documents coming from different offices or sections of the same city."<sup>25</sup> The American experts, to be sure, reached precisely the opposite conclusion from the separate series of documents available to them. Yet the evidences of a single machine being used for documents of different offices even in this latter series are, again, unescapable to the unpracticed eye; and it is difficult to understand how the American experts could have arrived at such a judgment.

Why the typing on the original documents and photostats was not tested at

<sup>24</sup> The reader who has access only to the published pamphlet, *German-Bolshevik conspiracy*, may wish to note as an example the facsimiles of Document 3 (the body, on p. 6, not the annotation), supposed to have been produced by Soviet foreign office officials, and Document 14 (p. 11), from the "Nachrichten-Bureau." Both were typed on machine Number 1, which had a tendency to blur the lower left-hand corners of the capital letters, particularly the K, and the lower portion of the letter  $\mathfrak{b}$ .

<sup>25</sup> James R. Mock and Cedric LARSON, *Words that won the war* (Princeton, N.J., 1939), p. 319; telegram No. 2044, Sept. 19, 1918, 10:00 P.M., from Ambassador Page in London to the department of state.

an earlier date is one of the mysteries of their history. It is true that the originals were turned over to President Wilson soon after Harper and Jameson had completed their work on them, and they remained unavailable until the beginning of 1953. The American handwriting experts, as noted above, never saw them. The department of state appears never, at any time, to have had access to them. But they were in Sisson's personal possession throughout the summer of 1918 and were available for study until turned over to the president in November of that year.

### III. THE REAL ORIGIN OF THE DOCUMENTS

In his published memoirs,<sup>26</sup> Sisson has described in some detail the circumstances of his purchase of the documents. It is clear from his account that in this operation he dealt primarily with Semenov.

Evgeni Petrovich Semenov (sometimes written as Kogan-Semenov) was a Petrograd journalist, known to the western embassies as a correspondent and, after the February Revolution, editorial associate of the evening newspaper *Vechernee Vremya*. This was one of the papers owned and published by the well-known publisher Aleksei Sergeyich Suvorin, the main one being the morning *Novoye Vremya*. Both papers were conservative, anti-German, and anti-Semitic (a circumstance which did not prevent their using the talents of Jewish journalists whenever convenient).

Being himself both anti-German and anti-Bolshevik, Semenov became useful to the provisional government leaders when the latter, in the wake of the July

<sup>26</sup> Edgar Sisson, *One hundred red days: a personal chronicle of the Bolshevik revolution* (New Haven, 1931).

disorders of 1917, made efforts to discredit the Bolsheviks as German agents by releasing material from the intelligence files suggesting that the Bolsheviks had been receiving money from the Germans. Semenov appears to have been involved in the gathering of some of this material. Soon after the November Revolution, the *Vechnoe Vremya* having been closed down, he went to the Don Cossack country to join Kornilov. It was presumably he who brought to that region the documents that subsequently formed Appendix I to the Sisson collection and who arranged for their publication there.

Semenov returned to Petrograd in January 1918, having been commissioned on the strength of his good relations with the Allied embassies to negotiate an Allied loan for the anti-Bolshevik forces in the Don Cossack territory.<sup>27</sup> It was soon after his return to Petrograd that copies of the older documents began to come to the attention of the Allied embassies there. Plainly, if the Allied representatives could be persuaded that the Bolsheviks were German agents the chances of Allied financial support for the anti-Bolshevik forces would be enhanced.

But the effectiveness of these older documents was limited. If credited, they proved only that prior to their seizure of power in November, 1917, the Bolsheviks, still a struggling opposition group, had received funds from German sources. It was not even demonstrated that the German government itself was involved; the money might, for all these documents revealed, have come from friendly German Socialist circles. If Allied enthusiasm was to be fully aroused, it was neces-

sary to show that the Bolsheviks not only had been, but were still, receiving official German support and that this activity was a direct projection of the German war effort. It was in the face of these circumstances that Semenov, very soon after his return—and at just the time, in fact, when sets of the older documents were being left at the Allied embassies by anonymous donors—appeared in the office of the American ambassador (as also, apparently, on the doorsteps of the British intelligence chiefs in Petrograd) with the first of the new series of documents, purporting to reflect the German-Bolshevik tie as a relationship of that very moment, proceeding directly from the German General Staff.

Semenov, who escaped from Russia in the following winter and joined the emigration to western Europe, never attempted subsequently to deny his part in the procurement of the Sisson documents; but he did claim to have been only an intermediary between those supposed to have filched them from or photographed them in the Bolshevik files and the Allied embassies to which they were delivered. From Semenov's statements at the time, Sisson gathered that there were two groups of "anti-Bolshevik workers" involved in the original procurement of the documents, that these groups were "in large degree independent" of each other, though Semenov was a member of both and the "head" of one, and that the other, of which Semenov was not the head, consisted of men connected with the military and naval services, all anti-Bolshevik but continuing to serve in their old positions in order to obtain inside information. These men were engaged, Sisson relates, primarily in the delicate operation of tapping the direct telegraph circuit between the Russian delegation at Brest-Litovsk and the

<sup>27</sup> Copies of the letters of authorization for this purpose, given to Semenov by the "provisional government of the North Caucasus," will be found in Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, the David R. Francis MSS.

Soviet headquarters in the Smolny Institute.<sup>28</sup> These were usually referred to as the "wire group."

To Sisson, Semenov gave little further information about the personalities involved in the procurement of these documents, other than to name a certain "Colonel Samsonov" as head of the wire group. He does not seem to have identified to Sisson any of the members of his own group. But sometime later, after his arrival in London, Semenov had several interviews with Sir Basil Thomson, head of Scotland Yard; and to Thomson he confided that he had actually received the documents from a friend and editorial colleague on the *Vechnee Vremya*, Anton Martynovich Ossendowski. In view of this confession, it becomes necessary to look more closely at Ossendowski's person and background.

Ossendowski's name is familiar to the English reading public mainly as that of the author of a number of autobiographical works, of which the best known is probably *Beasts, men and gods*.<sup>29</sup> These accounts are vague and confused, both as to chronology and circumstance, and they are in many respects implausible. They are thus highly unsatisfactory as historical or even autobiographical evidence.<sup>30</sup>

This being the case, and since little

<sup>28</sup> There is some evidence that such a group did indeed exist, and that its efforts were productive. An intercept from the Brest-Litovsk telegraph channel to Petrograd, contained in the Sisson documents file, bears every evidence of authenticity. There is also some evidence that the material produced by this group was utilized in the preparation of the Sisson documents. This enabled the authors of the documents to incorporate authentic information not yet generally known and naturally served to enhance greatly the impression of authenticity, particularly when some of the items were confirmed by subsequent revelations.

<sup>29</sup> New York, 1922. Less well-known works of this nature were: *Man and mystery in Asia* (London, 1924); and *From president to prison* (London, 1925).

other biographical source material is available, it is not easy to piece together anything like a dependable account of Ossendowski's life and activity. There seems no reason to doubt that he was born in Poland on May 27, 1876 and taken at a young age to Russia proper, where he was educated. But after that the uncertainties begin. In the last years of the century, according to his own account, he was a student at the University of St. Petersburg but failed to take his degree at that time owing to the effects of the student disorders of 1899. For the period 1899-1903, as for most other periods in his adult life, he claims a bewildering plethora of occupations, positions, and adventures. He may, at this time, have been an assistant to Professor Stanislav Zaleski at the St. Petersburg University or he may have been in western Europe obtaining his doctoral title (as well as that of an "Officier d'Académie") in Paris and traveling extensively in France and Spain; or he may, conceivably though not plausibly, have been doing all these things. In 1903, in any case, he went to Vladivostok, where he claims to have had some connection (he says as "scientific secretary") with the oriental department of the Russian Geographical Society. He was still there when the Russo-Japanese War broke out. At some time during the war he moved to Harbin and became an employee of the Chinese Eastern Railway. One of the few relatively well-established facts in his career is that he was elected, on November 25, 1905, chairman of the

<sup>30</sup> In the mid-twenties, the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin sharply challenged the truthfulness of Ossendowski's account in *Beasts, men and gods* of his later travels in central Asia. Lively controversy ensued; and Ossendowski's German publishers replied with a special volume defending his integrity (*Um Ferdinand Ossendowski* [Frankfort on the Main, 1925]). This volume, itself a bibliographical oddity, leaves much to be desired in scholarly completeness.

strike committee of what might be called the white-collar workers of that railway.<sup>31</sup> This position brought him into sharp conflict with the more radical leaders of the socialist manual labor organizations. But it was enough to make him a participant in the defiance of the authority of the Russian government in that region in the months immediately following the termination of the war. Upon the suppression of these disorders he was arrested (January 16, 1906), tried, and sentenced to eighteen months in prison. He was released in Harbin on September 23, 1907 and returned to St. Petersburg that same fall. Here, he says, he suffered three years of adversity and poverty before he was able to "batter down the continuing persecutions of the government" and find a steady job. This job, he infers, was that of research assistant at the Coillon factory in St. Petersburg, a circumstance hard to reconcile with his publisher's assertion that he was, just before the war, ". . . a specialist in gold and platinum questions, the head of the All-Russian Bureau of the Gold and Platinum Industries, a member of the Council of Merchants and Industrialists in Petersburg . . . a collaborator of Count J. J. Witte in questions of the gold industry . . . the editor of the monthly magazine *Gold and Platinum* . . ." and the author of a number of works of fiction.

However this may be, the first war months found Ossendowski already engaged in a wholly different occupation. The outbreak of war led to the inauguration of intensive efforts by a portion of the Russian business community not only to eliminate the genuine relics of German commercial influence in Russia but, by fanning and exploiting war hysteria, to discredit and destroy such of their Russian competitors as were vul-

nerable to attack by virtue of their German names or the German origin of their companies.<sup>32</sup> Ossendowski appears, on strongest evidence, to have served these Russian business circles throughout the war years 1914-17 and possibly even earlier as a paid propagandist. The vehicle in which his efforts appeared was, primarily, the *Vechnee Vremya*. His efforts took the form of articles signed, almost invariably, by the pen-name "Mzura." The manner in which these items were carried by the paper—neither as news reports nor as editorials—revealed clearly their quality as paid propaganda. There is every reason to suppose that not only Ossendowski personally but also the newspaper (widely suspected of the grossest venality) received compensation for this service. It was, of course, one which fitted well with the violently anti-German editorial line for which the paper had long been known.<sup>33</sup> The general tendency of the Mzura articles was to persuade the reader that Russia was still, even in the midst of the war, the victim of a tremendous "spider web" of secret German commercial intrigue.

The Mzura articles continued to appear, in considerable profusion, throughout the war years up to the revolution. At least twenty appeared in the columns of the paper during the first half of 1915 alone, in addition to other items obviously emanating from Ossendowski (some

<sup>32</sup> There appear to have been several associations established for this purpose, or lending themselves to it—one of them the "Obshchestvo 1914-go goda."

<sup>33</sup> The constant attacks of the Suvorin papers on Germany had begun long before the war. By 1908 they had achieved such violence that they became the subject of German diplomatic representation. The Russian foreign minister, Izvolski, was obliged at that time to confess to the German ambassador his bewilderment at their motive and his inability to put a stop to them (*Die grosse Politik der europäischen Kabinette 1871-1914*, ed. J. LEPSIUS, A. Mendelsohn BARTOLDY, F. THIMME [Berlin, 1922-27], XXVI, Part I, 315-16).

<sup>31</sup> See "Dvizhenie v Voiskakh Dalnom Vostoke" [The movement among the troops in the Far East], *Krasny Arkhiv*, XI-XII (1925), 299-386.

bearing his initials). They continued until the February Revolution, after which Ossendowski seems to have become, like Semenov, a regular editor of the paper.

By the late summer of 1917 Ossendowski appears to have entered, together with Semenov, into some sort of relationship with the military intelligence authorities of the provisional government, who were intensely interested in establishing a connection between the Bolsheviks and the Germans. He himself later claimed to have been involved in the "unmasking" of the Bolsheviks after the July disorders,<sup>34</sup> a government-inspired operation. He and Semenov gave briefings at military intelligence headquarters in the summer of 1917, in the capacity of anti-German propaganda experts.<sup>35</sup> They presumably received financial support from this source.

In a letter written in 1920 Ossendowski described himself as having been "... editor first of the *Birzhevye Vedomosti* and then, during the war, of the *Vechnyaya Vremya*, where I conducted the fight against Germany in all branches of our life, using material and monetary means placed at my disposal by N. A. Vtorov, A. I. Guchkov, Polish figures, and others."<sup>36</sup> Vtorov was a prominent Moscow merchant. Guchkov was chairman of the War-Industry Committee of Russian manufacturers, and, after the February Revolution, first minister of war in the provisional government. Guchkov's donations might thus have represented contributions from Russian commercial circles or, following the February Revolution, from military intelligence circles.

Who the Polish figures were is uncertain; but there is strong evidence that Polish circles were involved in the origin of the documents. Some of the members

<sup>34</sup> Sisson documents file, letter from Samuel Harper to Allen Carter, Oct. 14, 1920.

of the local Polish committee in Moscow were mentioned in connection with the delivery of later documents to the American consulate general there.<sup>37</sup> And Sir Basil Thomson gave a hint of the information the British held concerning the origin of the documents (presumably far better than that of the United States government) when he wrote, to a state department official<sup>38</sup> on July 29, 1920, that while he knew nothing of Ossendowski, "... it is, of course, well known that there was a regular factory in Poland for the manufacture of bogus documents, at which the Poles are extraordinarily adept. . . ." The tendency of the documents—anti-Bolshevik and anti-German—fitted well, of course, with the views of those Poles who, like Ossendowski, laid their hopes for Poland's future on the benevolence of a non-Communist Russia.

Altogether, it is evident that for years prior to the Bolshevik revolution Ossendowski had been earning his living as a professional purveyor of anti-German propaganda material and particularly, in the summer of 1917, of material tending to incriminate the Bolsheviks as German agents. The Bolshevik seizure of power naturally terminated all open activity along this line and therewith cut off the established sources of his livelihood. It is not surprising, therefore, that we find him, immediately after the Bolshevik revolution, providing his colleague Semenov with the following document, obviously designed to be shown to Allied representatives in Russia:

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, memorandum of Thomson's conversation with Semenov at Scotland House, London, July 17, 1920.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, letter of Apr. 11, 1918 from Ossendowski to the Russian Economic League in New York.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, in a telegram of May 22, 1918, to Archangel, the department of state inquired whether "Abbé Lutoslovsky, Count Poslonsky and other Poles" had left other items of the "Sisson document" series at the consulate general in Moscow.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, letter, Thomson to Arthur Bullard.

Veчерnee Vremya  
 Editorial Office  
 November 13, 1917

Very honored Evgeni Petrovich:

Keep this letter as a document.

They offer me from official neutral sources abroad detailed information on the secret German intelligence work in Russia, in neutral and Allied countries, by the aid of firms, as well as the list of German spies in Russia. For all this mass of information they ask 50,000 roubles. I have not so much money, and I am addressing myself, with the offer to acquire this material, to the Allied Ambassadors.

In this manner I shall receive a copy of the information and shall be in a position to help Russia at the moment, where the Germans are trying to put on economical chains and make us forget the splendid days of the first revolution and recognize again the Romanovs or other "Czars."

Yours,  
 A. OSSENDOWSKI<sup>39</sup>

The Allied representatives, Semenov later related, declined this offer. After that, Semenov says cryptically, "I organized the campaign in another manner."<sup>40</sup> By the time Semenov had returned from his visit to the Cossack territory, two months later, documents of precisely the nature described in Ossendowski's letter but purporting now to come from another and more exciting source, began to flow in profusion.

It now becomes necessary to invite attention, in just this connection, to certain of the Sisson documents which have particular relation to the Far East. In Document No. 9 a number of persons, allegedly residing in Vladivostok, were mentioned as German agents. While the document gives no more than their names, inquiry reveals that most of the people named either were or had been officials or employees of the well-known Siberian firm of Kunst and Albers. This was a major wholesale and retail trading

company which owned department stores in several cities and other economic enterprises in several parts of the Russian Far East. Originally founded by Germans, the firm had become Russianized before the war by the naturalization of its leading officials. The head of the firm during World War I was A. Dattan, formerly honorary German consul in Vladivostok. A naturalized but evidently entirely loyal Russian, Dattan is reported to have had two sons in the war on the Russian side, one of whom died in action. Dattan was among those mentioned in Document 9 as a German agent.

Another of the persons mentioned in Document 9 as a German agent is one Panov, described only as a "retired officer of the Russian fleet." This could have been none other than V. A. Panov, who was indeed a retired naval officer, one-time mayor of Vladivostok, and for many years (since 1892) editor of the leading newspaper of the Russian Far East, the Vladivostok *Dalni Vostok*. Panov was in fact the oldest and most distinguished Russian publicist in the Far East, a man widely known and widely respected. No hint of any of this is given in Document 9.

Document 29 returns to these same suggestions. This time a separate list is enclosed of persons supposed to be German agents in the Far East, with their addresses. Again, inquiry shows that most of these named were officers and employees of the firm of Kunst and Albers (in the case of two of them, the firm is given as the address). The list includes Dattan himself and, again, Panov.

Bearing these documents in mind, let us return once more to Ossendowski's earlier activity during the war as a propagandist for Russian firms.

A striking feature of the Mzura articles was the constant recurrence of the sharpest and most vicious sort of attack on the firm of Kunst and Albers and on

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, enc. No. 2 to London dispatch 758, Nov. 24, 1920: "Historique prepared by Semenov. . . ."

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

Dattan personally. How many such attacks flowed from Ossendowski's pen it is impossible to state. He referred to himself in one of these articles in 1915 as attacking the firm "for the hundredth time"; and this was probably no exaggeration. It is doubtful whether the history of journalism could produce any other instance of a personal vendetta more violent and more prolonged.

At what time this feud began, to what extent the newspaper and its publisher, Suvorin, and to what extent Ossendowski personally, were involved, is also obscure. Ossendowski, in conversation with Samuel N. Harper in November 1921, admitted that he had been the author of the attacks on the firm. He said that it was in 1913 that he had first come into contact with it and had noted what he believed to be its sinister aims and activities. He described his articles against the firm as having been written "before the war." Actually, they also appeared in great profusion in 1915 and 1916. There is, however, evidence that the Suvorin papers had been attacking the firm long before the war, whether or not with Ossendowski's assistance. In the volume *Peace or war east of Baikal?* by E. J. Harrison, published about 1910,<sup>41</sup> reference is made to what the author calls a "characteristic attack" by the *Novoye Vemya* upon "Mr. Adolph Dattan, the German Consul at Vladivostok and head of the well known firm of Kunst and Albers at that port." The author quotes a passage from a *Novoye Vemya* editorial from early 1909, in which wording distinctly suggestive of Ossendowski's later attacks on the firm was employed. It may be said, in any case, that the persecution of the firm by the Suvorin papers, with or without Ossendowski's probable participation, had been in progress for at least five years before the war.

<sup>41</sup> (Yokohama), pp. 204-8.

As a result, apparently, of these various attacks and intrigues, Dattan was apprehended early in the war as a politically unreliable person and sent away to "administrative exile" in Tomsk. He remained there at least until the February Revolution. But the attacks on the firm did not cease. On the contrary, Ossendowski proceeded to supplement his articles with public lectures on the same theme, and is even said to have published a book on the same subject, called *The Far Eastern spider*. In 1915, according to Panov, he began to develop a plan for the making of a motion picture, to be filmed in Vladivostok, in which the evil doings of the firm were to be depicted, and the lead was to be played by an actor made up to look like Dattan. This apparently brought things to a head. In any case, at some time in 1915 Ossendowski was sued by the firm, either for defamation or for blackmail—it is not certain which. He later claimed to Harper that the firm had offered him a bribe of 200,000 rubles to cease the attacks.<sup>42</sup> In the Sisson documents file there are facsimiles of two anonymous blackmail notes, made available to the department by Dattan in the early twenties, suggesting that if an appropriate sum were to be paid to Mzura, the attacks might cease. The case dragged on during 1916, and never came to trial before the February Revolution. Dattan and other witnesses for the firm were unable to come to Petrograd to testify.

In the fall of 1916 the firm made public evidence to support its charges against Ossendowski. This material is said to have been published by the Petrograd newspaper *Den* in November and December 1916.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Sisson documents file, "Memorandum of conversation with Mr. A. Ossendowski, November 25, 1921," signed with the initials "SNH."

<sup>43</sup> I have not been able to find these issues of the *Den* in the incomplete holdings available to me and could not check this assertion, which is Panov's.

Dattan's friends evidently felt that either Ossendowski or the *Vechnnee Vremya* enjoyed some sort of special governmental protection during the tsarist period. This does indeed seem very probable. Immediately after the fall of the tsarist government, therefore, they took the initiative in trying to have the matter thoroughly investigated, in justice to Dattan. Panov, in company with other influential figures and institutions in Vladivostok (including, incidentally, the local soviet, then still a moderate body), wired to the provisional government and urged that the matter be looked into. They asked in particular that the files of the counterintelligence office in Harbin be consulted in this respect. Presumably, these files contained some sort of material about Ossendowski which was not in the Petrograd records.

The Bolshevik revolution in November 1917 saved Ossendowski from this sort of an investigation. It did not, however, eliminate from the Russian Far East the persons desirous of seeing the Dattan-Ossendowski affair investigated. In the winter of 1917-18, while Semenov was delivering the documents to Sisson, Ossendowski must have had prominently in mind the continued presence of these people in the Russian Far East and their charges against him.

Ossendowski himself fled to Siberia from Petrograd in May 1918, the object obviously being to get into Allied-controlled territory. The idea of such flight must surely have occurred to him in the beginning of March, when German seizure of Petrograd seemed likely and the Petrograd newspapers for the first time carried stories from the Allied capitals suggesting that Allied intervention in Siberia was imminent.

This being the case, it is most interesting to note that Document No. 29, dated March 9, 1918, with its list of "German

agents" in the Far East, was the only one of the main series that was not handed to Sisson at the time of his departure on March 3; it was delivered soon afterward to another American representative with the request that it be sent on to Sisson. All this indicates that it was drafted in the days immediately after Sisson's departure on March 3. These were precisely the days in which the first (erroneous) reports of Allied intervention in Siberia were appearing in the Petrograd press.

It requires little stretching of the imagination to perceive that if Ossendowski was contemplating fleeing to Allied-controlled territory in Siberia (which he shortly did), he must have had in mind his vulnerability to charges by Dattan and his associates and must have realized that once he arrived in the Far East it would be much easier for the officials of the firm and for Panov to pursue such charges against him. The motive for feeding to the Allies information tending to discredit these persons in advance, as German agents, is therefore obvious.

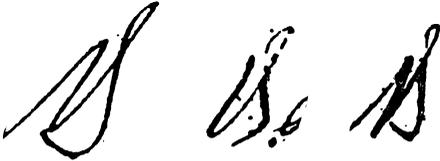
When news of the publication of the Sisson documents first reached Panov, in late October 1918, with the report that his name had been listed in an official American publication as that of a German agent, he was dumbfounded. He made formal requests to the local American press bureau and to the American consulate for confirmation or denial of the report and for copies of the documents. Although the press bureau published, some weeks later, a summary of the documents, again mentioning his name, he received no reply of any sort from the American authorities. Not being able to see the text of the document in which his good name was impugned, he was hampered in replying to the charges. It was not until nearly a year later that he succeeded in getting access to a copy of the American pamphlet, with the fac-

simile of Document 29. He then promptly wrote and published a small volume pointing out the abundant evidences of fraudulence in the documents, unhesitatingly charging Ossendowski with their authorship, and complaining bitterly of the American government's part in the blackening of his own name.<sup>44</sup> Panov ended his account by appealing, as a Russian journalist, to his professional colleagues in the United States for vindication of his honor: "I appeal to the American press in the name of solidarity

If Ossendowski had forged the Sisson documents, one would expect to find in his own handwriting evidences of similarity to the penmanship which appears on the various documents. This is, indeed, precisely what one finds—and in considerable abundance.

Panov, in writing his little book about the documents, had only two signatures of Ossendowski to go on. Even on this slender basis, he was able to construct a respectable argument for the thesis that not only were *all* the signatures and mar-

*B*'s from the Bauer signature on the Sisson documents:



*V*'s from Ossendowski's Russian handwriting:



A further interesting illustration of the similarity between Ossendowski's hand and the writing on the documents is found in a comparison of the "Bauer" signature with Ossendowski's writing, in Latin characters, of the word "Bureau," containing precisely the same letters. Note the *a* and *u* as well as the *B*:

. . . to call upon the persons in the American government who are responsible for the publication of this material to fulfill their duty before the American people who are misled and before me who by their action suffered undeserved charges reflecting on my honor and reputation."

There is no evidence that Panov's appeal ever found an echo in the American press; nor did the United States government ever give evidence of considering the information he adduced in his defense or re-examining its own part in the damaging of his reputation.

ginal notes on *all* the documents written by a single hand but that the hand was unquestionably that of A. Ossendowski. The contemporary American student is more fortunate. He has not only signatures to go on, but a four-page letter penned by Ossendowski on April 11, 1919, to the Russian Economic League in New York, as well as the facsimiles of some pages from Ossendowski's pocket

<sup>44</sup> V. I. PANOV, *Istoricheski Podlog: Amerikanskiye Podlozhnye Dokumenty* [Historical forgery: American forged documents] (Vladivostok, Aug. 5, 1921). The copy in the Library of Congress is the only one I have discovered in this country.

notebook, reproduced in the volume put out by his Frankfort publishers, mentioned above.

It may be said without hesitation that the evidences of similarity between these authentic specimens of Ossendowski's hand and the writing that appears on documents of the Sisson document series are ubiquitous and convincing. The most ample specimen of handwriting in any item of the Sisson document series is to be found on the certificate, mentioned above, supposed to emanate from the "St. Petersburg Labor Commune." The entire text of this certificate is written in longhand. The writing is, in general character and appearance, undistinguishable from that of Ossendowski. While it is plain that deliberate efforts were made to disguise the handwriting on the main body of documents (the underline flourishes, for example, were evidently introduced for this purpose; they do not appear in Ossendowski's own hand), Ossendowski's own capital *V* in Russian (the Russian *V* is the same letter as the English *B*) is largely identical with the capital *B* in the series of "Bauer" signatures. Ossendowski's characteristic capital *A*, which appears in his signature, will be found repeated in the documents, and particularly in the supposed signature of Joffe (who actually executed his *A* quite differently). The *k*'s are identical in both places. The similarity in the execution of the date "1917" is unescapable. There is a most revealing upward slant in the mark that is made, in place of the dot, over the soft Russian *i*. This list could be prolonged; but it is hardly necessary to prolong it. Whoever wishes to go into this more deeply will do best to take the originals of the documents, in the National Archives, and compare them directly with the photostat of the Ossendowski

letter which the archives also contain.

The evidences, direct and indirect, of Ossendowski's leading complicity in the concoction of these documents are thus, in their entirety, powerful and persuasive. This does not mean that he had no collaborators, for he probably did. But there is every evidence that he was the central figure in the operation and that the motivation, as well as the main burden of execution, was his.

One question remains, however, to be asked in this connection. What was the real origin and motivation of Ossendowski's prolonged activity as an anti-German propagandist, and particularly his campaign against German commercial influence in the Russian Far East?

The financial attraction is clear. Panov says that the money for the attacks on the firm of Kunst and Albers came mainly from the Kazyanov family, owners of the rival firm of Churin and Company, which likewise had a chain of wholesale and retail commercial establishments in the principal Siberian cities and was the leading competitor to the Kunst and Albers firm. All this sounds plausible enough. There was also the fact that Ossendowski was a Pole (though a very Russianized one at that time) and obviously opposed to German policies in Poland.

Perhaps this was all there was to it. But the student of Ossendowski's affairs can hardly fail to be struck with the pronounced dearth of references to the Japanese in his works, and the decidedly pro-Japanese slant of such few references as do occur. He was, after all, in both Vladivostok and Harbin during the Russo-Japanese War; Japan could not have been far from his thoughts at that time. He was deeply involved in the political

intrigues and rivalries that dominated the Harbin scene in the immediate wake of hostilities, developments from which the Japanese can scarcely have remained wholly aloof. The cause to which he subsequently devoted himself so long and so assiduously—the elimination of German commercial influence in Russia and particularly in Siberia—was one in which the Japanese were intensely interested. Yet his writings seem to contain no mention of anything along this line; nor do they show any concern for, or even awareness of, the fact that Japan might also have had commercial (and not only commercial) aspirations affecting that part of the world. One is moved to wonder why a man who found German commercial influence in Siberia so dangerous and so intolerable to Russian sensibilities was so wholly complacent about that of another great power.

While the Sisson documents were zealously peddled to the British and American representatives in Petrograd, there is no mention or evidence of their having been similarly offered to the Japanese. This is strange, for the Japanese, just then intensely preoccupied with the prospect of an early occupation of portions of eastern Siberia by their own forces, might surely have been expected to have a primary interest in such things as lists of German agents in Vladivostok. That Japanese money was available for the purchase of material of this nature, as for other clandestine operations in Russia, cannot be doubted; nor is there reason to suppose that Semenov and Ossendowski would have spurned attractive offers from that quarter. It is always possible, of course, that the Japanese did actually acquire the material in the normal manner, and that everyone concerned remained very discreet about it thereafter. It is also possible that the

Japanese were too well-informed to be intrigued by Semenov's offerings and thus disinclined to buy them. But there is also the possibility that the conspicuous absence of the Japanese from this entire picture could be explained by a relationship on their part to Ossendowski and his activities more intimate, and more interested, than that of a mere detached customer.

The evidence this writer has seen is wholly inadequate to support any judgment on these questions. But further scholarly inquiry would surely shed light on some of these mysteries; and it might well serve to illuminate questions of broader import than merely the origin of the Sisson documents themselves.

#### IV. THE APPENDIXES

The above discussion has been directed to the main body of the published documents.

Of the fifteen documents that make up Appendix I to *The German-Bolshevik conspiracy* pamphlet, little needs to be said. There is no reason to suppose that Ossendowski was the author of any of them. For the seven letters no originals or photographs are available. It is plainly impossible to evaluate the authenticity of alleged translations of this nature. With the contrived and ostentatious ringing-in of the names of Lenin, Trotsky, and Gorki these letters make, it must be said, a distinctly unreliable impression. As for the circulars, as noted above, for only two of these was there available anything purporting to be an original; and the deficiencies of these documents were so glaring that even Harper and Jameson could not bring themselves to credit their authenticity.

The single document included (for no very clear reason) as Appendix II is by no means implausible (except for the

last sentence, which shows every sign of having been added for greater effect). There is enough evidence of the success of the wire-tapping operation to make it wholly possible that most of this message was genuine. It is, however, ironic that the sole document in the entire collection that gives a reasonable impression of authenticity should have been one which contains no hint or mention of anything resembling a "German-Bolshevik conspiracy."

There is one reservation that should be stated with respect to the letters in Appendix I, mentioned above. If the documents in the main body of the pamphlet pointed toward a situation that was highly implausible, the same cannot be said of these letters. The question as to what sources of clandestine external support the Bolsheviki had during the spring and summer of 1917 is a complicated one, with extensive ramifications, and far surpasses the scope of this inquiry. That there was intensive communication between the Bolshevik leaders and persons in Scandinavia in these months; that this communication involved persons whose names occur in these letters; and that the communication very probably involved the transfer of funds to the Bolsheviki from *some* external sources—all this seems fairly well established. Further inquiry will have to establish whether the German government itself was behind this, or whether the moneys came only from friendly foreign socialist sources and other well-wishers abroad. In either case, there might well have been some substance behind these letters. It is quite conceivable that the texts published in the pamphlet were based on genuine letters and merely

touched up, in certain instances, by the addition of the reference to leading Communist figures.

It should be noted, in this connection, that there was nothing in the philosophy of either regime which would have inhibited the Germans from giving financial aid to the Bolsheviki *prior* to their assumption of power or the Bolsheviki from accepting it. Neither would have considered itself in any way under moral obligation to the other by virtue of such a relationship. The essential reality behind the entire controversy over the Sisson documents is that even if—as the documents do not prove but as is wholly possible—the Bolsheviki received financial support from official German sources prior to the revolution, there is no evidence that they considered themselves by consequence under any moral or political obligation to the Germans in the period following their own seizure of power or that the Germans had any illusions of this nature. In fact, there is powerful evidence to the contrary.

If the Germans financed the Bolsheviki in the spring and summer of 1917 they did so on the principle—sound in international affairs as elsewhere—that they were supporting them not for what they promised but for what they were; not for what they might undertake to do for others but for what they were likely to do for themselves. In the sweeping demoralization of the Russian armed forces that accompanied the Bolshevik political triumph in Russia, this German speculation was vindicated beyond the most optimistic dreams.