

Introduction



THE EVENTS IN the spring of 2018 in the quiet rural setting of the city of Salisbury in Wiltshire provided a sharp reminder of the highly significant role accorded by the Russian state apparatus to members of the country's covert military intelligence agencies over the past millennium and recalled the past achievements of the USSR's Chief Intelligence Office – the *GRU* – within the Soviet defence establishment.⁵ Arguably its most celebrated covert intelligence agent in the twentieth century was Dr Richard Sorge (1895–1944), born in Baku but of German parentage, whose role was only officially recognised in 1964 with his naming as a 'Hero of the Soviet Union'.⁶ Knowledge of Sorge's role initially stemmed from the publication of documentary evidence linked to questioning by officials of the Japanese *Tokkō*, the Special Higher Police, and of the Japanese Ministry of Justice following the surrender of Japan at the end of the Pacific War in August 1945.

Immediate exploitation of Sorge's activities was available to the US Occupation and was channelled into developments arising from the onset of the American-Soviet Cold War between 1945 and 1991 and also entwined in the domestic US political

⁵ For coverage of some of the history of the complementary covert arrangements involved in Russian codebreaking, see D. Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, "Tsarist Codebreaking Some Background and Examples," *Cryptologia* 22/4 (October 1998): 342–353. Sorge was credited with gaining access to German enciphered radio signals in China and in Japan, as well as to the early naval war diary for East Asia in World War II until this was withheld by Admiral Wenneker when he returned to Tokyo in 1940. A chart of the position of the *GRU* in the Soviet hierarchy may be seen on p.vi above.

⁶ The initial Soviet announcements appeared in *Pravda* on 4.9.1964 and in *Izvestiya* on 5.9.64. A monograph by M. Kolesnikov: *Takim Byl Rikhard Zorge*. Moscow, Voennoe Izdatelstvo Oborony SSSR, 1965 was published shortly afterward and this author was able to borrow a copy from the Soviet mission in Tokyo. Subsequently, the East German state registered its input in a book by Julius Mader *et al.*: *Dr. Sorge Funkt aus Tokyo*. East Berlin, Deutscher Militärverlag, 1966, with a second edition, *Dr. Sorge Report*. East Berlin, 1985, a copy of which was kindly made available to this author by Fräulein Ingeborg Krag.

controversy surrounding the enquiries into the outbreak of hostilities at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941.⁷ As Sorge himself served in both China and Japan as director of the GRU espionage groups there from 1930 to 1941, there are a large number of individuals with whom he made contact as a journalist and corresponding numbers of personal observations have appeared in print. One of the fullest accounts, based on German and Japanese sources, was published in 1966 by Sir William Deakin and Professor Dick Storry and there is a parallel study by Chalmers Johnson based primarily on Japanese sources on the career of Sorge's principal informant, Ozaki Hotsumi, which appeared in 1990.⁸

Some knowledge of Sorge's activities in Japan between 1934 and October 1941 was clearly also gained from the German and Japanese communities and was of direct significance to members of the German diplomatic and press corps. Perhaps most directly affected was *SS-Sturmabführer* Meisinger, the representative of the German secret police within the German Embassy in Tokyo since April 1941. Meisinger had played a significant role at *Gestapo* headquarters in the cases undertaken against high-profile figures in German political life, such as Ernst Röhm and the associated assassinations of Generals von Schleicher and von Bredow in 1934 and against Field-Marshal von Blomberg and General von Fritsch in 1938. These, of course, took no account of the many other individuals accused of homosexuality or fraud both within and outside the Nazi Party between 1933 and 1939.⁹ As Meisinger had spent almost six months in China rather

⁷ The case was raised in the Un-American Activities of the House of Representatives under the title *Hearings on Un-American Aspects of the Richard Sorge Spy Case*. Washington DC, USGPO, 1951 and an extensive monograph was published by Major-General C.A. Willoughby (1892–1972), General Macarthur's chief of intelligence staff, as *Shanghai Conspiracy – The Sorge Spy Case*. Boston, Western, 1952. Willoughby appears to have been of German origin and this was of some value when dealing with the many Japanese Army staff officers seconded to Germany between 1919 and 1945. However, his reputation as an intelligence officer was characterised as low by Macarthur himself and by most more recent analysts. US investigations in Japan went on until at least 1949, as may be seen in CIC questioning of Kawai Teikichi: see National Archives, Washington DC (NAW): RG 319: Kawai dossier, declassified in 1990.

⁸ F.W. Deakin & G.R. Storry, *The Case of Richard Sorge*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1966; Chalmers Johnson, *Ozaki Hotsumi and the Sorge Spy Ring*. Stanford UP, 1990.

⁹ Meisinger produced a handwritten account of his police career which was translated and typed up. It indicates the very large numbers of prosecutions in

than in Tokyo until recalled there in November 1941, he had almost no knowledge of the German community in Japan and was wholly ignorant, until this point in his career, of diplomatic or legal circles in Japan.

Meisinger appears to have been recalled from Shanghai by the German ambassador in Tokyo, Major-General Eugen Ott (1889–1977), and his arrival is recorded in the war diary of the German Naval Attaché in Tokyo, Rear-Admiral Paul W. Wenneker (1898–1979).¹⁰ Meisinger ordered the detention on the blockade-running ship, *Osorno*, and the compulsory transport to Europe of the German exchange student, Claus Lenz, who had been working alongside Sorge on the German Embassy's local newssheet, *Deutsche Dienst*, which was based on the press cables of the Transocean News Agency.¹¹ When two memoranda written by Sorge in Sugamo prison were supplied to the German Embassy in Tokyo in early January 1942, these were shown to Meisinger, who was reported to have concluded that he was 'doubtful if the author is knowledgeable about the intelligence service of the Comintern.'¹²

which he was involved between 1933 and 1941: see NAW: RG 319: Meisinger Dossier: 16–60 & 100–172 and prosecutions are all cited at 290–6.

¹⁰ See J.W.M. Chapman, ed., *The Price of Admiralty – The War Diary of the German Naval Attaché in Japan, 1939–1943*: Ripe, Saltire House Publications, 1990, Vol.4: 744. Vols.1–4 were produced in print versions, but Vol.1 has recently been revised and expanded in electronic form and Vols.5–7 have also been translated with additional central documents: see www.price-of-admiralty.com.

¹¹ The background to events in Japan prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor lay in the super-secrecy demanded to achieve surprise at the opening of the Pacific War. The final phase of preparations was marked by the appointment of General Tōjō Hideki in place of Prince Konoe as Premier and this was welcomed by Japanese Navy officers, not least because when he was appointed War Minister in July 1940, Tōjō, a former head of the *kempeitai* in Manchuria, had been instrumental in ordering the arrest of 12 British nationals as spies. These included the Reuters correspondent, Melville Cox, who jumped to his death while in police custody. The counter-espionage drive was spearheaded by the civilian police and Sorge was tracked down through his contacts with members of the Japan Communist Party and the accusations levelled at the large number of arrestees concentrated on claims that they were agents of the Comintern rather than, as was later discovered, of the Soviet military, as the latter charge would have stimulated demands for control on the part of the Military Police, the *kempeitai*.

¹² Ott (Tokyo) secret Tel.No.60 of 9.1.1942 at: *Auswärtiges Amt (AA)*: BRAM: 'Dr. Richard Sorge'. The file was initially maintained by Dr Karl-Otto Braun (1910–88), the head of the East Asian Section in the Political Department (*Pol VIII*) before being transferred to the Press Department in the hands of Secretary

At this stage, the matter continued to be handled by the Political Department of the German Foreign Ministry and doubt continued to be expressed by Ott about Sorge having a major role in the affair on the ground that 'the principal role in the pending proceedings is being played by the Japanese Ozaki'. It was not until the end of March 1942 that a claim was made that 'Sorge was continuously briefed from the best German source about Axis policy and its future course', that he had been working for the Soviet military intelligence service rather than for the Comintern and that the Japanese had broken the radio code employed by Sorge's transmitter, Max Clausen.¹³ But while listing the contradictions that were also contained in this allegation, Ott also offered to resign or to stand back from his position as ambassador and an enquiry was instituted within the Foreign Ministry into 'the matter affecting Ambassador Ott'. As the allegation had been circulated outside the Ministry to the High Command of the Armed Forces, Ribbentrop intervened as Foreign Minister to advocate caution. He needed to be able to back up his own organisation and to seek to promote 'discretion' although this tended to point rather to the desire for a cover-up. Nevertheless, the allegation that Sorge was continuously briefed about Axis policy from the best German sources was upheld, despite Ribbentrop's scepticism, by October 1942, when Himmler insisted that the allegation was correct and he claimed to have received confirmation that Sorge was employed by the GRU as well as by the Comintern 'according to information recently received from Tokyo'.¹⁴

of Legation Bassler (*PV/III*) when its classification rose from Secret to Top Secret and it was passed on to officials in Ribbentrop's Secretariat in late February 1942.

¹³ On 20.11.1945, Max Clausen, who had been sentenced to life imprisonment in 1943, made a statement to the International Red Cross in Tokyo claiming that he had had to hold on to copies of his transmissions 'for some days or even a few weeks in my house' in case he had to repeat messages affected by the bad atmospheric conditions in East Asia. He took responsibility for the fact that 'Japanese police inspectors found the unenciphered cables in my house.' Exh.III in NAW: RG 319, Clausen dossier, Box 31 (declassified on 22.2.1985).

¹⁴ Himmler to Ribbentrop *Reichsführer-SS IV A 1B.Nr.104/42 gRs* of 27.10.1942. This triggered Ribbentrop's decision for Ott to be replaced by a former member of his Secretariat, Heinrich Stahmer (1892–1978). Another former member of Ribbentrop's Secretariat was Erich Kordt (1903–1969), who served as German Minister in Japan from April 1941 and was nominated by Ott to undertake liaison with the Japanese Justice Ministry over the Sorge Case. It remains unclear exactly from whom the information had been supplied. Schellenberg blamed Meisinger and Braun claimed that it was pressed by Japanese diplomats in Berlin. Kordt is erroneously described as 'economic attaché' in Tokyo in Matthews (2019): 289.

There is no written evidence in the files to confirm whether the source of this information was German or Japanese but it followed on from news that Sorge and Ozaki had been sentenced to death and it is likely, but unconfirmed, that more detailed information may have been received in the light of fresh data provided by Japanese prosecutors. The fact that the information had first come to Berlin's attention from an *Abwehr* agent in Harbin, Ivar Lissner, and that it had been in all probability received from his most important Japanese Army contact, Major-General Yanagida Genzō (1890–1952), head of the *tokumu kikan* in Manchuria, in March 1942 suggests that it had been confirmed through the release of hard evidence from intercepted radio signals – an area of technical expertise in which extensive collaboration had existed at least since late 1940 between the Japanese and German armies.¹⁵ Lissner in his report had been at pains to argue that some groups in the Japanese Navy in particular had been hostile to Germany and praised the Naval Attaché, Admiral Wenneker, for his 'magnificent efforts' in promoting collaboration with Japan. Nothing was ever said by Ambassador Ott about these efforts, but he did admit that Sorge had enjoyed friendly relations with himself and the former naval attaché, Captain Johannes Lietzmann (1894–1959), while denying that he himself had ever passed on any confidential information to Sorge.¹⁶

It is clear from Sorge's statements to his interrogators that he had little if any respect for General Ott. However, in a statement made by Clausen on 5.12.1945, he

...considers Admiral Wenneker, former German Naval Attaché, an anti-Fascist. He said Sorge placed great trust in Wenneker.

¹⁵ An exchange of materials on Soviet military communications with General Erich Fellgiebel was identified in the diary of the Chief of the German General Staff, General Halder, on 4.12.1940. Japanese officers were permitted to make contact with *Abwehr* officers behind the German frontline in Russia in 1941 and were provided with substantial information throughout the war about Soviet communications systems. There also appears to have been extensive collaboration between the Gestapo and successive Japanese Army officers in Berlin, Colonel Usui Shigeki and Colonel Yamamoto Bin, involved in issues of sabotage and subversion. It was claimed by Walther Schellenberg, the head of Gestapo intelligence, that collaboration had played a key role in promoting the purges of the Soviet armed forces in the late 1930s and it is also clear that there had been considerable Gestapo access to the decryption and intercept successes of the *Forschungsamt* and the Armed Forces (*OKW/Chi*).

¹⁶ Ott (Tokyo) Tel.No.930 of 29.3.1942 to Ribbentrop: AA: BRAM: 'Dr.Richard Sorge'.

Whenever Sorge went out of town, he would leave a suitcase containing personal papers either with Clausen or Wenneker for safekeeping.¹⁷

Despite having made the effort to meet Wenneker before he left with Soviet assistance to travel to the Soviet zone of Germany, Clausen was subsequently asked by the legal team entrusted with the defence of Wenneker in the trial brought against him in 1964/65 by the West German prosecuting authorities to provide supportive testimony. However, on 1 November 1965, Clausen responded wholly negatively by saying that the Nazi regime only selected suitable individuals and their families to serve it abroad, that some of these were involved in Nazi and war crimes and worked unthinkingly for the Nazi cause and expressed regret that he was unable to provide any information on the ground that he had been arrested in Tokyo for anti-Fascist activities and spent a long time in prison.¹⁸ Clearly, this was a line of argument which simply reflected the prevailing divisions of the Cold War, but was still a blank denial of Clausen's earlier argument about his belief in Wenneker as an 'anti-Fascist'. The contradiction is further highlighted in the assessment of Wenneker by a senior US counter-intelligence official in the holding camp at Ludwigsburg on 14 October 1947 following his repatriation which concluded that Wenneker 'impresses this interrogator as an anti-Nazi, sincere man, who did his duty as a soldier'.¹⁹ Unlike General Ott, who was explicitly fired for his relationship with Sorge and was not re-engaged by the West German diplomatic service, Wenneker continued to serve in the German Embassy in Japan until May 1945, but subsequently refused to accept encouraging plaudits from former professional diplomats for him to become a post-war diplomatic recruit.

Very detailed written records about Wenneker's service in Japan survive from World War II, albeit these were not absolutely complete, but his unpublished defence papers added considerably in the 1960s to knowledge about his personality and activities and, gradually, further information was subsequently released as a result of the publication of post-war interrogations and decrypted signals

¹⁷ NAW: RG 319: Clausen dossier.

¹⁸ Letter from Max Christiansen-Clausen (East Berlin) of 1.11.1965 at: *Handakten Paul (HP): Briefe und Besprechungen, Bd.II: IC 2*.

¹⁹ NAW: RG 319: Wenneker Dossier, 13.1.1948.

unavailable at the time of his trial. These materials make it possible to re-examine Wenneker's career in the light of his connections with Richard Sorge employing something much closer to 20-20 vision. It remains unclear, nevertheless, why there remains limited indication of evidence being derived from the Japanese side of the radio signals sent by Sorge to the USSR clearly emanating from conversations between Sorge and Wenneker after having been relayed to the German side.²⁰ Most of the material exchanged by the Japanese side tends to highlight interaction between Sorge and the various representatives of the German Army in Japan and to underscore the parts played in the interactions with General Ott and Colonel Scholl. This directly impinged on the key relationship in Japan between the Army and the Navy which was of absolutely central significance in the development of relations between Japan and Germany in the Nazi era, but whose understanding was continually plagued by an internecine tension with ramifications even more extensive than those attributed to the situation of 'mystery wrapped within an enigma' by observers of the Stalinist regime. The relationship between Sorge and Wenneker involved an exchange of observations of their understanding of the so-called 'Japanese mentality' relayed to their separate bosses, one of whom eventually took note of their implications for national strategy, while the other flatly refused to contemplate any possible alternative to his own inflexible variant of national strategy. The analysis which unfolds below explores the pathway of this interaction and assesses the fateful outcome of the insuperable divergence that was ineluctably entailed.

²⁰ There is a particularly interesting exchange between Captain Maeda Tadashi and Wenneker on 4 November 1941, some three weeks after the arrests of Sorge and Clausen: see *POA* 4: 702. In the context of Japanese Navy suspicions about the leakage of information at Shanghai in Siefken's organisation, Maeda pointed out that he had learned that his meetings with Wenneker were being closely observed by the British Secret Service. However, all further information about the source was withheld from Wenneker at this time. It is within the realms of possibility that Navy counter-espionage agents would have been informed by the *Tokkō* about any messages seized at Clausen's house that pointed to Sorge having learned from Wenneker any hints about Navy strategic intentions. What is especially intriguing is Maeda's final statement is that 'it is reassuring, however, that apparently the content of our discussions had not become known.' Nothing of anything discussed by Maeda after the time of the arrests would have been passed on to the *GRU* to be sure, but Maeda was only appointed on 4.10. and his discussions with Wenneker on 6., 9. and 15.10. were interspersed with contacts with other Navy departments.

