

## Commentary VII: Scholars at War

Today I've asked you to look at related themes in the careers of Sylvanus Morley, Zosa Szajkowski, and Wernher von Braun. What unites them, of course, is that all three bent the ideals of science to morally dubious ends in service to a political agenda—no doubt subtly at first, but increasingly brazen as time went on.

Let's start with Morley. Espionage by scholars was carried out under the unassailable guise of scientific research. In Morley's specific case, it was carried out under the pretext of Mayan archaeology, whose research sites all lay—conveniently—along the Mexican and Central American coastline. Archaeologists were uniquely suited to turning their talents to espionage, since so many of their acquired skills were the same sort of skills that proved useful in intelligence gathering: foreign languages, cartography, wilderness survival, textual and oral research, etc. Again, in Morley's case, his particular assignment was to search out the potential for German U-boat submarine docks along the Central American coastline, which would put these ships within range of the U.S. coastline. As such, the details of his reports all include in-depth data on coastline bays, inlets, shores, etc., along with their water depth, wide, wind levels, water choppiness, etc. Very quickly, however, it becomes apparent that no part of this coastline could possibly support a German U-boat base. So Morley then turns his attention to things that were not on his original agenda, and these activities are bit more morally dubious: getting Germans fired from American companies (even if he has no proof that they are supporting the German war effort), reporting on U.S. draft dodgers who escaped abroad, and shutting down German companies (again, even if he has no proof that they are aiding Germany's war efforts). This is a preview of the same sort of logic that will eventually put Japanese-Americans in internment camps during WWII. And if you read some of the scholarship on U.S. intelligence activities in Latin America during WWII (see Prof. Max Friedman's book *Nazis and Good Neighbors: The United States Campaign Against the Germans of Latin America in WWII*), you'll find that they pursued German ex-pats in a way that was disturbingly familiar to how Morley pursued them during WWI: setting out to destroy their lives regardless of whether or not they were active supporters of the German war effort. As for Morley's motives, of course it is easy to simply say he was patriotic and got swept up in the war enthusiasm. But it's something more than that: his (and admittedly our) ability to deceive himself/ourselves into justifying activities that veer further and further away from any sort of a moral compass. Note how he starts small on the scale of moral dubiousness, then gradually graduates to more sinister stuff: scholarship as a cover for reporting on possible U-boat docking sites (deceptive but practical and possibly heading off a real threat, with potentially real American lives to be saved) → tracking down suspicious German ex-pats (a little worse but still within the outside realm of possible real threats) → getting German ex-pats fired without any evidence of hostile posture (pretty bad) → pursuing U.S. draft dodgers (now we've got a Harvard professor reporting on private American citizens with different political opinions than his own, with possible prison sentences in the offing). It's a slippery slope—and some people saw this and called it out from the beginning (e.g., Franz Boas).

With Szajkowski, the morally dubious actions are not so odious that anyone's life is at risk or harm, and he's otherwise a sympathetic figure—but nonetheless he crosses a very important line when he decides to steal from archives. As I suggested previously, we could say that his agenda is similar to that of Himmler's Ahnenerbe in that he is attempting to valorize an idealized version of his own imagined community (i.e., race, nation, whatever). The Nazis said the Jews were all the same, and they cast this similarity in negative terms as fit for extermination. Szajkowski

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disagreed with the negative gloss, but absolutely agreed with the idea that the Jews were—or should be—one unified people, despite the fact that they were separated by class, geography, and language across the globe. But both sides said the Jews were “special”—either in a positive or negative way—and then took extraordinary measures to use that specialness as a basis for political action. In Szajkowski’s case, as a scholar, his action was to reorganize the archival files on Jews from the larger countries in which they lived—such as France, Germany—and make them look like they were a transcendent nation beyond parochial political contexts. And in his capacity as a scholar, he was willing to do illegal and criminal acts—stealing from archives and libraries in Strasbourg and New York—to support his conception of the Jewish nation and stimulate pride in its history. He often even resold the documents he had stolen once he was done analyzing them, thus making a profit on the side.

As for von Braun, his deception was twofold: erasing his own past as an (arguably) Nazi war criminal so as to promote rockets with blatant military applications under peaceful scientific pretenses. That’s why he gets included as the coda to the story of “Indiana Jones in history”—because human beings made it to the Moon (the final frontier of expeditions!) under the false pretense that we were doing it all for altruistic science. That’s why Neil Armstrong’s famous line is all about “a giant leap for mankind.” What he really meant, of course, and what everyone watching that telecast back in 1969 certainly understood, was “one small step for man, one giant leap for the awesome, unrivalled, kick-ass U.S. of A, baby!!!!” But quotes like that don’t go over well in international diplomacy and news media, and no one likes a bad winner. But if he was being honest about the forces behind his visit to the Moon, that’s what Armstrong would have said. In von Braun’s speeches, he does acknowledge the military applications. After all, they are so incredibly obvious that he would have no credibility if he didn’t mention them. But he always follows them up with wistful, glassy eyed inspirational quotes about peace—you know, sort of like how the solution to too many guns in America is for everyone to have more guns! Ahem, here’s von Braun himself: “Rocketry is, I believe, capable of solving the world’s peace problems more effectively than any other branch of science or engineering.” Because nothing brings the people of the world together more than having weapons of mass destruction ready to launch over each other’s air space at the push of a button, right? Von Braun has a job: make sure the U.S. can blow up the USSR before the USSR can blow up the U.S. But he needs to make it look like the U.S. is only trying to undertake an altruistic scientific expedition to space for the benefit of all mankind. And hey, let’s hand it to him: he did a pretty good job on both counts.