

***Into the Darkness : An Uncensored Report from Inside the Third Reich at War***

by Lothrop Stoddard

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### **Chapter 3: Getting on with the Job**

I went to Europe as special correspondent of the North American Newspaper Alliance, a press syndicate with membership in the United States, Canada, and other parts of the world. My main field was Germany, with side glances elsewhere in Central Europe. Since N.A.N.A. is a feature service, my job was to study conditions, do interpretive or local color articles, and get important interviews. I was not professionally interested in spot news. To do a good job I had to have an open mind; so I did my best to park my private opinions on this side of the ocean. And since my return I've tried not to pick them up again. An objective attitude was made easier by the fact that the outbreak of the European War caught me in a place where it meant nothing except its effect on the price of sugar Havana, Cuba.



**Havana postcard, Cuba**

Between a survey I was making with a Washington colleague, H. H. Stansbury, and the terrific heat I could pay scant attention to European affairs, which were badly covered in the Havana press. Everybody was absorbed in local politics. The Batista Government was getting ready to celebrate the anniversary of its revolutionary origin, the momentous date being September 4th. So Havana was all bedizened with flags and bunting, while across the harbor on Morro Castle and Cabanas Fortress rose huge transparencies bearing the legends: BATISTA and CUARTO SETIEMBRE electrically blazing forth o' nights in giant letters of fire. Then,

just before the big party, Europe had to explode! Small wonder that it hardly made a dent on Cuban thinking, except the sugar phase.

However, it made a big dent on my mind. I had already canvassed the possibility of personally covering the German situation, for which I had certain qualifications such as an intermittent knowledge of the country since childhood and a working knowledge of the language. I had also followed German events regularly in my studies of foreign affairs. Therefore as soon as I could wind up my Cuban survey, I hurried home, reaching New York late in September. Three weeks afterwards I was on the Rex, Europebound. I thus arrived on the scene of action in an objective state of mind.

To get working quickly and efficiently, three things had to be done as soon as possible. First of all, I must present my credentials and acquire the permits needed by a foreign correspondent in wartime. Then I had to establish correct and personally amicable relations with the officials with whom I would be in contact. Last but not least, I should get on really friendly terms with the outstanding members of the foreign press corps not merely the Americans but those of the other neutral nationalities stationed in Berlin. An experienced, capable foreign correspondent is your best source of information. He usually knows more and sees clearer than a diplomat of the same caliber. This is also true of certain long resident foreign professional or business men. Furthermore, both they and the correspondents can talk more freely to you. There are certain things which members of the diplomatic corps hesitate to discuss unreservedly with you even in the strictest "off the record." Fortunately I was able to make a good start on all three lines the very first day after my arrival in Berlin.



#### **Wilhelmstraße 74-76: The Foreign Office**

Monday noon found me at the Foreign Office, halfway down the Wilhelmstrasse, where I was to attend the foreign press conference held there daily at this hour. These conferences are usually held in a large oblong room, elaborately paneled.

Down the middle of this chamber runs an enormously long table covered with green baize. On one side of the table sit a line of Government officials drawn from both the Foreign Office and the Propaganda Ministry. One of these men is the Government spokesman for the day, who makes announcements and answers questions either directly or through some other official who is a specialist in the particular matter. On the other side of the table cluster the foreign correspondents, representing every neutral country in Europe, plus a few Orientals and a strong contingent of Americans. The average attendance runs between fifty and seventy, including several women journalists.

Personal relations between these Government spokesmen and the foreign correspondents are generally friendly and sometimes cordial. The officials are intelligent men specially picked for the business of tactfully handling foreign journalists. The correspondents are, for the most part, old hands who know how to play the game. So the conferences, which are conducted in German, usually go off smoothly, with humorous undertones as a shrewd query is met by an equally shrewd parry. These bits of repartee are often greeted by a general burst of laughter.

After the conference that morning I was introduced to the chief officials, and I likewise met several of our American press delegation to whom I had been recommended or with whom I was previously acquainted. The officials were nearly all university men, some with doctorate degrees. Those in the American Section were well fitted for their posts. Dr. Sallett, the Foreign Office contact man for Americans, had lived in the United States for years before he entered the diplomatic service and had done postgraduate work at Harvard. Dr. Froelich, head of the Propaganda Ministry's American Bureau, has a Harvard Law School degree, while his junior colleague, Werner Asendorf, is a graduate of the University of Oregon. Both these men have American wives. The head of the entire Foreign Press Section, Dr. Boehme, is an engaging personality with a quick intelligence and cynical sense of humor, who has traveled widely in many lands including the United States. I felt from the first that here were men who knew us well and with whom one could get along harmoniously.



### **Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda**

That same afternoon I attended another foreign press conference, this time at the Propaganda Ministry. These conferences, likewise held every weekday, deal more with special topics than with spot news. Government specialists address the correspondents on current military, naval, or economic situations, while outstanding figures are produced for inspection. For instance, when a big aerial battle was fought over the North Sea, the squadron commander and his flying aces appeared before the foreign journalists to tell their side of the story and be questioned.

Before the inevitable blackout ended my first working day in Berlin I had been duly enrolled in the foreign press corps and had filed my application for a Press Wireless permit. This is the correspondent's most important privilege. It enables him to file press despatches to his newspaper or syndicate, payment guaranteed at the other end. Furthermore, those despatches go through uncensored. I am sure of this, both from what I was told and from my own experience. For instance, I filed a despatch at a small substation as late as 6.15 P.M., Berlin Time (12.15 noon, Eastern Standard Time) and it appeared in all editions of the New York Times next morning. This would have been impossible if there had been even the short delay which a most cursory check up before putting the despatch on the wireless would have involved.

This brings up one of the most interesting aspects of wartime Germany the system of handling foreign journalists. Right at the start I was told at the

Propaganda Ministry just where I stood and what I could, and could not, write. Military and naval matters were, of course, severely circumscribed, together with topics such as sensational rumors obviously tending to discredit the German Government and give aid and comfort to its enemies. There was a sort of gentleman's agreement with the correspondent that he would abide by rules laid down for his guidance. If he overstepped the line and a despatch, when published in his home paper, contained matter which the German authorities considered untrue, unfair, or otherwise unprofessional, the correspondent would be called onto the carpet and warned to mend his ways. If the offense was flagrant he might be formally expelled from the foreign press corps, thereby losing his official status with all its attendant privileges. His professional usefulness would thus be at an end, and he might as well leave Germany even though not formally expelled.

This gentlemen's agreement system is equally obvious in the matter of interviews. When you interview an official personage you are required to submit your manuscript to the Propaganda Ministry which makes a German translation and lays it before the person interviewed for his approval. Obviously, it is necessary for the Government to see to it that its leading spokesmen are correctly quoted and that statements made to the interviewer "off the record" are not published. So it often happens that considerable changes have to be made before the final draft is O.K.'d. Once approval is given, however, there is no further checkup and the interview can be filed for the wireless in the same way as any press despatch. Technically, there is nothing to prevent your sending the original version. But naturally, if the published interview does not tally with the draft agreed upon, it will be clear that you have broken faith, and confidence in your reliability is destroyed.

The same policy applies to foreign telephone service. Most Berlin correspondents of newspapers in European neutral countries have telephone permits similar to Press Wireless for us Americans. Such permits enable the European correspondent to telephone his despatches directly from his Berlin office to his home paper. These talks may be subject to a double check by listening in and by transcription on dictaphone records. However, even when this is done, it is seemingly to catch such obvious indiscretions as discussion of military matters. I never heard of a press telephone conversation being broken into or stopped. Here again the foreign correspondent is called to account only when a despatch published in his home paper contains something which German officialdom considers a violation of the rules of the game.

During my stay in Berlin, the Propaganda Ministry evolved an ingenious method of expediting press stories sent by mail. All such material could be turned into a special bureau with the understanding that the manuscript would be read and mailed within twenty-four hours unless something objectionable should be discovered. Being mailed in a special envelope, it went through without scrutiny by

the regular censors. In case of objection, the correspondent was notified, and specific changes or eliminations were suggested. Here, as elsewhere, objections seemed to have been rarely made except for reasons already explained.

The foreign correspondent can go pretty far in describing current conditions and general situations. German officialdom seems to have realized that it is no use trying to stop press stories about matters which are undeniably true and widely known. Let me cite one instance from my own experience. I had written a pair of "mailers" describing in detail the many vexations and hardships which German housewives had to endure. They went through the Propaganda Ministry all right, but I wanted to find out the official reaction to them. Accordingly, I tried them out on an official who I was sure had not read them. He scanned them carefully and handed them back with a slightly wry smile. "American readers will be apt to think we're in tough shape," he said. "I really think you left out certain qualifying factors which would have made the picture less dark. However," he ended with a shrug, "what you do say is all true, and I believe you're trying to be fair. So, under our present policy, we can make no legitimate kick." Of course, the latitude extended foreign correspondents has its practical limits. Should a correspondent unearth some unpalatable information he is more than likely to be told that such a despatch, even though true and not falling under the ordinary tabus, is displeasing to the German Government. I know of one such instance where the offender was plainly told that, if he publicized any more exceptional discoveries of this kind, he would get into serious trouble.

There seems also to be distinct discrimination between the latitude permitted the correspondents of powerful neutrals and those of the small European countries which fall more or less within Germany's orbit. More than once their press representatives said to me: "We can't write nearly as freely as you Americans. If we did, the German Government would either crack down on us directly or make strong diplomatic protests to our own Governments, who in turn might make it hot for our home papers." Such things make it abundantly clear that, in its seemingly liberal attitude toward foreign correspondents, the German Government is animated by no idealistic motives. Its policy is severely practical. The shrewd brains which run the Propaganda Ministry have decided that it pays to treat foreign correspondents well and help them to get their despatches out with a minimum of red tape and avoidable delay. Nothing makes a newspaperman more contented than that. But that isn't the only reason. The very fact that Berlin despatches to the foreign press sometimes contain items unfavorable to Germany tends to give public opinion the idea that a Berlin dateline is relatively reliable, and this in turn aids the German Government in pushing out its foreign propaganda. Finally, there is no danger that any of those unfavorable items will leak back to the German public, because they are not allowed to be printed in any German newspaper.

Nothing can be more startling than the contrast between the respective

treatments of foreign journalists and their German colleagues. The German press is rigidly controlled. Indeed, German papers print very little straight news as we understand the term. Every item published is elaborately scrutinized. I had one illuminating instance of this when I was invited by the head of a German press syndicate to contribute a short statement of my impressions of wartime Europe. Having been assured that I could write what I chose, I stated frankly that we Americans thought another long war would ruin Europe economically, no matter which side was victorious. The Propaganda Ministry promptly vetoed publication, and I was tactfully but firmly told that such a statement, though quite proper for my fellow countrymen, was deemed unsuitable for German readers.

When he travels, the foreign correspondent encounters the same condition of circumscribed freedom as he does in sending his despatches. Over most of Germany he can travel almost as freely as he could in peacetime by train or commercial bus, of course, since gasoline rationing makes private motor trips impossible. The only apparent check on his movements is the requirement to turn in his passport when he registers at a hotel. But there are certain parts of the Reich which are rigidly barred zones. He cannot go anywhere near the West Wall, the fortified belt of territory along the French, Belgian, and Dutch borders. He cannot visit the fortified coasts of the North Sea and the Baltic. He cannot enter German occupied Poland at least, he could not during my stay in Germany. He has to get special permission to enter the Protectorate of Bohemia Moravia, and even then he is under such close surveillance that no patriotic Czech will dare come near him. Such, briefly, are the conditions under which the foreign correspondent lives and works in wartime Germany. Within limits, he can operate quickly and efficiently. There are quite a few locked doors, and he had best not try to open them. But at least he knows where he stands, and the rules of the game are made clear to him.

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