

## Chapter One

**H** EINRICH ALBERT WAS forty years old, carried a briefcase, and worked in an office high above Broadway in one of downtown Manhattan's brand-new skyscrapers. From his window he could see West Street, crowded with merchants leading horse-drawn carts of fruit, dockworkers pulling on pieces of bread while on their way to the piers, and policemen walking their beats. He watched as cargo ships hauling grain and coal were emptied onto the covered piers stretching out into New York Harbor—ninety-nine of them on the west side of Manhattan, ranging from six hundred to one thousand feet long. Originally built to accommodate ocean liners such as the *Lusitania* and the *Olympic*, the piers were too important to use just for luxury travelers. By 1914, more material moved in and out of New York Harbor than anywhere else in the world. The mayor at the time, John Mitchel, worried aloud about the economic consequences worldwide if someone demolished his harbor, and not a soul considered his fears without justification.

The scene was always so hurried, so full of purpose, so earnest. So typically American, Albert thought.

How he hated the view.

Past the piers, the Statue of Liberty glistened in the late-

## CHAD MILLMAN

afternoon sun. Every day, immigrants from Europe, refugees from the war, arrived at nearby Ellis Island. Albert himself was a stranger here, having moved to New York shortly after the conflict in Europe had begun in August 1914. He had come alone, leaving his wife, Ida, and their three young children in Germany.

On a clear day, if he squinted, Albert could see beyond the Statue of Liberty to Black Tom Island, a mile-long spit jutting into the harbor from Jersey City, New Jersey. Black Tom was laid with dozens of intricately woven rails and long piers extending like spokes from one side of the thin finger of land. From sunrise to sunset, workers unloaded trains that brought dangerous cargo from all over the country, transferring the goods to the ships waiting in the piers. The largest munitions depot in the country, Black Tom was the last stop for American-made shells, dynamite, and bullets before they were sent to the front. The British and French were buying them by the ton, as fast as the American companies could make them, and then using them to beat back the Germans in the countryside of France and off the coasts of Europe.

Albert watched the business of Black Tom with dismay. He was not alone. President Woodrow Wilson had declared the United States neutral when war broke out in 1914, and the harbors in port cities up and down the East Coast were veritable parking lots filled with German merchant ships, battleships, and U-boats, all of them interned for the duration of the war. Wilson's neutrality policy not only meant that he would not take sides or commit his military. It also meant that he would not allow any ships docked in the United States at the outbreak of World War I to join the fight. As a result, along the Hudson River there were nearly eighty German vessels interned, tied together in groups by thick ropes and watched at all times by patrolling U.S. Navy ships. With the British navy controlling the seas, wayward German vessels looking for safe haven often docked in the United States when their supplies ran low. They, too, were interned and forbidden to leave. Eventually, the harbor became so crowded with cargo ships, luxury liners, and idle warships that the German boats were

## THE DETONATORS

towed across the water to New Jersey. By the fall of 1914, it was common for German naval officers and merchant marines setting sail from Germany to shout, "I'm going to heaven, hell, or Hoboken."

As busy as the harbor was during working hours, it was mostly desolate at night. The piers, hoisted twenty feet above the water, had small rowboats tethered to their wooden pinnings so workers had access to the lower reaches of the ships. After sunset, given the dense cover of the piers' roofs, it was common for crooks to borrow those rowboats and be quietly ferried from one unmanned ship to the next.

Directly in front of the piers, running parallel to the river, was West Street. So hurried in the light of day, it lay still after dark, littered with grain and loose pieces of coal that had fallen from carts; water pooled in the crevices between the cobblestones. There were no lights along the docks, and the only sounds came from small waves on the Hudson River slapping against the hulls of ships. In the night shadows, resentful, interned German seamen—loud, bored, and frustrated—stumbled along West Street, tripping on the uneven lane, drawing rebukes from the cops walking the beat. The Germans spent their days maintaining their ships, scraping down the sides, and watching big steamers leave wispy trails as they chugged away from Black Tom, headed for the war. They spent their nights wandering and drinking. They weren't prisoners, but they weren't free. No matter where they went, they were viewed with suspicion—although all who found themselves dockside at midnight were to be doubted. "In districts where you find few people, you will rarely find lights, and where there are no lights you may well expect crime," opined Thomas Tunney, then the head of the New York Police Department's bomb squad. "On the waterfront, for every thoroughfare which can pass as a street there are a dozen or two alleys, footpaths, shadowy recesses and blind holes . . . and, as Shakespeare said, there are land rats and there are water rats."

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## CHAD MILLMAN

The British blockade not only neutered the German navy, but it also made it nearly impossible for the Central powers—Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire—to import food and material. From 1914 through 1916, American exports to Britain and France combined rose from \$750 million per year to \$2.5 billion. Meanwhile, exports to Germany shrank from \$345 million to just \$2 million a year.

Albert, sent to America as Germany's commercial attaché, needed to find ways to change that. The U.S. government may have been neutral, but American companies were open for business. Nothing, he knew, was as seductive to an American as money.

On the surface, Albert was an unlikely seducer. He wore stiff-collared white shirts and black pin-striped suits. He parted his light brown hair closer to the side, forgoing the greased, split-down-the-middle style so many of his countrymen preferred. Exceedingly polite and unnecessarily formal, he hid his contempt for America underneath his businessman's uniform. The only visible evidence of his undying commitment to the kaiser was the shallow red battle scars on both cheeks, saber cuts earned as an infantryman in the German army. They looked chronically inflamed against his fair skin and soft blue eyes.

German-American banks had granted Albert millions in loans, motivated as much by events abroad as by Albert's personal appeal. The country was bitterly divided over the war, with most Americans believing that Germany was responsible for starting it. But pockets of the nation were sympathetic, and during the first days and weeks of the war, German-Americans around the country demonstrated in support of their native land. Wealthy second-generation German-Americans wrote Albert checks. In Chicago, a parade of reservists carried the German colors. Inspirational speeches meant to spur volunteers to the front were given at every rally. German fight songs were sung, and telegrams were sent to Kaiser Wilhelm praising his decision to fight. German reservists from every state, as well as from South and Central America, came to New York, lined up

## THE DETONATORS

outside the German Embassy, and demanded to be shipped to the front.

Most Americans saw these acts of German patriotism as uncharacteristic and even unsettling. Nativism was rampant in the United States, as millions of European immigrants were increasingly blamed for poverty, disease, and crime. Fears that new-world values would erode beneath the increasing waves of old-world cultures prompted “Americanization” programs in public schools. Classes that taught immigrant children about the importance of punctuality, hard work, and the superiority of the “American way” became required parts of the curriculum.

Germans, however, remained largely untouched by prejudice in the years leading up to the war. Among the earliest settlers of New Amsterdam, they came to the United States by the millions during the mid-1800s. The Irish (who immigrated in equal numbers during the same time) left a homeland that could not feed, house, or employ them. They arrived poor and, in New York, largely took jobs as unskilled laborers, often working on the docks. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of middle-class, liberal-minded Germans left their country in 1848, following a failed revolution to create a unified, democratic German government. Millions more fled over the next three decades as several religious groups—Quakers, Lutherans, and Jews among them—were persecuted. In New York, they settled along the East River on the city’s Lower East Side, a part of town that quickly became known as Kleindeutschland. By 1900, Germans accounted for the largest immigrant group in the city. They hadn’t come empty-handed, and they used their capital to open small businesses as cabinet-makers, tailors, bakers, cigarmakers, and brewers. They also became leaders in creating trade unions. Ten years later, with growing German populations in Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Louis, and Cincinnati, first- and second-generation settlers accounted for 10 percent of the entire U.S. population.

As eastern European Jews and Italians became the dominant immigrant groups, settling in Lower East Side tenements, Germans left Kleindeutschland for more well-to-do parts of Man-

## CHAD MILLMAN

hattan. A new subway built in 1904 encouraged development uptown. German immigrants bought homes in the Yorkville section of the Upper East Side and, crossing the Hudson, in the suburbs of New Jersey. While they were proud of their heritage, keeping it alive through hundreds of German social clubs, beer halls, and German-language newspapers, they wanted to be citizens of the United States first. No immigrant group seemed to assimilate as quickly or as easily. Seven out of ten Germans became naturalized citizens, proudly referring to themselves as German-Americans. One study done during the early 1900s and published in the *American Journal of Sociology* asked sociologists, journalists, psychologists, and social workers to rate ethnic groups based on various personal traits. Germans ranked first, ahead of Americans, in self-control, moral integrity, and perseverance. The image most Americans held of Germans reflected what they thought of themselves: they were hardworking and aspired to be upwardly mobile.

All that would change in the summer of 1914. As the war raged overseas, the United States was forced to examine how it wanted to interact with the world. For the first time, it was a country strong enough, economically and politically, to shape events in Europe by choice. And while Americans may have been separated from battle by an ocean, it was impossible for them not to feel the war's tension. Often their new neighbors from Italy, Russia, England, and Germany had family living along the front lines. These newcomers were vocal about their reactions to the war and their allegiance to the countries they had left behind. This behavior raised questions of divided loyalties among other Americans. The rampant nativism was ratcheted up, as were fears and prejudices toward immigrants. This was especially true regarding German-Americans. The goodwill heaped on them by their adopted countrymen disappeared in a flash of gunpowder as soon as the kaiser's army crossed the Belgian border, signaling the start of World War I. In several books that were rushed into print that summer, the kaiser was depicted as intelligent, imaginative, cruel, and bent on world domination. A typical political cartoon in an American magazine depicted a German soldier marching through

## THE DETONATORS

Belgium with women and babies hanging from his bayonet. Many in the United States believed that the kaiser's plan included mobilizing millions of German-Americans—beginning with those who were begging the German ambassador in Washington, D.C., Johann von Bernstorff, to draft them into the war.

As much as he may have wanted to, von Bernstorff couldn't harness the energy of his countrymen. Getting them to the front lines in Europe was impossible. In the unlikely event that the ships hauling them across the Atlantic passed the U.S. Navy on patrol, they'd be sunk by the British once out in the open sea. But providing Germany with manpower wasn't really von Bernstorff's concern. His mission was to keep the United States out of the war.

Von Bernstorff had been raised for this job. The son of the former German ambassador to England, he had spent the first decade of his life in England. He spoke English without a German accent and had married an American. When he was named ambassador to the United States in 1908, one German paper declared that with von Bernstorff in place, a German-American partnership on balance with the British-French-Russian alliance was possible. As he said, his "main instructions from the emperor and the chancellor were to inform the American public about the peaceful and friendly intentions of German foreign policy."

With his piercing blue eyes and handlebar mustache, the ambassador quickly became a popular guest at dinner parties in Washington and New York. He summered in New England and was so skilled at befriending influential Americans that he was awarded honorary degrees from ten different universities, including Columbia, Brown, the University of Chicago, Princeton, and the University of Pennsylvania.

Once the war broke out, he needed every bit of that charm. The ambassador's budget had always included several thousand dollars that went toward paying reporters for writing positively about German policies, but with battles raging overseas, he increased his propaganda efforts. When the German-American newspaper *Staats-Zeitung* nearly went bankrupt, von Bernstorff persuaded the German Foreign Office to invest \$200,000 to keep

## CHAD MILLMAN

it afloat. He then paid \$625,000 for an interest in the *New York Evening Mail*. He knew that the daily dispatches from the front were the only ways Americans learned about what was happening in Europe. Those stories, and the debates in local pubs, on elevated trains, and around dinner tables, shaped American opinions about the war—and Germany’s role in causing it. The more it appeared that Germany was fighting for a righteous cause, the more support von Bernstorff would get, and maybe—just maybe—the United States would change its mind about who was in the right.

It was Albert’s job to make von Bernstorff’s ideas happen. Early in 1915, he raised millions from American investors by selling short-term German notes. One bank showed that he made deposits of nearly \$13 million between September 1914 and November 1915; another recorded \$11 million between 1915 and 1917. His success did nothing to change his opinion of America. Actually, it did quite the opposite. “I find myself like a healthy man who sees a great strong lout suffering from shriveling of the brain,” he wrote to his wife. “Germany ought to treat the United States like a great big child.”

One. Two. Three. When Martha Held went looking for a house to rent, she wanted an address that would be easy for her countrymen to remember: 123 West 15th Street was perfect, a three-story brownstone fronted by a stoop in the middle of a tree-lined block on the west side of Manhattan. At street level, underneath the stoop, was a door that led to a basement big enough for a wine cellar, a full-service kitchen, and a bathroom. A large dining room, with a formal dining table, and a parlor were located on the first floor. Bars covered the windows in the front of the house, and the shades were almost always drawn.

Held claimed to be a German baroness by marriage, although no one ever saw her with a husband. Before moving to the United States from Germany in 1912, she had been an opera star, and she decorated the house with pictures of herself dressed in elaborate



## THE DETONATORS

costumes from her days on the stage. Held was middle-aged when World War I began, but she still carried herself like a diva. Buxom and handsome, her dark blue eyes and glossy black hair were usually set off by sparkling earrings. She wore heavy, Victorian-style dresses that covered her greatly expanding girth, and she belted out arias late into the night.

During the summer, when windows stayed open and neighbors gathered on their stoops to escape the heat, they gossiped about what was going on inside Held's house. Her singing carried down the block, rising above the din that lingered in the air whenever her door opened and closed. The neighbors noticed that beautiful women would arrive early in the evening and then disappear through the door leading into Held's basement. Hours later, men speaking German, often dressed in German military uniforms, would follow. Interned German merchant marines were regulars at Held's house, as were the kaiser's diplomats.

Occasionally, that included von Bernstorff himself, and when he'd walk in the door and shed his coat, there'd be an ovation. Germany's military attaché, Franz von Papen, and its naval attaché, Karl Boy-Ed, visited often as well. When von Bernstorff was there, the two attachés often acted imperiously, as if they had earned posts of distinction. In fact, before World War I, it was considered an insult to be assigned to the United States; the greatest militaries in the world were in Europe. The Germans thought the military attaché to the United States was such a minor position that they made it a dual post, adding Mexico to the light workload. The thirty-four-year-old von Papen, a cavalry officer, had been given the assignment because his wealthy and influential father-in-law had pushed for it, not because he had shown any potential.

But the German Foreign Office had misjudged him. Lazy and undisciplined before the war, he was emboldened by the conflict. Still, on West 15th Street, he often revealed his wild side. He lorded over the crowd at Held's house, demanding that he be catered to. Held introduced him to women he could take to Delmonico's, near Wall Street, or on carriage rides through Central Park. They listened as he boasted about his close relationship with the German

## CHAD MILLMAN

ambassador, then they'd take him back to Held's, where he'd drink wine until he fell asleep.

When the war began, von Papen was in Mexico City. He took the train back to Washington, where von Bernstorff instructed him to open a New York branch of the embassy at 60 Wall Street, just a five-minute walk from Albert's office at 45 Broadway. Officially, the office was named the Bureau of the Military Attaché, but von Papen would refer to it as the War Intelligence Center. His objective was simple and brutal: find ways for Germany to advance against the Allies, even if it meant waging a war against the United States.

Von Bernstorff considered von Papen unrefined as a diplomat, someone who openly drank to excess, womanized, and never hid his beliefs that the German way was the only way. All these traits, in the ambassador's eyes, made von Papen a liability. They also made him expendable.

With the Allies boarding merchant vessels that sailed from America for Europe and demanding that every traveler show identification, von Papen's main focus was on getting interned sailors fake passports. Bankrolled by Albert, von Papen's men approached visiting sailors from neutral countries such as Spain and Denmark, offering each ten dollars for his passport. Even better were U.S. passports, which at the time were easy to come by. Von Papen's men paid twenty-five dollars each to sympathetic German-Americans, as well as to bums and petty thieves, who were willing to fill out a passport application (including the requisite signatures of two American citizens confirming the applicant's nationality) and then hand it over to von Papen.

In December 1914, the U.S. State Department made photographs a passport requirement, complicating von Papen's operation. He hired a German-American attorney, Hans von Wedell, who earlier in his life had been a newspaper crime reporter. Some of von Wedell's old contacts and current clients were expert forgers who could duplicate the new U.S. passports. Von Wedell hired

## THE DETONATORS

an assistant, and together they opened an office on Bridge Street, a few blocks south of von Papen's War Intelligence Center. There they provided papers to anyone carrying a letter of reference from von Papen. For twenty dollars, a German could become a "native-born" American.

As von Bernstorff suspected, von Papen went about his business carelessly. He handed out letters of reference to nearly anyone who walked into his office, making no effort to check the person's background. It didn't take long for von Wedell to hear from his old newspaper sources that beat cops had been tipped off to his operation. Just weeks after he began working with von Papen, on December 25, 1914, von Wedell disappeared, leaving only a letter to von Bernstorff explaining his absence:

I know that the State Department had withheld a passport application forged by me. Also, ten days before my departure I learnt from a telegram sent by von Papen that one of our clients had fallen into the hands of the English. That gentleman's forged papers were liable to come back any day and could, owing chiefly to his lack of caution, easily be traced back to me. . . . I now travel to Germany with the consciousness of having done my duty as well as I understood it, and of having accomplished my task.

Several days later, on January 2, 1915, the U.S. Justice Department raided the Bridge Street office. Among the evidence gathered were the letters of recommendation written by von Papen. When the German Foreign Office heard of the raid and asked for an update, von Bernstorff casually replied, "Details have unfortunately become known to public opinion and the American Government started an investigation. There is no reason to fear that the Embassy will be compromised. State Department informed me definitely that the U.S. government attached no importance to the rumors that the Embassy had been concerned." While von Papen landed on the U.S. government's watch list, von Bernstorff and the embassy were still trusted.

CHAD MILLMAN

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Perhaps one reason the Germans showed little concern was that they had already shifted priorities. Sneaking Germans out of America to fight on the front was an inefficient and costly exercise. For every man who made it through the blockade, there was a boatload of American-made bullets being distributed to the Allies. In November 1914, while working hard on his passport operation, von Papen received a cable from the Foreign Office, which read, "It is indispensable to recruit agents to organize explosions on ships sailing to enemy countries, in order to cause delays in the loading, the departure and the unloading of these ships." Two months later, on January 26, 1915, von Papen received another cable, this one more pointed and more urgent: "In United States sabotage can reach to all kinds of factories for war deliveries. . . . Under no circumstances compromise Embassy."

Von Papen knew just where to go. Day after day, interned sailors and merchants stood around the docks, tending to their ships, watching other boats leave the harbor. They were bored, frustrated, and angry at the United States. Eager to get on von Papen's good side, they volunteered information about movements in the harbor, new cargo that had come in from all over the United States, and especially movement to and from Black Tom Island. With three-quarters of the ammunition being sent to the front leaving from Black Tom, its daily activities became an obsession for von Papen and the interned Germans, and what they observed was invaluable. They knew that arriving train cars loaded with flammable materials were always parked at the north end of the yard and were all clearly marked. They knew that that end of Black Tom was remote and unlit. They knew that, despite a rule prohibiting loaded barges from being docked overnight, the workload was so backed up that many ships packed with ammo sat tied to the piers for days at a time. There were no gates separating the street from the piers, and when the shift ended on Saturday night, the yard was dead until Monday. All of this information was passed along, from one German to an-

## THE DETONATORS

other, at Martha Held's brownstone. Her bordello was a house of spies.

The Germans cursing the Americans and the munitions shipments that steamed in and out of the harbor shared a bond with the hundreds of thousands of Irish immigrants in America: their mutual hatred of England.

James Larkin was an Englishman who had earned his reputation as a firebrand by organizing labor unions in Belfast and Liverpool and all along the coast of Scotland. He had grown up on the docks, working in Liverpool from the time he was eleven years old. Larkin had no formal education, but he had street smarts learned by observing life in Liverpool's seedy districts. He saw men of industry abusing hookers on the streets. He saw how those who were supposed to be providing a living wage and food for the poor enriched themselves and paid almost nothing to their workers. As an adult, he spent every Sunday morning on a soapbox, preaching to his fellow workers about the value of banding together and fighting their bosses for better wages and working hours—in short, to be treated like human beings.

Larkin never drank, and he demanded that his men live as temperately as he did. He always wore a black suit and a broad-brimmed hat, and he usually had a pipe dangling from his mouth. Unlike many other union leaders, he never took money out of his workers' paychecks. He once refused to speak at a union rally because the organizer had beaten his wife and treated her in a "most shameful fashion." Larkin made just a little more than two pounds a week and spent much of that giving handouts to the families whose fathers had drunk away their earnings. He had a habit of beating the husbands until they sobered up, went home, and promised to do better by their families. He was the boss not just of the union but also of the community.

In 1914, just six years after settling in Dublin, Larkin was named the chairman of the Irish Trade Unions Congress. Now the most powerful man in the Irish labor movement, he used his

## CHAD MILLMAN

pulpit to preach not just about the labor movement but also about socialism—about the ills of capitalism and how it was the root of all corruption—and not just in Ireland but also in the United States, where masses of Irish immigrants were working on the docks for low wages and long hours. In November 1914, Larkin set sail for America to raise money for the union. He was already a minor celebrity in the United States, his union fights having been chronicled by revolutionary rags such as the *International Socialist Review* as well as by mainstream papers such as the *New York Times*. His fiery oration and labor-first philosophy had inspired so many union members that the *New York Sun*, hearing American union members invoking his name and spouting the tenets he believed in, branded this philosophy Larkinism.

But Larkin's speeches in the United States garnered attention for a different reason. Beyond trying to incite labor and tweak big business, Larkin assaulted the war now under way in Europe. He denounced it as a capitalist sham and implored America to stay out. He urged both Irish-Americans and German-Americans to rally, insisting that whatever difficulties they created for Britain were in Ireland's best interests as well. In one of Larkin's first interviews upon his arrival in America, with the socialist *New York Call*, he said, "The war is only the outcome of capitalist aggression and the desire to capture home and foreign markets." Days later, speaking in front of fifteen thousand people at Madison Square Garden, Larkin was even more incendiary, saying, "We are against war on a field of battle. But we are against a more brutal war, the war of capital against the men who are oppressed and who have only their labor power to sell. . . . We want more than a dollar increase for the workers. We want the earth." In Philadelphia, he was even more direct: "Why should Ireland fight for Britain in this war? What has Britain ever done for our people? Whatever we got from her we wrested with struggle and sacrifice. We shall not fight for England. We shall fight for the destruction of the British Empire and the construction of the Irish Empire. . . . We will fight to free Ireland from the grasp of that vile carcase [*sic*] called England."

## THE DETONATORS

When Larkin returned to New York, von Papen and Boy-Ed called on him. Meeting at 60 Wall Street, they flattered him, praised him, complimented his speeches, and talked about their shared interests. Neither of them wanted the United States to join the war. Boy-Ed told Larkin that an alliance already existed between Irish-Americans and German-Americans and described the political pressure both groups were putting on Washington to remain neutral, no matter what the costs or how provoked.

Then Boy-Ed explained to Larkin that Germany had created a “secret department charged with hindering or interfering with the transportation of supplies.” He wanted Larkin to organize the Irish arm of Germany’s sabotage unit. No one had more clout in the immigrant community. No one else could rally the dockworkers by sheer force of personality. Larkin seemed to be in a perpetual state of calling for revolution, and Boy-Ed wanted to tap into that energy. He told Larkin this was his chance to strike back at England, not just with words but with actions. Germany’s military victory would help bring about Irish independence. He offered Larkin \$200 a week to work for Germany.

Despite his hatred for England, Larkin declined. “I am,” he said, “not for the Kaiser any more than I am for England.” Larkin excused himself and hoped that he was done dealing with Boy-Ed. He would soon be disappointed.