

# Philip de László in the Great War

By  
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Hungarian-born Philip de László (1869-1937) was a truly international artist who travelled widely in Europe and America and painted many of those who were the major political players in the First World War. He moved from Vienna to London in 1907 with his wife Lucy, née Guinness, and family, and quickly established his reputation there, counting the royal family, aristocracy and members of government amongst his many patrons. This essay examines de László's situation as a naturalised alien and an artist in the context of the spy furore in Britain during the First World War.



*Philip Alexius de László in his Vienna studio 1903*



*Self-portrait with his wife Lucy and their son Henry painted while under house arrest at Ladbrooke Gardens Nursing Home 1918*

## I

The Great War was not only the 'first' war designated as global, it was the first to have roused an ubiquitous spy fever which placed whole sections of immigrant communities under suspicion of working for the enemy.<sup>1</sup> Britain was not unique. In Berlin, those opening days of August were marked by lawless demonstrations against foreigners: the British Embassy was attacked, diplomats were struck, British subjects were locked up in the fortress in Spandau and a great 'spy excitement' resulted in rumours about poisoning wells and lakes.<sup>2</sup>

Germany had a tenth the number of aliens as Britain where most Germans, Austrians, Hungarians and Turks were modest shopkeepers or tradesmen. The grandees attached to embassies left along with the more prominent Germans and Austrians, although many of those indicted for spying for the Axis Powers were Americans of German descent. Suspicion

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<sup>1</sup> The Congress of Vienna (1814-1815) was plagued by spies, but the Napoleonic Wars that preceded it did not provoke anything like the same levels of paranoia

<sup>2</sup> James W. Gerard, *My Four Years in Germany*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1917, pp. 92-95

fell on prostitutes like Margaretha MacLeod (Mata Hari) and other operatives who made good listeners, such as hairdressers. The barber Karl Gustav Ernst in London's Caledonian Road and his friend Wilhelm Kronauer were both pursued by the courts. Publicans and barmen might also pick up stories: Frederick Adolphus Schröder, alias Gould, in the naval port of Chatham was one such. In the Second World War, the British Ambassador in Ankara's valet 'Cicero' used his position to photograph documents in his master's safe. In an age when photography was more cumbersome, however, artists might have been able to make serviceable plans of naval installations.<sup>3</sup> Bankers and stockbrokers could have used their money to undermine the economy or a society portrait painter might have been able to glean interesting details from his sitters. A painter with a clientele as illustrious and wide-ranging as Philip de László's was bound to come under suspicion one day.

De László was Hungarian, but despite his country's equal partnership in the Dual Monarchy, Hungary was not seen as Britain's chief enemy by a very long chalk. Indeed, after the costly Dardanelles Campaign of 1915, even Turkey would have taken precedence. Britain's quarrel was first and foremost with Germany – the country that had not only become a commercial rival to Britain and its empire, but which had had the temerity to construct a world-class fleet.

Not even Horatio Bottomley, the rabidly nationalist editor of the Sunday newspaper *John Bull*, with its million-and-more circulation, could see any problem with Austria seeking a severe retribution for the killing of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on 28 June 1914: 'to hell with Servia, [sic]' he blasted on 15 August, while making it utterly clear that the war wasn't about continental entanglements but eradicating the German enemy once and for all.<sup>4</sup>

The *Jewish Chronicle* was the voice of the somewhere between 250,000 and 300,000 Jews who had settled in Britain since 1870. The Jews almost certainly represented the country's largest body of immigrants at the time. The *Chronicle* initially hoped that Britain would not be dragged into the conflict. British Jews were prospering and had not only made a notable contribution to the arts and sciences, they were also prominent in business. The paper pointed out that the Austro-Hungarian Empire was not their natural enemy: '... the Austrian Emperor has been a consistent friend to Jews, and our coreligionists have held high office in the services of the state which has been denied to their neighbouring empires.'<sup>5</sup> Russia, which by virtue of being France's ally, had become Britain's too, was behind the Serbs, but until the summer of 1914, Russia was hardly held in high esteem by Britons who saw it as a repressive if not barbaric state. British Jews had even less regard for Russia, as most of those then in Britain had quit the Tsarist Empire as a result of the pogroms.

'For England to fight alongside Russia,' continued the leader in the *Chronicle*, 'would be as wicked as for her to fight against Germany, with whom she has no quarrel whatsoever.'<sup>6</sup> After the violation of Belgian neutrality, attitudes hardened and the *Chronicle* fell into line. From now on they would have their work cut out stressing the difference between Jews and Germans and making sure that the sacrifices made by members of the Jewish colony were

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<sup>3</sup> James Fox, 'Traitor Painters': Artists and Espionage in the First World War, in *The British Art Journal*, vol IX no 2, Autumn 2008

<sup>4</sup> *John Bull* 15 August 1914

<sup>5</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 31 July 1914

<sup>6</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 7 August 1914

fully broadcast. A National Relief Fund was created and contributions rolled in from Sassoons and Lazards, Reitlingers, Sterns, Ashers, Hirsches, Seligmanns and Erlangers.



*Sir Philip Sassoon, 3<sup>rd</sup> Baronet Sassoon 1915*



*Baron Frédéric Emile d' Erlanger 1899*



*Franz Joseph I, Emperor of Austria, and King of Hungary 1899*

After the first bout of xenophobic rioting, the proprietors of the newspaper had the windows of their offices prudently boarded up and a huge slogan was strung across its Furnival Street facade: 'England has been all she could to the Jews; Jews will be all they can to England.'<sup>7</sup>



Count Albert von  
Mensdorff-Pouilly-Dietrichstein 1908

The demand to intern Britain's large enemy alien community was heard almost as soon as war was declared on 4 August 1914. When the Austrian ambassador Count Albert Mensdorff, patron and supporter of de László, left the embassy, thirty or forty Germans in the crowd apparently sang 'Deutschland über alles'-presumably making the hot-headed mob even hotter.<sup>8</sup> There were stories of beevies of waiters making a beeline for the Harwich boat.<sup>9</sup> Many of the waiters, restaurant and hotel managers who failed to do so were swiftly interned. *The Times* journalist Michael MacDonagh noted 'London is said to be full of German spies. Popular resentment against German tradesmen, principally bakers, provision dealers, watchmakers, waiters and barbers has developed in some instances into the wrecking of shops.'<sup>10</sup> Somewhere around forty percent of the Germans in

England were bakers and looting their shops had a practical advantage. Food sellers were commonly accused of poisoning their wares and German barbers of slitting their customers' throats. Shops that had previously sold 'delikatessen' and sauerkraut, now advertised 'Good English viands' and hung Union Flags over their doors. This did not save those in the East End. In Cockspur Street, on the other side of the City, the offices of German shippers were taken over. The *London Gazette* published lists of people who possessed names of German allure whose possessors now sought to disguise them by deed poll. MacDonagh did not hesitate to call attention to this practice, citing three cases: 'Rose' deriving from Rosenheim, Curzon was originally 'Siengenberg' (sic - the pianist Clifford Curzon's father was born Michael Siegenberg) and Dent, which was originally 'Schact.'<sup>11</sup>

There was limited recording of the outrages in the papers, but 'spy peril' was surely rampant. The Home Secretary told the House the police bagged twenty-one spies in August, although he exaggerated the numbers.<sup>12</sup> Thirty were later tried. Of these eleven were shot and one hanged. Another spy called K pferle committed suicide in Brixton Prison during his trial. Brixton was the holding pen for those due to face trial for espionage.<sup>13</sup> When the enemy agent Carl Lody fell to a firing squad on 6 November, he was the first man executed in the Tower of London for 150 years. All the spies were of foreign origin: the sensationalist Sidney Felstead asserts contentiously that 'no bona fide British subject' was arrested during the war.<sup>14</sup> Spies were a subsection of an unwelcome foreign body.

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<sup>7</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 21 August 1914

<sup>8</sup> Michael MacDonagh, *In London During the Great War, The Diary of a Journalist*, Eyre & Spottiswoode, London 1935, pp. 15-16

<sup>9</sup> Sidney Theodore Felstead, *German Spies At Bay*, Hutchinson, London 1920, p. 41

<sup>10</sup> MacDonagh, *Great War*, p. 15

<sup>11</sup> MacDonagh, *Ibid.* MacDonagh is responsible for the misspellings.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm: An Authorized History of MI5*, Allen Lane, London 2009, p. 53

<sup>13</sup> Felstead, *Spies*, pp. 50-51, De László was held there after his arrest in September 1917.

<sup>14</sup> Felstead, *Spies*, p. 282

On 5 August, the government passed its Aliens Restrictions Act. Three days later came DORA (Defence of the Realm Act) in which Article 14B stipulated that enemy aliens – Germans, Austrians and Hungarians – were required to register with the police by 11 August.<sup>15</sup> Postal censorship employed 4,000 people<sup>16</sup> and the self-appointed spyhunter William Le Queux says postmen prepared lists of foreigners on their delivery rounds, leading to hundreds of arrests.<sup>17</sup> These actions eventually caused the internment of 32,000 German men, chiefly of military age, while 20,000 more were repatriated – mostly women and children. Those who remained free for the time being were supposed to keep clear of sensitive areas – particularly the coast and the sea ports. J C Bird calls this a ‘mild’ policy. It became much stricter after May 1915.<sup>18</sup> The lion’s share of internees was taken to the Isle of Man. On the way they were jostled and spat on by the crowds.<sup>19</sup> A riot occurred in Douglas on 19 November 1914 claiming five lives.

After Austria-Hungary declared war on 14 August, the total number of enemy aliens in Britain was estimated at between 70 and 75,000, not including women or children under fourteen (two thirds were men).<sup>20</sup> Of these, more than two out of three were Germans. Hungarians were a tiny minority of the 15,000 or so citizens of the Dual Monarchy, and many of those were perceived as reluctant enemies – Czechs, Poles etc. The Home Office expressed reservations about the internment of Austro-Hungarians: ‘British subjects have been treated with so much more leniency in Austria and Hungary than in Germany that exceptional consideration has been given to applications for exemption on the part of Austrians and Hungarians.’<sup>21</sup> De László asserted that the Hungarians did not intern aliens at all. The *Jewish Chronicle* observed the looting and internment of aliens with apprehension, realising that many of those who suffered would be Jews: ‘There is a large proportion of our people in this country who are foreign born. The mere fact that they have been naturalised or that without being naturalised they have identified themselves completely in thought and spirit with this country, has not removed their foreign appearance, or their foreign tone of speech. This is nothing to their detriment, and of their origin they may be rightly proud. Jews in this country too, have in the popular mind been largely identified with Germany. Indeed, German and Jew have frequently been regarded as interchangeable terms.’<sup>22</sup>

The *Chronicle* could scarcely conceal its despair when Austria-Hungary joined the fray, an Empire containing vastly more Jews than the German one.<sup>23</sup> To their exasperation, *The Times* continued to associate Jews with Germans and the editor felt obliged to write a letter in protest.<sup>24</sup> *John Bull* was no more tolerant and proclaimed ‘Keep your eye on the aliens,’ 10,000 of whom were under lock and key by mid-October.<sup>25</sup> In London, in addition to the

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<sup>15</sup> MacDonagh, *Great War*, p. 15; NA HO 45 115 22/2872355

<sup>16</sup> Felstead, *Spies*, p. 2

<sup>17</sup> William Le Queux, *German Spies in England: An Exposé*, Stanley Paul, London 1915, p. 90

<sup>18</sup> J C Bird, *Control of Enemy Alien Civilians in Great Britain 1914-1918*, Garland, New York and London, 1986, pp. 8-9

<sup>19</sup> Antony Lentin, *Banker, Traitor, Scapegoat, Spy? The Troublesome Case of Sir Edgar Speyer*, Haus Publishing, London, 2013, p. 42

<sup>20</sup> Bird, *Alien Civilians*, p. 6

<sup>21</sup> National Archives HO 45/11522/ 287 235/12

<sup>22</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 7 August 1914

<sup>23</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 14 August 1914

<sup>24</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 21 August 1914

<sup>25</sup> *John Bull*, 22 August 1914

vast Alexandra Palace pleasure-complex in North London, the Olympia Exhibition Halls were made available but there was still a shortage of beds. On 28 October, MacDonagh reported the cry ‘intern all Germans has been raised and is backed by a section of the press... they want to have interned also naturalised British subjects of German origin of whom there are many in London.’ He added that naturalisation ‘may be but a cover for nefarious practices.’ On 30 October, the King’s cousin Prince Louis of Battenberg resigned as First Sea Lord after he was hounded as a ‘German’ by a subaltern admiral, Lord Charles Beresford. The family later prudently changed their names to Mountbatten.<sup>26</sup> De László’s patronage by that family had begun in 1907 and continued after the war.



*Louis Mountbatten, 1st Marquess of Milford Haven,  
formerly Prince Louis of Battenberg 1909*

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<sup>26</sup> MacDonagh, *Great War*, pp. 33-34.

## II



*Wilhelm II, German Emperor, and King of Prussia 1911*

*King Edward VII of Great Britain 1907*

*King Ferdinand I of Bulgaria 1894*



Philip de László was lucky that there were few Hungarians about and that their exotic names aroused less suspicion as those who were demonstratively Teutonic. There seems to be no evidence that he suffered from the scandals that emanated from the career of the Hungarian conman Ignác Trebitsch, later Lincoln, who had converted to Anglicanism, was ordained deacon and had been curate of Appledore in Kent. Naturalised in 1909, he briefly served as MP for Darlington and after two failed business ventures forged the signature of the Yorkshire businessman Seeböhm Rowntree, his former employer, to guarantee loans against his debts. During the war he was for a while censor of Hungarian and Romanian correspondence; when he was forced to resign he fled to America where he offered his services to the Germans as a spy. Extradited to England on forgery charges, he was stripped of his nationality in December 1918. The fact he was Jewish roused particular ire in Britain.

De László was born Fülöp Laub in Budapest on 30 April 1869, the son of a failed and impoverished tailor. He was forced to leave school at the age of nine and took many apprenticeships to support his family. By dint of hard work and huge talent he was admitted to the Academy of Arts. He later studied in Munich and Paris. In 1892 he met Lucy Guinness from the banking branch of the family. Through the encouragement and patronage of Elek de Lippich, a member of the Hungarian gentry who was the Secretary to the Fine Arts Department of the Ministry of Education, de László was convinced to convert to Catholicism

and ‘Magyarise’ his name. Lippich helped him secure his first important commissions as well: the Prime Minister Sándor Weckerle and Prince Ferdinand of Bulgaria and his wife Marie-Louise of Bourbon Parma.<sup>27</sup> Those first royal commissions led to a plethora of others: the Grand Duke of Weimar, the Emperor Franz Joseph, the German Empress Augusta Victoria, Pope Leo XIII, Edward VII and the Kaiser. Finally, in 1898, he gained permission to marry his beloved Lucy. Doubts about his unsuitability as a match for a well-born Protestant Irish woman would have been mitigated by his considerable earnings by the time of their marriage in 1900 and by his elevation to the hereditary nobility of Hungary by the Emperor in 1912.



*Philip and Lucy de László, Budapest c.1900*



*Studio House, Budapest 1897*

At first the couple resided in the large turreted gothic studio house de László had commissioned in Pest in 1897. Three years later they removed to Vienna where de László converted to Anglicanism in the Legation Chapel. He had promised Mrs Guinness to bring up his children as Anglicans and Englishmen and in 1907 the de Lászlós decided to put down roots in London. His list of sitters was burgeoning, there seems to be little doubt that he felt London was the place to flourish. He had outgrown both Budapest and Vienna and followed his patronage to a bigger stage. There was also a stylistic reason why he may have felt an affinity for London - as the Austro-Hungarian writer and critic Felix Salten (the author of *Bambi*) pointed out in 1918: his artistic models had evolved from Van Dyck, Reynolds and Gainsborough which may have been the clue to why his pictures were appreciated in Britain.<sup>28</sup> One thing remained left to do when war threatened: he needed to become a naturalised Briton. After much soul-searching the papers were drawn up on 21 July 1914 and a week later they were with the Home Office. A certificate was granted on 29 August and de László signed the oath of allegiance on 2 September 1914. There was some urgency as his eldest son Henry would become fourteen in June 1915 and that would automatically confer Hungarian nationality on him and make him liable for service in the Hungarian army.<sup>29</sup> Three very prominent men stood proxy, the former Prime Minister, Arthur Balfour, Lord Lee of

<sup>27</sup> Duff Hart-Davis, *Philip de László: His Life and Art*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2010, p. 39

<sup>28</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 22 September 1918

<sup>29</sup> Hart-Davis, *op cit.*, p. 140

Fareham, who presented Chequers to the nation, and the successful former grocer Hudson Kearley, Lord Devonport, a fourth was his brother-in-law, Howard Guinness.



Hudson Ewbanke Kearley, 1st Baron Devonport 1914



Arthur James Balfour 1914

Arthur Hamilton Lee 1921



De László was a well-known figure in Austria and Hungary, and the news of his naturalisation eventually leaked out. This may have been as a result of a Hungarian journalist on the *Morning Post* called József Szebenyei who required de László to justify his decision. The story hit the streets of Central Europe on 15 October 1914, when it was reported without comment in Vienna in the *Neue Freie Presse*. The *Grazer Tagblatt* ran it the next day. The Austrian papers gave ex-PM Arthur Balfour as de László's sponsor, the others were not even known to the Westminster Parliament until then.<sup>30</sup> Some lines were apparently taken out of a letter written to his brother and later circulated as a pamphlet. An article in the British paper, *The Star*, of 17 November 1914 both quoted the letter and disclosed the sponsors. It said that the Budapest *Hirlap* had called for de László's expulsion from the nobility as well as the Senate of Fine Arts.<sup>31</sup> On 19 November 1914, the *Neue Freie Presse* reported a motion to expel de László from the Nemzeti Szalon (National Salon, the national forum for the arts in Budapest). On 28 May 1915, the *Linzer Volksblatt* announced that this had taken place the day before.

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<sup>30</sup> *Hansard*, 29 November 1917

<sup>31</sup> *The Star*, 17 November 1914

As far as his sympathies for the protagonists were concerned, de László was still emotionally Hungarian and naturally steeped from birth in his own Hungarian view of Central Europe: the Serbs were Hungary's enemies, and so were their backers, the Russians. The Russians were doubly bad: because they had helped the Austrians suppress the Hungarian Revolution of 1848. Indeed, had the Russians not done so, Hungary might have achieved independence. When the British secret service began to study de László seriously, they decided such attitudes were evidence of treachery.

De László gave generously to many war charities. He donated blank canvases that were auctioned and raised £4500 for the British Red Cross, while St Dunstan's and the Actors' Orphanage also benefitted. He did not, however, restrict himself to Allied charities. When he subscribed to the London-based Austro-Hungarian Emergency Fund this was refused by his bank. It was subsequently renamed the American Relief Commission for Austro-Hungarians. He also personally gave money to, or assisted, destitute Austrians and Hungarians. He and his wife Lucy supported an Hungarian professor of music who could not find work and had a wife who had fallen ill.

On 7 May 1915, a German submarine sank the *RMS Lusitania* a few miles outside Cork Harbour. That day, Cope Brothers' fishmongers – who had a branch in the increasingly Jewish Golders Green – placed their usual advertisement in the *Jewish Chronicle* under the banner 'No Herrings for Huns!' The paper had gone to press too late to report on the ship's demise and the consequent deaths of 1,198 passengers. A week later they attacked *The Times* again which they believed was continuing to stoke up hatred against Jews. They called the sinking a transformation of the face of war, which was 'now a struggle for common civilisation.' On 8 May, *The Times* reported on rioting in Liverpool as the mob looted 'German' shops.<sup>32</sup> The next day the disturbances crossed the Mersey to Birkenhead and there were incidents in Newcastle. The rioters had not sought to distinguish between Jew and German. *The Times* had gone further this time: calling for more aliens to be interned and pointing an accusing finger at naturalised Britons.<sup>33</sup> On 11 May there was a procession from the City to the Commons to demand that any remaining enemy aliens be interned. In the lobby they were addressed by Lord Charles Beresford.<sup>34</sup>

The paper reported that naturalised Germans had been suspended on the Baltic Exchange and naturalised Germans and Austrians were advised to stay away from the Stock Exchange. Rioting had spread to Bradford.<sup>35</sup> On 12 May, the publication of the Bryce Report on German atrocities provoked three days of rampaging in London. Some of the report was true, but a large part was distorted or wrong. The disturbances spilled out into the West End, where financiers like Sir Edgar Speyer lived.<sup>36</sup> The freedom of movement of the American-born 'German' banker Speyer was a considerable bone of contention to the press and he was later arrested and his naturalisation revoked. 'German' shops were looted. Most of these would have been Jewish-owned. There was scarcely any bread in the East End after all the bakeries

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<sup>32</sup> *Times* 8 May 1915

<sup>33</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 14 May 1915

<sup>34</sup> David French, Spy Fever in Britain 1900-1915, in *The Historical Journal*, 21 February 1978, pp. 369-370; Lentin, *Speyer*, p. 56

<sup>35</sup> *Times* 11 May 1915

<sup>36</sup> Lentin, *Speyer*, p. 57

were pillaged. One ‘Strachan’ (a Scottish publican) was assumed to be German and had his windows broken.<sup>37</sup>



Richard Burdon Haldane, 1st Viscount Haldane 1928



Sir John Simon 1919

On 13 May the government demanded the internment of all enemy aliens of military age, the opposition leader Bonar Law vigorously lending his support to the measure. At the same time the *Chronicle* took the trouble to remonstrate once again with *The Times* for associating Germans with Jews. The latter had imagined the Kaiser’s friend, the Jewish shipping magnate Albert Ballin in Hamburg, exultant at the loss of life. The Lord Chancellor, Haldane, a Germanophile who had studied at Göttingen, received 2,600 hate letters.<sup>38</sup> Asquith reshuffled his cabinet, Haldane resigned and Sir John Simon replaced Reginald McKenna as Home Secretary. Simon later successfully represented de László at his Naturalisation Revocation hearing in June 1919.

*John Bull* and the various organs of the Northcliffe Press (that included *The Times* then) bellowed for internment: ‘a number of politicians asserted that Germans had obtained British nationality in order to secure positions of influence in British society, particularly in the financial community, whose sympathies remained with their native Germany.’<sup>39</sup> Lord Northcliffe had a well-known animosity towards de László, despite the fact the artist had painted him in 1909, also his wife, mother and, in 1916, two of his nephews, who were serving officers. The Stock Exchange was targeted in mid-May 1915 because it was deemed to have kept up its connections with Germany. There was a remorseless ‘vilification’ of German-born naturalised subjects.<sup>40</sup> ‘Now for the vendetta,’ announced *John Bull*. For the first time ever Bottomley signed his editorial. He wanted every German in Britain relentlessly pursued. ‘Extermination’ was mentioned and as for the ‘farce’ of naturalised aliens, they should be confined indoors, their children banished from schools and their property taken

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<sup>37</sup> MacDonagh, *Great War*, pp. 63-64

<sup>38</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 14 May 1915, Richard Burdon Haldane, *An Autobiography*, Hodder and Stoughton, London 1929, p. 283

<sup>39</sup> Bird, *Alien Civilians*, p. 245

<sup>40</sup> Bird, *Ibid.*, pp. 246-247

from them for the duration of the war. ‘Enemy subjects are more dangerous than enemy aliens’ it roared.<sup>41</sup> Speyer was one example, Edward VII’s courtier Sir Ernest Cassel and Baron Bruno Schröder two more, both friends and patrons of de László. Schröder’s naturalisation also dated from after the opening of hostilities and was rushed through by the Home Secretary to safeguard raw materials – notably manganese. Schröder seemed to have cornered an Indian source for the chemical.<sup>42</sup>



*Alfred Harmsworth, 1st Baron Northcliffe*  
1908



*Lieut. the Hon. Vere Sidney Tudor Harmsworth*  
1916



*Baron Bruno Schröder* 1917



*Sir Ernest Cassel* 1900

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<sup>41</sup> *John Bull*, 15 May 1915

<sup>42</sup> *Hansard*, 29 November 1917

Lord Charles Beresford MP, scourge of aliens, was a younger son of the 4<sup>th</sup> Marquess of Waterford.<sup>43</sup> He decided that the most dangerous ones were not the bakers and barbers, but those in a high social position: 'I would put them all behind barbed wire' he announced on 11 May. The two naturalised Germans who interested him most were the Privy Councillors Cassell and Speyer. By 13 May the cry was for all naturalised Germans to be interned, especially 'those in high places.' Asquith had originally refused to be browbeaten. That day, however, he made a statement in the Commons in which he made it clear that the government was to become more repressive: all male enemy aliens of military age were to be interned. That meant any Germans between 17 and 55 and Austrians and Hungarians between 18 and 50. If they were over military age, they were to be repatriated. Naturalised British subjects of enemy origin were to be presumed friends, but suspected cases established to the satisfaction of the advisory body were to be specially dealt with. 'There must be a power of interning in a [case] of proved necessity or danger.' In reply to Sir Alfred Markham, Asquith said 'If a man is a British subject with the legal rights of a British subject, the *prima facie* presumption is that he is going to perform his duty.'<sup>44</sup> He promised 'machinery' in the form of courts, judges and assessors. Exemptions had to apply to the Home Office.<sup>45</sup> Asquith was believed to be sympathetic towards Germans and Cassell and Speyer still dined at Downing Street. The Prime Minister was suspected of having accepted donations to party funds in return for awarding Privy Councillorships to naturalised German businessmen.<sup>46</sup>

There were 9,000 naturalised British subjects in August 1914: around 7,000 of these were originally Germans. Most naturalisations dated from well before the war and only 146 Germans and 44 Austro-Hungarians were naturalised between 4 August 1914 and November 1916. A number were later interned under Article 14B, de László among them. By May 1916 naturalised Britons of enemy origin were subject to careful observation by the police and military authorities and 27 had already been interned.<sup>47</sup> Measures were taken to revoke naturalisation if 'disloyalty' could be proved or behaviour 'not conducive to the public good.' De László by no means hid from the prying eyes of the mob. In May he joined a delegation of loyal Austro-Hungarians led by Sir Ernest Schiff protesting against the sinking of the *Lusitania*. They were received by the Lord Mayor.<sup>48</sup> At the end of 1916 there was bitter criticism of the government's lenient internment policy and pressure to come down hard on those who were still at liberty.<sup>49</sup> The number of naturalised subjects had declined to 6,000 on 1 March 1917, but it is evidence that the police had difficulty making cases that still only 35 had been interned under 14B.<sup>50</sup> The others may be assumed to have left the country. They were nonetheless subjected to suspicion and abuse by the general public and there were 'powerful antisemitic undertones.'<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> The widow of the 6<sup>th</sup> Marquess and the 7<sup>th</sup> Marquess and Marchioness were later painted by de László

<sup>44</sup> *Hansard* 13 May 1915

<sup>45</sup> NA HO 45/115 22/287235

<sup>46</sup> Antony Lentin, *Banker, Traitor, Scapegoat, Spy? The Troublesome Case of Sir Edgar Speyer*, Haus Books, London 2013, pp. 40-41

<sup>47</sup> NA HO 45/115 22/287235/52

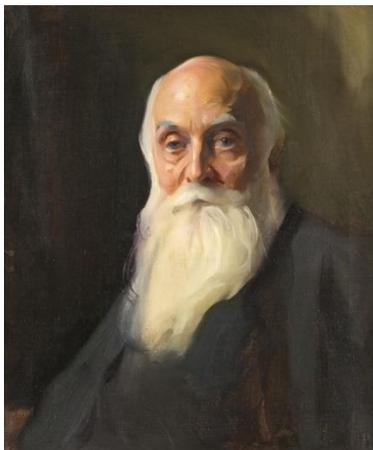
<sup>48</sup> *Vorarlberger Volksfreund*, 3 June 1915 also reported in *The Times* on 19 May

<sup>49</sup> Bird, *Alien Civilians*, p. 112

<sup>50</sup> Bird, *op cit.*, pp. 142, 236, 245-256

<sup>51</sup> Bird, *op cit.*, p. 19

On 22 May, Bottomley was braying again: ‘Lock ‘em up!’<sup>52</sup> The agents directed to deal with the new clamp down on aliens were led by Basil Thomson and Vernon Kell. Thomson was assistant head of Committee of Imperial Defence and as Assistant Commissioner (Crime) in charge of Special Branch. Kell led the newly founded MI5 that dealt with matters of state security. There was a rivalry between Kell the army officer and the policeman Thomson, but Kell needed Thomson because otherwise he had no power to arrest suspects.<sup>53</sup> They received help from Charles Bingham at the Bureau Central Interallié in Paris which included permanent representatives from Britain. The Home Office was well aware of how jumpy people had become about aliens and spies. On top of the losses on the Western Front and in the Dardanelles, the Germans had begun using poison gas against British troops. A Yorkshireman who had been denounced to the police because he had a funny accent was far from being an isolated incident.<sup>54</sup>



Professor The Reverend William Hechler 1923

One very dirty word was ‘pacifism.’ The Germans were seen to be promoting pacifism in the autumn of 1917. Thomson was particularly interested<sup>55</sup> and would have found some of de László’s contacts revealing: the Reverend Frederick Hankinson was a Unitarian Minister in Kentish Town who had been close to the Suffragettes and had visited some of them in prison. The Unitarians were an important group in Hungary and Hankinson was a frequent visitor to de László’s homeland. Young Hungarians found lodging at his house on Haverstock Hill and were thereby introduced to de László who was generous to a tee. De László’s friend the Reverend William Hechler was also suspect: half-German, he had been Anglican chaplain in Vienna and was a staunch Zionist. He had got on well with the Kaiser and his family. To give some idea of just

how fanatical MI5 was, the Congregationalist minister Thomas Evans Nicholas who preached against the ‘bloodhounds of war’ in Welsh Wales was relentlessly pursued by them. Kell referred to his ‘unsound opinions’ and accused him of ‘sedition.’<sup>56</sup>

### III

De László was concerned for his family in Budapest who depended upon their successful son and brother as their principal means of financial support. At the beginning of the conflict, de László was unable to access his bank account in Vienna and the painter had to find another means of providing for their needs. Later his Austrian bank account and investments, a total of £20,000 or £2,081,000 today, were sequestered by the government. One solution was the Dutch diplomatic bag, which was suggested to him by John Loudon the Dutch Minister for Foreign Affairs in London for a short period from the end of 1915 to 3 August 1916. Loudon’s sister, Adrienne van Riemsdijk, was the intermediary for the letters. Holland was a risky choice, for it was considered pro-Axis, and closely monitored: ‘Rotterdam was a regular

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<sup>52</sup> *John Bull*, 22 May 1915

<sup>53</sup> Andrew, *MI5*, p. 81

<sup>54</sup> NA HO 45/115 22/287235

<sup>55</sup> Andrew, *MI5*, p. 101

<sup>56</sup> NA KV/2/1750

nest of German spies.’<sup>57</sup> All post to Holland was censored but money transfers to neutral states were legal if passed via the Board of Trade,<sup>58</sup> but the cognisance of the Dutch foreign minister also to some extent validated the transfer of funds.



*John Loudon 1920*



*Madame Theodorus van Riemsdijk-Loudon, née Adriana  
Jacqueline Marie Loudon 1908*

On 16 Feb 1915, the postal censors intercepted a telegram that made mention of money destined for de László’s family. It was forwarded to the intelligence services in Watergate House. As de László was then in Bath, the local police investigated the matter. De László cooperated but MI5 believed that his explanation was insufficient. A postcard from Madame van Riemsdijk was intercepted on 18 June which revealed his use of the diplomatic bag. On 24 July, MI5 wanted to see his naturalisation certificate. His sponsors will have left MI5 in no doubt as to the prestige of de László’s contacts but they continued to monitor his correspondence.

Detective Constable Percy Isaac called on de László on 5 December 1916 to confront him about sending money to his family via Madrid. De László had tried to send £200 through Baron Conrad Meyendorff of the Russian Embassy there, who owed him £1,000 for a portrait. He had already been warned against sending money abroad by Bath Police - de László was notified that he would be charged under the Trading with the Enemy Act when that was passed in January 1917. The next day, 6 December, a plot backed by the Northcliffe press forced Asquith to resign in favour of Lloyd George. ‘Haldaneism’, associated with Lord Haldane, or leniency towards aliens, was now dead.<sup>59</sup> The maverick MP Noel Pemberton Billing joined in the witch-hunt against enemy aliens and Jews, even alleging the Kaiser was recruiting thousands of homosexuals to pervert British manhood.

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<sup>57</sup> Felstead, *Spies*, p. 62

<sup>58</sup> Phil Tomaselli, *The Spy Who Painted The Queen: The Secret Case Against Philip de László*, The History Press, Stroud, 2015, p. 28

<sup>59</sup> Lentin, *Speyer*, p. 76



Baron Conrad von Meyendorff 1914



David Lloyd George 1931

MI5 asked an accountant called Wyatt Williams to look into de László's bank account. Williams presented his report on 19 March 1917. He thought there was no case to answer for: de László was just a bit vague. It was possible that de László's transactions were against the law, but there was a great desire on Williams' part at least, to see de László as an innocent by nature who had committed the offences by oversight. MI5 was less sympathetic, and pointed out that de László was a British subject and that he had infringed the law. The case against de László became dramatically more serious on 7 July 1917, when MI5 received a report from Bureau Central Interallié which concerned a diplomatic passport-holder called 'Madame G', possibly at the Swiss Legation, who was also using the Dutch diplomatic bag to deliver information to the Austrians. On 12 July a Dutch subject informed the Austrian Secret Service that he or she was getting news from de László. The General Staff now wanted de László followed.<sup>60</sup>

MI5 was aware of who was going in and out of de László's studio.<sup>61</sup> Had they considered any of these individuals a danger to the realm they would have been arrested or interned by now. On 17 July, however, de László committed another act of gross imprudence. The Hungarian reserve officer Arpád Horn escaped from Donington Hall POW camp on 16 July. The next day he called on de László at his studio and said he had no money. Horn was staying at the Golden Cross Hotel in Trafalgar Square. De László asked how he might stay in such a grand hotel if he were without funds? According to de László's own testimony he thought Horn a nice young man and gave him £1 for food, but his conscience began to prick and 25 hours

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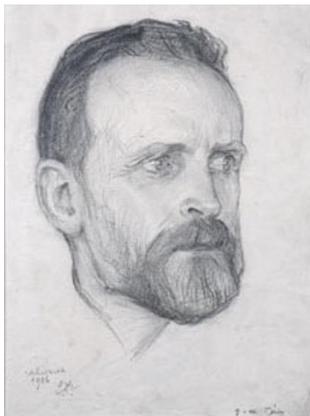
<sup>60</sup> NA HO4238-254.671.2a

<sup>61</sup> Tomaselli, *Secret Case*, p. 48

later (he should have reported the case within 24 hours), on 18 July, he went to the police and admitted giving Horn money at 12.30 pm on the previous day. He had also told Horn of other Hungarians who might have been helpful. The testimony is confused and not very convincing but he was able to inform the police that Horn was staying at the Golden Cross. Fortunately for de László, his tipoff led to Horn's arrest. Horn had £3 on him at the time.<sup>62</sup>

In an intercepted communication of 24 July, 'Madame G' said de László was connected to the Austro-Hungarian military attaché in Berne, Wilhelm von Einem, and that Einem was 'principally concerned with pacifist propaganda.'<sup>63</sup> The source for these revelations is presumed to have been an Italian raid on Colonel von Einem's office when a ton of papers were stolen. A letter (possibly from this horde) purports to be addressed to de László and talks of 'days when we were both bursting with youth' (it later transpired the correspondence was in Hungarian) and promises de László the 'restoration of his Hungarian nationality on the basis of services rendered.' The deal was that he should reveal details of the revolting treatment of German POWs in France and points to de László's report of 13 June which gave a 'true picture of England' – 'don't mention Madame G in your letters any more' – 'There is a highly placed personage who cannot forgive her for being the wife of an ambassador, seeing she was only a Jewess. Call on her frequently; what you can get from her is also worth having.'<sup>64</sup>

The report attributed to de László relayed maritime losses and mine production; that the King wanted the war to end and that Alsace-Lorraine was not worth fighting for. It intimated that de László was desperate to have his Hungarian nationality restored and that he had already sent in nearly 40 reports. De László, it explained, was a converted Jew with a wide social circle that included an entrée to the Pope, and the British and German courts. 'Hence he has a number of enemies, who made his life impossible in Hungary.' There was a note in the file saying that there was no doubt that de László received the letter. In a communication addressed to the German Legation of 16 July, 'Madame G' is named as 'Frau Gomperz' and is asked to tell de László to cease his activities because, according to the letter, de László 'had the feeling of being watched.'<sup>65</sup>



Dr Gábor de Térey 1906

Was one of de László's enemies seeking to frame him? Or was it MI5? Later de László thought it might have been his erstwhile friend Lippich, or the art historian Gábor de Térey. At first sight it would suggest someone close to the Dutch Legation, but no likely suspect was ever uncovered and the only ambassador who remotely fitted the bill was the Greek Gennadius. If these reports were really written by de László, the revelation would have been a bombshell, but it is very hard to imagine where de László might have gleaned information relating to mine production, shipping losses or even the true state of Britain. If he was getting it from his sitters, they were equally culpable by divulging military secrets to a naturalised British subject of enemy origin.

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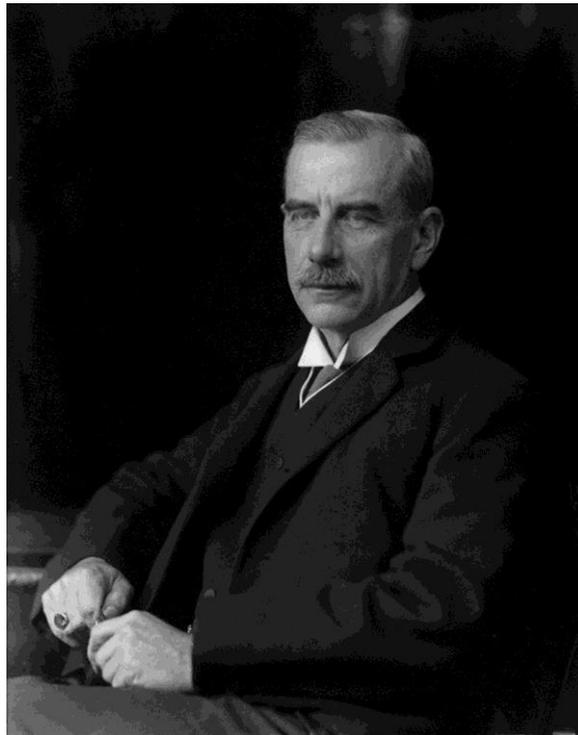
<sup>62</sup> Interrogation of de László, 15 August 1917, NA HO4238-254 671.2a

<sup>63</sup> NA HO4238-254.671.2a

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> NA HO4238-254.671.2a

We actually know quite a lot about the activities of the Austro-Hungarian Military Attaché in Berne from Peter Schubert's published doctoral dissertation of 1986. Wilhelm von Einem had a staff of forty and operated dozens of agents mostly directed against Italy. They specialised in falsifying documents and propaganda: appealing to Russian Jews and promoting 'defeatism' in Italy, France and Great Britain. They naturally played a big role in packing Lenin back to Russia in his sealed train.<sup>66</sup> Einem supported pacifist groups as well as those seeking national independence.<sup>67</sup> The Attaché's role, however, was modest outside Italy. Einem was responsible for breaking up a British spy ring in Switzerland revolving around a man called MacIntosh in which a Hungarian called Jacques Weiss, alias 'Esterhazy,' was involved.<sup>68</sup> The only known activity of Einem in Britain centred on the Argentinian Consulate in Glasgow. There were just five reports on Britain.<sup>69</sup> In the circumstances it seems unlikely that the correspondence originated in Berne.



Sir Basil Home Thomson 1920  
© National Portrait Gallery, London

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<sup>66</sup> Peter Schubert, *Die Tätigkeit des K u. K Militärattachés in Bern während des Ersten Weltkrieges*, Biblio Verlag Osnabrück, 1980, pp. 12, 16, 20, 29, 139

<sup>67</sup> Schubert, *Tätigkeit*, p. 140

<sup>68</sup> Schubert, *Tätigkeit*, p. 262

<sup>69</sup> Schubert, *Tätigkeit*, pp. 273-275

## IV

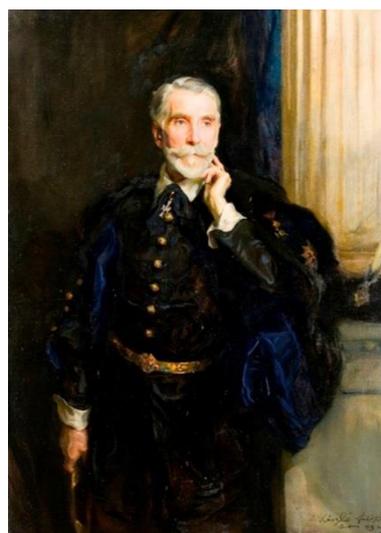
On 15 August 1917, de László was interrogated by Basil Thomson who had recently cut his teeth on Mata Hari and Sir Roger Casement. Much of the questioning seems to relate to



Field Marshal Frederick Sleigh,  
1st Earl Roberts of Kandahar 1911

points, important at the time, that seem fairly obvious now. The first was de László's alleged divided loyalty: did he want Britain and her allies to win the war, or would he have preferred the Axis powers to triumph? Did he still feel Hungarian, or was he now more British? On the face of it a man who grew up in Hungary and lived there for the first years of his life, who owed his first successes to Hungary and who had been ennobled by its king (Franz Joseph), was unlikely not to feel a few pangs of loyalty towards the country of his birth. At the time of his naturalisation, Field Marshal Lord Roberts had written to him to say 'you must be anxious... [you are] pulled both ways.'<sup>70</sup> If he had forgotten the country that succoured him, what sort of Briton was he likely to be? As it was, de László admitted to doubts. He wanted to be admired in his homeland. He was quite candid about his correspondence through Holland.<sup>71</sup>

De László talked of a concert pianist he visited in an internment camp where he had been sent after the *Lusitania* went down. He felt this man should not have been confined because no Englishmen were interned in Hungary. De László said that he was looked upon as a traitor in Hungary, and it is true that he had been thrown out of the Artists' Association.<sup>72</sup> Thomson challenged him on his desire to resume Hungarian nationality after the war, but de László disputed this. They were interested in the letters to Baron Gyula Forster, the Hungarian patron of the arts and 'vice-president of all the art societies in Hungary' who had helped secure de László's ennoblement. He had sat for de László in 1913 when he visited London and they had discussed his naturalisation at the time. Forster had – apparently – approved.<sup>73</sup> Thomson said de László's letters to Forster had passed via the Dutch bag. De László lost his temper here and Thomson reminded him 'It is a very serious matter. Here you are corresponding with an enemy using a legation bag.' Thomson came to the point: on 30 May, de László sent information to Forster and wanted to recover his nationality by providing 'political information on the state of the country.' De László denied this. Thomson wanted to know if Forster asked him about the treatment of German POWs in France? Why would Forster have asked? How would de László have known? Why would de László have cared?



Baron Gyula Forster 1913

<sup>70</sup> Correspondence and papers of Philip de László, National Portrait Gallery (hereafter NPG), letter from Lord Roberts to de László, 14 August 1914

<sup>71</sup> The minutes (passim) of the interrogation are at NA HO 4238 254 671/2a

<sup>72</sup> NPG, letter from Forster to de László, 8 April 1917

<sup>73</sup> Hart-Davis, 139; Owen Rutter, *Portrait of a Painter: The Authorized Life of Philip de László*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1939, pp. 274-275, 293



Marczell 'Marczi' László 1920

On the more serious matter of the information gleaned from Berne, the interrogators asked him about Switzerland in the hope of trapping him. Switzerland like Holland was a neutral country, and could be seen as a place where letters might be redirected. Unlike Holland, however, de László maintained he had no friends there. They asked him about 'Madame G'. It didn't ring a bell. He thought it might be someone in the *Corps Diplomatique*. They coaxed him, telling him that this person was of 'Jewish extraction.' He said he did not use initials to describe people. Pressed, he could only think of a relative of the Rothschilds, and that she was not Jewish. He also recalled that he had had a letter from Baron Forster via Forster's wife, who had been in Switzerland. She had written to Lucy but they had destroyed her letters. They pushed him regarding Baron Meyendorff who was supposed to have forwarded £200 to de László's brother Marczi, living in Budapest. 'They were going back to Zurich where they always lived in the summer. His wife has property there and his brother is I think in the Russian Embassy there.'

Thomson again suggested that he had described the political situation in England. (De László: 'never in my life'). Thomson then said if somebody wrote about this would they be trying to trap him? It is a question that does not receive an adequate response from either side. De László was then questioned about the duchesse de 'Guise.' Thomson meant 'Guiche' – the subsidiary title of the ducs de Gramont. The duchess (née Rothschild), wife of Agénor, 11th duc de Gramont, had died in 1905. The duke's son Armand, duc de Guiche, was a close friend of the de Lászlós, and his most loyal French patron, who thought de László 'clairement innocent.'<sup>74</sup> Thomson made the strange suggestion that the duchess might be the elusive 'Madame G.' Thomson then tried a few more people including the wife of the Swiss minister in France before asking about 'Madame Gompertz, the daughter of an Austrian banker.' He also mentioned a Madame Carlin. There was indeed a Madame Carlin, daughter of the Jewish Viennese industrialist Max Ritter von Gomperz and the wife of the Swiss minister in London, Gaston Carlin, later Ambassador to Berlin, but she is not remembered as having been a spy of any sort.<sup>75</sup> De László denied knowing any Mesdames 'G' or Gomperz, but Thomson's tactics are transparent: 'we have definite information that you have been conveying information to the enemy...' In ordinary circumstances that would surely mean arrest? What was he waiting for? He clearly had no such 'definite' information.

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<sup>74</sup> NPG, letter from the duc de Guiche to de László, 9 February 1919

<sup>75</sup> Georg Gaugusch, *Wer einmal war: das jüdische Grossbürgertum Wiens 1800-1938*, vol. 1, Amalthea, Vienna, 2011, p. 975



Agénor, 11th duc de Gramont 1902

Armand, duc de Guiche 1913

The interrogation of 15 August resumed at 5 pm. De László was questioned about a letter written to Geneva on 30 May. On the same day something had been rubbed out of de László's diary. De László seemed to have no problem fielding that ball. He said it was a sitter whose sitting had been rearranged. Thomson wanted to know about Baron Bruno Schröder. Schröder was in much the same position as de László. It was clear that de László knew Schröder. He admitted having painted him and his wife and children ten years before. Thomson returned to the Geneva tack and read him a letter. Pencilled in was the date 14 June 1917. He said it was 'a French translation... because the original was not written in French... It is addressed to you at 3, Palace Gate ('letter read to him').' De László denied having received it and knowing who could have written it. Thomson refused to let go: 'I think it is right to tell you that we have further information to this effect that in these letters you gave the exact date of the loss of English ships, the figures and statistics relative to the critical situation on account of the mines and particularly the gossip about the King's view of the war.' De László continued to deny all knowledge of this. He said he might have hoped for peace in a letter to his brother but he never mentioned war.

Apparently the fact that de László was born of Jewish parents had some bearing on the case: 'I want to ask you one personal question which might throw some light on this. As a matter of fact is yours a Magyar family, or was it originally Hebrew? De László's reply is honest enough: 'Originally Hebrew, always living in Hungary.' Thomson does not say why this might 'throw some light' on the case, but many people at the time saw the Jews as being devoid of national loyalties or patriotic feelings. The idea of a 'Jewish world conspiracy' had also been hatched in Tsarist Russia before the war and blossomed in the immediate post-war years with the aid of a literary forgery called *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. In Thomson's eyes, de László's race might have made him more suspicious and more likely to be a traitor. Many of the others pursued by the service at the time, Cassel and Speyer to name but two, were also born Jews.

That subject was dropped but Thomson returned to de László's loyalties: he was trying to impress the Hungarians in order to get his nationality back after the war. De László mentioned Szebenyei, the *Morning Post* journalist whom Forster had warned him against – presumably on his visit to London. Szebenyei had brought him some material and tried to blackmail him. He wanted him to answer 'all these untruths': accusations levelled at him by art circles in Budapest, who had charged him with disloyalty and stripped him of his membership to the Nemzeti Szalon (National Salon), of which de László had once been Vice-President.<sup>76</sup> This was the national forum for the arts in Budapest, of which he had once been Vice-President, and he did not exhibit there again until 1924. De László had agreed to write a letter which he maintained was not published in the newspapers in Hungary but only as a pamphlet. It was an apologia for his change of nationality but he denied that it was a plea for the return of his Hungarian nationality. In fact, a letter from de László had been quoted in the Hungarian press, and the letter had found its way into the *Star* on 17 November 1914.

Thomson became soft again. It was that cigarette moment. He moderated his tone – saying how important it was to clear this matter up. De László said he could not account for the French letter. Forster's letters were in French 'because he was so anti-German.' Thomson was not referring to Forster, but to 'Madame G.' He had been told that the incriminating letter had merely been *translated* into French. Forster had defended him at the Art Society against the politician Count Andrassy, the President of the Art Society and leader of the opposition who had accused him of disloyalty in taking out British nationality. De László's brother had witnessed the scene and had been able to produce a letter from two years before the war announcing his intention to become British.

Towards the end of the interview, de László said something that was uncharacteristically canny and altogether to the point: he told the committee they would never find anything in his own hand alluding to the conduct of the war. This seems to have been quite true, for if Thomson really had the evidence to convict de László of espionage he would hardly have allowed such an important spy to return – as he did - to his rented summer lodgings at Churchmead House near Windsor.

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<sup>76</sup> *Linzer Volksblatt*, 28 May 1914



Mrs Charles d'Orbán, née Constance Emily Hill  
1916

Two weeks later, on 29 August, de László was interrogated for a second time. This time Vernon Kell of MI5 sat in. Thomson started by asking de László about his view that the Russians had started the war. This was the Axis view and not one that was widely shared in Britain then or now, even if it is and was perfectly cogent. De László's contact with a young Hungarian student called Eugene de Weress were put under the microscope. Weress was another of Hankinson's foundlings. He was engaged to a niece of Lucy de László, Constance Hill, who had no high opinion of Hankinson, whom she saw as 'utterly unscrupulous' and a mischief-maker.<sup>77</sup> De Weress was interned and the engagement broken off. Thomson was once again interested in de László's relationship with a number of cranks and pacifists.

Many of the questions were simply refinements of those asked a fortnight before. Thomson wanted to ask him about his motives for becoming naturalised. De László talked about 'that man' (Szebenyei) who made trouble and told the papers he had been naturalised, implying that he would rather that the story had never leaked out. According to de László, that was at the end of September. (Most of the Austrian papers carried the story from the middle of October). It was a great shock for de László to be attacked in Hungary. He said his pictures had been taken down and re-hung in the foreign section. He had indeed been expelled from the Artists' Association.

Thomson's next attack went home. He read him the damning cutting from the *Star* which quotes the artist reflecting on his naturalisation: "It cost me severe mental conflict but on account of my five sons I had to do it."<sup>78</sup> De László denied writing 'that letter' (he had). This exchange dealt with whether de László felt loyalty for Britain or Hungary and whether he intended to crawl back to Hungary after the war. This must have been a lesser charge than espionage and an unfair question. Thomson put it that de László had a 'divided allegiance.' Thomson thought that de László should have divested himself of his foreign title. For a man of de László's background to be able to call himself 'László de Lombos' and transmit the title to his sons was a huge achievement. It was not an honour he would have found easy to relinquish.

MI5 had found a packet of cuttings and accused de László of having assembled them. They featured 'air raids, sinking of a cruiser, revolution in Russia, trouble in Greece, peace pamphlets etc.' Thomson wanted to know why de László had kept these. It transpired that the cuttings had been brought to him by 'Old Professor Hechler.' Thomson believed that Hechler was seditious: 'Is he a socialist?', he asked. He wanted to nail de László as a pacifist. Hechler had taught the children of the Duke of Teck, presumably including Queen Mary. 'He goes to all kinds of meetings.' He also talked about a Baron Otto von Schleinitz, living in London, who had written a book about de László.<sup>79</sup> Schleinitz had died in 1916 but his widow and daughter still visited and brought him German newspapers. Hankinson was also sending him

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<sup>77</sup> NPG, letter from Constance Hill of 5 February, undated

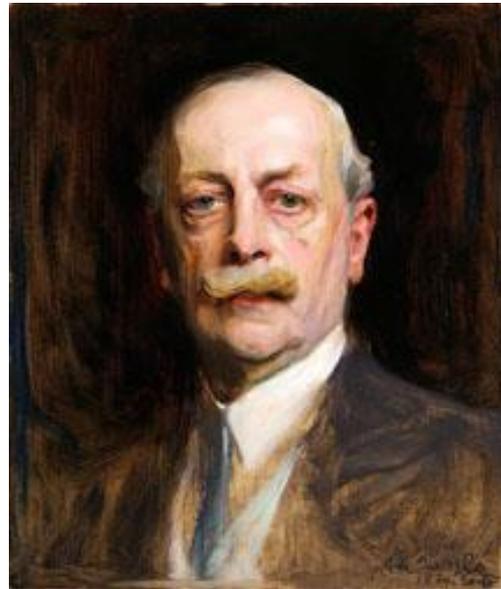
<sup>78</sup> NPG, *The Star*, "Painter of Many Kings," 17 November 1914

<sup>79</sup> Schleinitz, O. von, *Künstler-Monographien vol.106: Ph. A. von László*, Velhagen & Klasing, Bielefeld und Leipzig, 1913

material of the same sort and probably socialist and pacifist pamphlets.<sup>80</sup> Thomson accused him of pacifism. He denied this but said he would like to see Hungary achieve independence from Austria after the war. They were returning to de László's loyalty again: he had cast doubts on America's usefulness to one of his sitters: 'I am in an awful position in my studio. I see so many people and one talks.' De László's 'babbling' while he painted was now being scrutinised. The MI5 agents had been interviewing his sitters.



Baron Otto von Schleinitz 1913



Lieutenant Colonel Charles à Court Repington 1920

On another occasion de László had said it was 'the supreme moment to Great Britain to make peace... that she had got all she wanted... If the Russians had stood firm they would have come in like a wedge between her and her eastern powers.' He had talked about the war to *The Times* war correspondent Colonel Repington, who admired his work (one wonders what other form of small talk would have been appropriate with Repington?). Thomson continued trying to pin de László down on pacifism, but as he later explained, this is because he believed his loyalties were divided. This was probably a sign that MI5 was determined to intern him. De László said quite understandably that he could not hate Hungary; that Hungary did not start the war. He hoped Hungary would become free of Austria.

After the second interrogation, Vernon Kell wrote a report to the Home Secretary recommending that de László be interned.<sup>81</sup> Kell maintained that the elusive 'Madame G' was in England. The Austrian Secret Services in Switzerland 'were receiving information from a Dutch subject who, in turn, received by him from de László [,] stated by them to be a person who moved in official English circles...' In July one of Thomson's agents obtained a copy of a translation of a letter written in Hungarian by a Hungarian representative in Switzerland to de László together with enclosure which encouraged de László to believe that he would regain Hungarian nationality: 'he is thanked for the numerous and valuable reports which he has sent from England to Hungary since the war started, through the medium of some person in Holland, and that he is evidently regarded by the writer as a valuable and trustworthy Hungarian agent in this country.' De László was considered suspect because he

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<sup>80</sup> A number of these are included in the NPG material

<sup>81</sup> NA HO4238-254.671.2a

wanted Austria-Hungary to stop fighting. It is hard to imagine why this should have worried the British authorities? The desertion of their allies would have made it more difficult for the Germans to continue. ‘Madame G’ was never traced.

There was evidence not used in the interrogation: a Mrs Wanda Max-Müller reported that de László had persisted in talking about politics even to Thomson’s agents and was anti-Serbian and anti-Russian, keen that Britain should make peace. Mrs Max-Müller was a Norwegian-born woman with the German-sounding maiden name of Heiberg. She was married to an ambitious diplomat called William Grenfell Max-Müller whose father was German. There is evidence she might not have been entirely objective. It transpired that she had an animus against de László and she might have wanted to show how patriotic she was in the circumstances. Her husband had also upset the artist’s wife. Her name was later struck out of de László’s *Sitters’ Book*, with ‘Manifestation of Perfidy’ entered above it. An unnamed sitter who was employed in the output department at the Ministry of Munitions (‘a well-known public man who does not wish to appear’) was asked what production amounted to at the present time and what was the consumption (of munitions?) in France? The source points to a senior civil servant, but one who did not wish to give evidence to the committee. His affidavit therefore carried no weight in law.



*Mrs Wanda (later Lady) Max-Müller 1915*

Kell added an unsympathetic biography of de László, who was the ‘son of a Jew tailor.’ His brother was ‘an Austrian Jew tailor.’ His money was safe in an Austrian bank (this had been in fact been seized by the government there). Kell says he had an annual income of £12,000 and about £32,000 invested. De László believed the Russians, and not the Kaiser, started the war. He helped an escaped Hungarian internee. He was connected with the ‘notorious’ Frederick Lawrence Rawson – a Christian Scientist and suspected pacifist who said he had a method of sending people into the trenches and they would be guaranteed to come back alive. Rawson was also under investigation and must have been linked to Hankinson.<sup>82</sup> They clearly thought the Dutch diplomatic bag could have been used for more important correspondence but lacked proof. As for the ‘incriminating’ letters from the Austrian military attaché in Berne: the French did not want their source to be exposed. A further letter seemed to point to de László being a disseminator of pacifist propaganda.<sup>83</sup>

If MI5 could not intern de László for pacifism and divided loyalties they had a good chance of convincing the authorities that he had abused the diplomatic bag. This constituted secret contact with the enemy. It was a far less significant charge than that contained in the interrogation of the middle of the month, but de László was clearly guilty on this count and he was admitted to Brixton Prison on 21 September 1917. In some ways it was remarkable that he had managed to avoid arrest for nearly three years. Austrian reports on de László’s internment were singularly lacking in the vituperative tone apparently adopted in his native

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<sup>82</sup> NPG, letter to de László of 29 January 1917

<sup>83</sup> NA HO4238-254.671.2a

Hungary. His imprisonment in Brixton was recorded just five days later.<sup>84</sup> The following month, the same source reported that de László's actions were harmless – and that even the Northcliffe press agreed and that he was likely to be released soon.<sup>85</sup> A little confusion crept in a few days later when the paper said de László was nearly 70 [*sic*], and was not naturalised; and that he was one of the few Hungarians to be free to see people; and that he had been sending unimportant communications through the diplomatic bag.<sup>86</sup>

Kell's report failed to convince the judicial committee that de László was a spy. 'At this stage of the case the question whether de László should be prosecuted for the breaches of the Defence of the Realm Regulations which he had committed was very carefully considered in consultation with the Director of Public Prosecutions. It was decided that the actual offences were, in themselves, comparatively insignificant when compared to the other, and infinitely more serious offence which he was very seriously suspected of having committed, and it was essential in the interests of public safety that de László should be interned for the duration of the war.' He was 'not to be trusted.'



Sir Austen Chamberlain 1913

De László appealed against his confinement. After the appeal it was noted that de László did 'hear gossip and may repeat it.' His defenders cast him as an excitable, highly strung man with a tendency to babble: the politician Austen Chamberlain, for example, regretted the painter's 'indiscretion.'<sup>87</sup> The committee reviewing de László's internment rejected the higher charge on the basis of the examination of the documents. The committee was composed of legal men, and they quashed MI5's evidence on the following grounds: they had no proof; they had no proof that the incriminating letters ever reached de László; that even if the original correspondence were presented 'it might have been fraudulently prepared... by someone who desires to do László a bad turn' 'by someone who desired to sow the seeds of discord between England and France and took this very clever and adroit way of doing it'. The judgement was neither half-hearted nor lenient. As they put it - 'It goes without saying that if the contents of the letter are true, László's punishment ought not to be internment but the severest penalty which the law can inflict.' But... there was 'no object proof... No very strong grounds for suspicion.' Replying to a question in the Commons, the Home Secretary Sir George Cave said there was 'no legal evidence' that de László was a spy.<sup>88</sup> His wagging tongue was the main case against him: 'no member of the committee is desirous of interning an artist of international standing for any length of time if it can possibly be avoided.'

'Madame G' and the accusations of espionage levelled at de László had failed to impress and in the end, the MI5 evidence was not used in the denaturalisation proceedings which followed

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<sup>84</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 26 September 1917

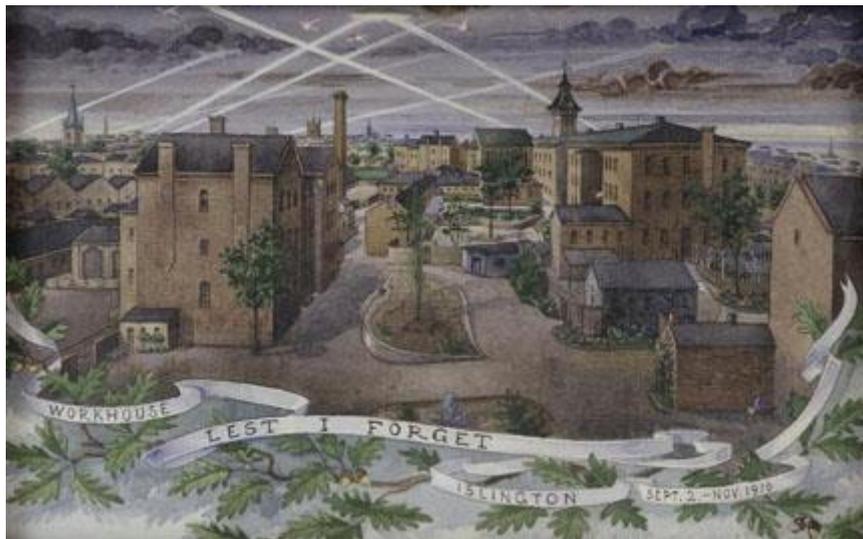
<sup>85</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 4 October 1917

<sup>86</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 12 October 1917

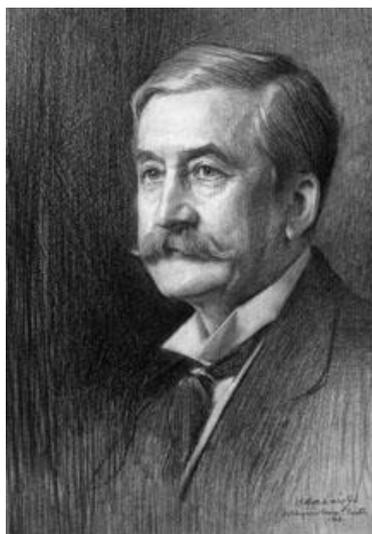
<sup>87</sup> NPG, 22 May 1918

<sup>88</sup> Hansard, 18 October 1917

in 1919. In November 1917, after seven weeks in severe conditions at Brixton, he successfully appealed against his incarceration there and was moved to the old Islington Workhouse for the next seven months. Here he was treated rather better and was permitted to draw and paint in watercolour. He became friends with the industrialist Theodore Kittel and the lawyer Friedrich Braune, both of whom he presented with a portrait drawing. Islington camp in Cornwallis Road, Holloway was commanded by Robert Luck and held ‘other naturalised Britons’ and enemy aliens with British wives. On 5 September 1916, it numbered 81 prisoners under 50 and 28 Germans plus another five of unspecified nationality. De László would have seen Hankinson there, as he was a permitted prison visitor. Those interned were from a variety of professions including bakers, waiters, barbers, butchers, tailors and clerks. There was just one Hungarian. This was possibly ‘J Adler.’<sup>89</sup>



*Islington Internment Camp, Cornwallis Road, Holloway*  
© IWM (EPH 1882)



*Theodore Bruno Kittel 1918*



*Friedrich Wilhelm Braune 1918*

<sup>89</sup> NA HO45/115 22/ 287 235/68

Among the Article 14B cases in 1915 was Graeme Scott (see below), under suspicion for being too friendly towards the German military attaché in The Hague. His name figured in de László's address book, but it was unlikely he was still there when de László was interned. An F Schmidt was considered of 'national importance.' When de László arrived he was accorded certain privileges, given a room and the use of the servant of Walter Baron von Bissing (half-brother of the notorious German governor of Belgium who had ordered Edith Cavell's execution). Other inmates included the South African Eric Whytehead formerly 'Weiskopf,' a naturalised Bohemian chemist and explosives expert who changed his name by deed poll on 1 September 1914.<sup>90</sup> There was Nicholas Ahlers too, the former German Consul in Sunderland, who had been condemned to death for helping Germans leave the country, but subsequently reprieved. There are incidentally remarkably few pictures of the buildings, but one anonymous POW painted the camp during a raid by a German Zeppelin.<sup>91</sup>

## V



Hans Heinrich XI, Fürst und Herzog von Pless,  
Herzog von Hochberg 1900

MI5 had not given up hope of indicting de László on more serious charges and they went to work on his address book which yielded 29 names that figured in MI5 files.<sup>92</sup> Many of them were simply enemy aliens – Germans, Austrians and Hungarians – who lived or had lived in Britain. Others (Werres and Henrik Loeffler for example – he had painted Loeffler's wife) had been mentioned in the interrogations, such as József Szebenyei of Golders Green, who was accused of using forged letters purporting to come from Hungary to write pro-peace articles. He was interned. 'Graham' [Graeme] Scott was detained under DORA and suspected of being a German spy. As mentioned, he was also imprisoned in Holloway and billeted with the German socialist Ferdinand Kehrhahn. In November 1916, Scott, Kehrhahn and another internee called Hodgson escaped. They were recaptured. Also in the book was the name Wilhelm von Mallinckrodt, who had been expelled from Belgium at the beginning of the war for being a German agent. Others were investigated but none proved to have been an enemy agent. They were presumably mostly sitters or prospective ones – an [obscure] painter called Georg Lauter; the Kaiser's scandalous friend Phil Eulenburg; Hans Heinrich von Pless; the German banker Max Grunelius; Baron François Rodolphe d'Erlanger (a naturalised British subject living in Tunis); Sir Francis Trippel, alias Franz Heinrich Trippel of St James's Street - former secretary to Sir Max Waechter, German entrepreneur, art collector and philanthropist - MI5 found Trippel most suspicious. Bruno Schröder was naturally there too; and the pacifist Robert Dell who worked in Paris for the *Manchester Guardian*. On 20 December 1917, the Committee decided that the address book made no difference. De László remained confined in Islington.

<sup>90</sup> *The London Gazette*, 18 September 1914, with thanks to Christopher Wentworth-Stanley for the clarification.

<sup>91</sup> [http://www.islingtontribune.com/sites/all/files/nj\\_islington/imagecache/main\\_img/images/news/WorkhouseLe%20I%20Forget.jpg](http://www.islingtontribune.com/sites/all/files/nj_islington/imagecache/main_img/images/news/WorkhouseLe%20I%20Forget.jpg)

<sup>92</sup> NA HO4238/254/671



Sir Charles Russell, 1st Baronet 1919

On 8 August 1918, Westminster passed the British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act allowing for the review of any naturalisations that had been accepted since the beginning of the war. These might be subject to revocation. The result was that de László and every other alien naturalised since August 1914 had to have their papers examined. By that stage his lawyers seemed more sympathetic to de László's view that it was just a 'common police trap', but his solicitor, Sir Charles Russell warned him not to accuse MI5. He thought it would not help his case.<sup>93</sup> De László thought that Hankinson might be involved, as he had boasted of a Unitarian friend at the 'Yard.'<sup>94</sup> A three-man committee was formed and notices in the press asked naturalised aliens to come forward and at the same time encouraged members of the public to alert the committee. Former aliens had to give details of property and family in enemy states. De László's letters to his friends and family via Madame van Riemsdijk were collated in Hungary. Communications with the enemy were seen as the deciding factor for denaturalisation. If the principle of *nulla poena sine lege* was applied de László's letters, it could not have been taken into consideration as they were written prior to the enactment of the law.<sup>95</sup>

The attitude towards aliens in Britain was more bitter than ever. On 11 July 1918 the *Evening News* announced it was 'enemy alien week;' a rally was held in Trafalgar Square and placards read 'intern them all'. The King was furious and said he should be interned before Cassel and Speyer, as his blood was German.<sup>96</sup> On 24 August a massive petition was prepared and delivered to Downing Street. Vigilante groups went hunting for German spies. On 1 September 1918 there were 208 Hungarians at liberty in London. In Austria, rumours ran riot that de László was to be imprisoned in the Tower and possibly executed. In August the Austrian press learned that de László had been ill and had been moved to a nursing home (which had happened in May).<sup>97</sup> By 17 September 1918, however, the tone had changed dramatically: it was reported that he had been sentenced to 11 years imprisonment by a secret court for passing secrets to the enemy through a neutral country. He had only been saved from execution by the intervention of the King.<sup>98</sup> On the same day, the *Neue Freie Presse* added that only the intercession of the Duchess of Sutherland had



Eileen, Duchess of Sutherland 1913

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<sup>93</sup> NPG, 16 June 1919

<sup>94</sup> NPG, 12 June 1919

<sup>95</sup> 'No penalty without a law'

<sup>96</sup> Lentin, *Speyer*, p. 79

<sup>97</sup> *Linzer Volksblatt*, 14 August 1918

<sup>98</sup> *Fremdenblatt*, 17 September 1918

prevented his execution, and that two of his sons, serving in the army, had been broken in rank.<sup>99</sup> Felix Salten had received the same information.<sup>100</sup> Salten, a Jew born in Budapest the same year as de László, played on the motto de László had adopted when he was ennobled in 1912: *veritas vincit* – ‘the truth will prevail.’<sup>101</sup> De László’s tragedy would be irresistible for the novelist: his birth in poverty, his rise, his success, his association with royalty and his standing in the courts of Europe, and then this recent fall from grace. The King and Queen, said Salten, had spared de László the noose. Salten did not give too much credence to the case against de László for all that: why would he have felt the desire? He asked. When would he have found the time? He was guilty of one thing only: of being a ‘refugee from his blood.’

## VI

In the country at large, negative attitudes to de László and some other naturalised Britons in no way altered with the cessation of hostilities in November. On 15 April 1919 Sir Richard Cooper echoed *John Bull* in asking why the painter had not been shot as a spy. *John Bull* demanded to know what MI5 had unearthed on de László.<sup>102</sup> Later Bottomley challenged de László to sue for libel.<sup>103</sup> Both mentioned reports sent to the enemy. De László’s destiny was debated in the Lords on 28 May, when some negative attitudes were ascribed to ‘artistic jealousy.’<sup>104</sup> On 29 July, after the satisfactory termination of the Denaturalisation Tribunal, the Home Secretary, Sir Edward Shortt, proclaimed the harmlessness of de László, and stressed that the earlier investigation and the tribunal had been convoked to different ends.<sup>105</sup> De László doubtless suffered greatly from the accusations levelled at him during the war. Like Speyer, his children were rejected by their chosen schools, although the headmaster of Rugby behaved honourably, welcoming two de László boys when an Eton housemaster spurned them; as indeed did the old Etonian Basil Thomson, who had offered to write to the headmaster of Eton on Lucy’s behalf.<sup>106</sup> De László had another hurdle in the denaturalisation case; but if sections of the press and public were still baying for his blood, the case had lost its fizz. While the intelligence services believed that de László was a dangerous man, they still had no ‘smoking gun’ even if he was – in their opinion – ‘a deliberate and cynical agent of an enemy power acting as both a source of important high-level intelligence and a peace propaganda source, spreading ill-will towards Britain’s allies and undermining the morale of his important clients among Britain’s elite.’<sup>107</sup>

The prosecution’s case before the Denaturalisation Committee was flawed. They could not provide the ‘French evidence’ (whatever that was, given no original documents had been produced) without permission from France— i.e. the two letters that claimed to prove László was a spy. Half de László’s correspondence had disappeared from the MI5 file - much to de

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<sup>99</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 17 September 1918 The artist’s sons were too young to enlist

<sup>100</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 22 September 1918

<sup>101</sup> His grant of arms and motto were recorded by the College of Arms in London in 1923

<sup>102</sup> *John Bull*, 24 May 1919

<sup>103</sup> *John Bull*, 5 July 1919

<sup>104</sup> *Hansard*, 28 May 1919

<sup>105</sup> *Hansard*, 29 July 1919

<sup>106</sup> NPG Trunk, letter from Thomson to Lucy, 8 February 1918. Lucy took Thomson up on the suggestion: Letter from Lucy to Thomson, 10 February 1918; Lentin, *Speyer*, p. 53

<sup>107</sup> Tomaselli, *Secret Case*, pp. 7-8

László's advantage - but no one has suggested he might have stolen it à la 'Watergate' - and two prosecution witnesses, Mrs Max-Müller and Henry Vincent Higgins – solicitor and manager of the Covent Garden Opera House – no longer wished to give evidence. Sir Charles Russell thought the latter an 'agent provocateur' working for Scotland Yard.<sup>108</sup>

De László's hearing took place on 23 June 1919, and the verdict was delivered five days later. The three-man committee was identical to that which later denaturalised Sir Edgar Speyer, 21 former German, four former Austro-Hungarians and one Turk: the Hon Mr Justice Salter, Viscount Hambledon, and His Honour Judge Radcliffe. The Attorney General Sir Gordon Hewart appeared for the prosecution,<sup>109</sup> together with Sir Archibald Bodkin and G A H Brandon. De László's defence team consisted of the former Home Secretary Sir John Simon, Harold Murphy and John Wylie.<sup>110</sup> The committee took fifteen minutes to throw out the case. De László's undoubted misdemeanours no longer interested them. In other cases, there appeared to be the volition to convict – when it came to Sir Edgar Speyer, they clearly wanted the result they obtained. The indictment was more or less the same, the legal team and the judges almost identical.<sup>111</sup>

De László came under suspicion because he made use of the Dutch diplomatic bag, something that was of questionable legality. It is possible that others were using the bag, and that their reasons were less innocent. De László also gave money to an escaped Hungarian POW and failed to report the matter for more than 24 hours. Both these actions and the fact that he continued 'communicating with the enemy' after he had been warned not to, would normally have resulted in internment, given the climate of thinking of the time. The two illegal or quasi-illegal acts led MI5 to investigate his affairs. They discovered that the man who had come to Britain at the age of 38 had divided loyalties and interpreted the origins of the crisis in an Hungarian way. They also learned that he had dealings with pacifists and muddleheads who had brought him the sort of newspaper cuttings that might be read in any neutral country. MI5 wanted to construct a more serious case against him from that moment on and claimed to have the proof. If that was the case, they never produced it and they never managed to convince the legal authorities that de László had one to answer. It may be that they fabricated evidence, or that someone else did. They may have been worried that the documents they had would backfire if they came under proper scrutiny. None of the names thrown up by the enquiry pointed to a serious player in the world of espionage.

It would seem that de László was just one of the hundreds and thousands of foreign gentlemen who fell victim to the spy fever that rampaged through the streets of Britain during the Great War.

***The author is grateful to Katherine Field, Senior Editor of the De László Catalogue Raisonné, for her supporting research and contributions to this essay.***

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<sup>108</sup> NPG Trunk, 16 June 1919

<sup>109</sup> Hewart's sister (later Attorney General and 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Hewart 1870-1943) was married to the portrait painter John St Hélier Lander

<sup>110</sup> The lawyer and historian Harold Murphy (1882-1942) was the son of the Irish High Court Judge James Murphy. He had been called to the Irish Bar in 1906 and the English one in 1910. He served in the Royal Navy in the Great War. He was made an Inner Temple bencher in 1934 and a KC in 1936. John Wylie, admitted to Middle Temple 1907 and called to the Bar aged 40 in 1908, was a former solicitor from Castle Brae in Dumfries

<sup>111</sup> Lentin, *Speyer*, p. 96

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*Self-portrait with his wife Lucy and their son Henry painted while under house arrest at Ladbroke Gardens Nursing Home* 1918  
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*Sir Philip Albert Gustave David Sassoon, 3rd Baron Sassoon* 1915  
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