

PRINCE OF PROPAGANDA

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By Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 18 March 2023

Hans Josef Lazar was a First World War hero who was awarded six medals, including the Austrian Iron Cross.

Lazar then became foreign correspondent for Austrian and German publications in the '20s and the '30s. He also spied for Germany and was briefly in the German diplomatic corps.

Lazar became head of the German propaganda operations in Spain at the start of the Second World War and employed 432 people. As such, he built the most effective propaganda apparatus the Third Reich had abroad.

After the Axis defeat, Spain helped Lazar elude Nazi hunters who considered him a most wanted Nazi agents.

Lazar was Armenian, although Wikipedia bizarrely claims he was a Jew based on his looks. Lazar was "dark and looked Oriental," according to contemporaries.

This is the way a recent article about Lazar (*History Today*, Feb. 2023) titled "The Nazi Spy in the Spanish Press") began: "Who was Hans Josef Lazar? The short answer is a small, seemingly inoffensive Austrian national of Armenian origin who arrived in Spain in 1938, ostensibly on vacation, and soon became a representative of German news agency, Transocean."

Soon after, he headed the German propaganda mission in Spain and remained in charge during the entire Second World War. Although his enemies and rivals portrayed him as sinister ("dark-skin, small mustache, monocle, dark clothes and shoes, an individual of Oriental extraction of undesirable presence and reputation") Lazar could charm a snake if he put his mind to it.

Because of his warm relations with high officials in the Spanish government, the Phalange party, publisher and editors of major newspapers, most Spanish newspapers frequently published pro-German and anti-British articles. In addition to his permanent charm offensive, Lazar bribed reporters and publishers. Of his annual 200,000 pesetas propaganda budget, he spent 175,000 pesetas to bribe journalists. It was money well invested: the Spanish press printed countless war articles in favor of Germany and hostile towards Britain. As a result, Hitler stated that the Spanish press was the best in the world.



Although Germany already had a team of propaganda agents in Spain, Lazar and the German ambassador plotted to get rid of their predecessors because of policy differences. The existing team's goal was to persuade Spain to enter the war on the Axis side. Lazar and the ambassador didn't see any benefit in dragging Franco's Spain into the war. Their priority was to protect Germany's economic assets in the Iberian Peninsula, ensure the supply of raw materials to the German war effort, and help stabilize the Franco regime and the Phalange. Finally, they wanted to convert Spain into a bridgehead for German interests in North Africa and South America. His years as an Abwehr

spy (he was known as the best informant and the 'Arian Armenian') came in handy as he guided German propaganda. To gain public backing for Germany, Lazar and the ambassador also placed pro-German articles in newspapers, distributed propaganda pamphlets, leaflets, and information sheets.

Meanwhile, Lazar and his Romanian aristocrat wife (Baroness Elena Petrino Borkowski) lived in the lap of luxury and decorated their mansion with Gothic and Byzantine art. Anti-Lazar reports to Berlin by the Gestapo and other Nazis stationed in Spain failed to dislodge Lazar from his post.

Lazar was born in Constantinople in 1895. His Armenian father was a dragoman for the Austrian embassy. At the age of twenty, Lazar went to law school in Vienna but had to drop his studies when he was recruited in the army and sent to the war front. After suffering severe injuries, he spent many months in hospital. Because his medical treatment was less than adequate, he left the hospital with a drug habit. Throughout the rest of his life he took cocaine and morphine to reduce the various pains.

Despite his unhealed wounds, he rejoined the army in 1918 and was sent to Constantinople. Although the Armenian Genocide was still going on, Lazar worked with the Turks. After the war, he freelanced for Austrian and German publications. There's no record as to whether he referred to the genocide in his writings.

As the Axis lost ground in the war, Lazar's position became less secure. Spain's new foreign minister banned the expression of pro-Axis sentiment in the press. There was no more room for Lazar's activities. Even the most skilled propagandist could not counteract the hard realities of the war's trajectory. After the war, when Nazi hunters came looking for him, he pretended to be ailing. He then became general manager of a Madrid company. In 1946, he wrote to the Austrian Foreign Office offering his services. The Austrians declined his offer. After the death of his wife, he remarried Renate Baronin Thermann. In 1956, he and his wife settled in Brazil. Shortly after his second wife's death, he moved in with his sister. He returned to Austria in 1958.

"Lazar the Survivor," "Germany's Grey Eminence in Spain," and the "Dictator of the Spanish Press" died in Austria's capital on May 9, 1961. He was 66-years-old.

There are no comments yet.