

When Doctors Became Spies: Real-life Stories

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ABSTRACT

This medical history article recounts the adventures of some physicians who acted as spies at different times in history. Many of them had to face dire consequences for their actions.

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INTRODUCTION

Doctors have played diverse roles in the society, besides their primary duty as healers, throughout human history. In historical narratives, one can find doctors who also became politicians, sport-stars, artists or businesspersons. Since people usually trust doctors and physicians enjoy privileged access to many people during conflicts and battles, it is conceivable that they would be utilized as pawns during military operations. Such espionage roles are played by doctors either willingly or they are coerced or lured into such operations. This article gives brief accounts of a few such incidents. Many of these "incidents" as described here are based on journalistic investigations and indirect evidence. For obvious reasons, concrete proof and declassified evidence are not always forthcoming. Although the narrative of spies often catches the imagination of the public, in real life, most spies remain unknown throughout their lives.

Some Notable Incidents

Hunt for Osama

Osama bin Laden was, in the first decade of this millennium, the most sought-after man all over the world. He was finally found and executed in Pakistan. The central intelligence agency (CIA) of the USA was hot on the trail

of Osama for a long time, but the most wanted man in the world always managed to escape. It was then that the CIA operatives in Asia thought of an innovative plan.

According to the story published in *The Guardian*, CIA recruited a Pakistani doctor named Shakil Afridi, who organized a vaccination campaign in Abbottabad.¹ The CIA operatives in Pakistan had focussed on Abbottabad, and they had their eyes on what was later revealed to be bin Laden's residence. But before mounting a covert The United States navy sea, Air and Land (SEAL) operation in another country, they needed to be sure. This is where the doctor came in. He was financed to set up a hepatitis B vaccination campaign in the area. According to journalists, the idea was to get some tissue sample from the subjects during vaccination. Then, that tissue deoxyribo nucleic acid (DNA) would be compared to bin Laden family DNA, as obtained from his sister in Boston in 2010. If there was a match, this would provide biological evidence of the presence of the family members in the area and hence, the probable existence of Osama bin Laden. The vaccination program was started in a poor section of the city so that it would seem a routine operation and no suspicions would be aroused. Then it slowly moved towards the target. A nurse named Mukhtar Bibi gained access to that bin Laden compound, but it is not clear whether she managed to get biological samples. However, the later successful operation of killing Osama bin Laden a few days later indicates that the program may have succeeded. In 2012, the then US Defence Secretary also publicly acknowledged on TV the crucial role of Dr Afridi in hunting down Osama.²

However, there are two anti-climax moments in this story. Firstly, as the story broke, Dr Afridi was hailed as a hero in some parts of the Western world. But he was promptly arrested in Pakistan for treason and later, other charges were added. He is still languishing in jail and pressure by the Western groups have completely failed to secure his release. The Western institutions have also lost interest in him, and their efforts are now reduced to mere lip service. Secondly, and this is more serious, as the story broke, the local population became highly wary of vaccination programs. People in many areas of Pakistan refused vaccination, especially if backed by Western institutions. The net result was a resurgence of polio in Pakistan. Humanitarian workers in the USA have expressed deep resentment at this misuse of public health programs for counter-espionage purposes.

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The military objective may have been fulfilled but the cost to public health is too great and may have undermined the efforts of countless aid workers over the years.

Nazi spy in America

We will now discuss an incident in the United States of America (USA) in 1943 during World War II. In 1943, Dr Fred William Thomas, a physician and a surgeon (in other accounts, obstetrician) of German descent, was arrested for espionage from Detroit, Michigan. According to the US Department of Justice document released after the arrest, Dr Thomas tried to obtain information from his patients and passed on that information to other German spies.³ The main target of his information gathering was the manufacturing of American war materials, like bombers, in the state of Ohio. Detroit was the main base of his work because Detroit was the industrial hotbed of the USA at that time and many of the wartime equipment were produced there. He expressed his admiration for the Nazi ideology frequently, including their anti-Semitic principles.³ He was an avid speaker at meetings of the German-American Bund and openly expressed his pro-Nazi views.

According to the Michigan Daily archives (Feb 2, 1944), Dr Thomas strongly denied the charges of espionage and said that his relationship with the so-called "spies" was purely professional. However, one of the other spies arrested with him, Grace Buchanan-Dineen, who turned an FBI double agent, elaborately discussed his voluntary involvement in the plot and his willingness to sabotage an ammunition plant in Detroit.⁴ He was also said to supply chemicals to prepare invisible ink for sending information to the Nazi handlers. He was sentenced to 16 years in prison, but in 1949, the charges against him were dropped.⁴ Later investigative journalism could not determine whether Dr Thomas was a co-conspirator or just a victim of the overzealous federal bureau of investigation (FBI) activity.

Soviet Spy in Israel

Dr Marcus Klingberg was one of the most respected doctors in Israel. He was a Polish Jew whose family was exterminated at the Treblinka concentration camp. He held such prominent positions as deputy scientific director of Israel Institute for Biological Research, Head of the Department of Preventive and Social Medicine of Tel Aviv University, visiting fellow of Wolfson College, Oxford and the Editor of more than one highly respected International medical journals. In 1983, he was arrested on charges of spying for the USSR and passing on information about Israel's chemical and

biological weapons. Dr Klingberg said later that his spying was purely ideological and Moscow never paid him anything.⁵

Dr Klingberg was imprisoned for 16 years and only released due to failing health. When he died in 2015 in France, he was described by Israeli newspapers as "perhaps the most damaging spy in Israel's history."⁶ However, Dr Klingberg was unapologetic about his spying. After his release from prison, he regained some of his fame in the academic world. In an article in 2010, he has detailed his extensive work in the field of epidemiology.⁷

In the concluding remarks, he had stated that he never regretted his decision for passing on information to the Soviets and just as the secret of the atomic bomb was passed on to Russia to ensure balance of power, Dr Klingberg also passed on crucial information about biological weapons research to ensure that both sides (during the cold war) were equally poised.⁷

Forced to Spy: A Story from Iran

Dr Kooshyar Karimi was a thriving Jewish doctor in Iran. But he did something which went against the Iranian laws: he regularly performed abortions, mainly for rape victims.⁸ He got caught, and the Iranian authority tortured him into espionage. He was forced to spy on fellow Jews and other targets, as told by the authority. As a well-regarded member of the Jewish community, he had a lot of people coming to him and he was forced to secretly record their conversations and turn those over to the Iranian authority. If people expressed anti-authority views in front of him, those were recorded. His actions may have harmed many people, but Dr Karimi was helpless. Dr Karimi finally managed to escape from Iran. He later got citizenship of Australia and wrote a book detailing his unfortunate role in espionage.

The Soviet Spy in Saigon

Dr Pierre Hautier, a French physician, was a resident of Saigon since the early 1960s.⁹ He operated a tuberculosis clinic and was a lecturer at the local medical school. He had contacts at the high levels of Vietnamese military and national security office. He acted as spy both for the Viet Cong and Soviet intelligence. His connections would come to his clinic posed as tuberculosis patients and information would be exchanged. He was paid handsomely by the Soviets for his work.

The doctor was caught red-handed in Paris while handing over a package to some Soviet official, but since he had committed no crime against France, he was released.⁹ He later settled in some African country.

A Doctor against Slavery

Among the many crimes committed by human beings over the ages, slavery is perhaps the most heinous. Many countries of the world had slavery in different forms, but the place where it became the focus of a civil war was undoubtedly the United States of America. Dr Rufus Gilpatrick was a physician in Ohio in the 1850s. But he had another more important historical role. He was a crucial link in the "Underground Railroad", the famed network that helped many former slaves to escape to freedom in the northern states and Canada.¹⁰ He also acted as a spy for the Union army in the Battle of Webbers Falls in Cherokee Territory in 1863. The details of his spying activity are not known, but it is said that he was involved in high-level information gathering. However, during the battle, although he was a Union Army member, he went out of his way to treat some Confederate soldiers and got killed by some members of the same group.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

These few stories are intriguing. But it must be remembered that other medical professionals were working as spies who were never discovered and just silently completed their assignments. There may be others who got caught and were killed without any record. As these anecdotes demonstrate, doctors got involved in spying for various reasons: some did it for money, some for ideology and some were unwittingly mixed up in such affairs. But the consequences, like any other spy, were not good. If they got caught, they risked torture, imprisonment, and of course, loss of professional dignity. In some cases, their actions had wide-reaching consequences like the generation of societal mistrust in health programs.

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