

Redl, Alfred

By [Günther Kronenbitter](#)



Alfred Redl (1864-1913)

A portrait of Alfred Redl in his formal uniform and military decoration.

Unknown photographer: Alfred Redl, black-and-white photograph, n.d.; source:

Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Bildarchiv Austria, Pf 6924 C1,

http://www.bildarchivaustria.at/Pages/ImageDetail.aspx?p_iBildID=1556044.

Courtesy of the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek.

Redl, Alfred

Officer, spy

Born 14 March 1864 in L'viv (Lwów, Lemberg), Austrian Empire

Died 25 May 1913 in Vienna, Austro-Hungarian Empire

Summary

On 25 May 1913 Colonel Alfred Redl, the former head of Austria-Hungary's military espionage, committed suicide in Vienna. As it turned out, Redl had betrayed Austria-Hungary's spy-network in Russia and had sold sensitive information on war preparations to the Czar's military intelligence.

Table of contents

[1 Military Career](#)

[2 Death of a Spy](#)

3 Scandal

4 Relevance

Selected Bibliography

Citation

Military Career

Alfred Redl (1864-1913) was born in 1864 in [L'viv \(Lwów, Lemberg\)](#), the capital of the Austrian Crownland of Galicia and also the most important city in the eastern part of Galicia. In the [multiethnic environment](#) of the Habsburg Monarchy's northeastern province, Redl would pick up Polish and Ruthenian (Ukrainian), as well as German. The son of a railway inspector, he attended a military school in Moravia, served with an [infantry](#) regiment of the k.u.k. (Imperial and Royal) Army and was promoted to lieutenant after four years. Redl was one of the few officers from military schools who was accepted at the War School, the academy for future general staff officers. After graduation in 1894 he joined the General Staff, studied Russian in Kazan in 1899-1900 and started out as an expert on [Russia](#) in the *Evidenzbüro*, the military intelligence branch of the Viennese General Staff. [Espionage](#) and counterintelligence was the focus of the *Kundschaftsabteilung*, a specialized unit within the *Evidenzbüro*. In 1907 Redl became head of the department and deputy head of the *Evidenzbüro*. In 1912, Redl was promoted to colonel and took over as chief of staff of the VIII Corps in Prague.

Death of a Spy

By chance, German intelligence came across a *poste restante* letter addressed to a person in Vienna who was obviously involved in espionage, probably on behalf of Russia, in 1913. When Redl called for the letter on 24 May 1913 at the Viennese General Post Office, police were able to identify him and track him down at a city hotel. Upon being informed, [Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf \(1852-1925\)](#), chief of the General Staff, and [August von Urbanski \(1866-1950\)](#), head of military intelligence at the time, were shocked. They decided that a commission should confront Redl with the incriminating evidence and immediately question him about his betrayal. Redl admitted to having sold military secrets to foreign powers. After a brief interrogation, the commission left Redl's hotel room. In the early hours of 25 May 1913 he used the opportunity offered to him and committed suicide.

Scandal

Although the General Staff tried to avoid any public debate about Redl's betrayal, journalists got wind of the spy story. The fact that the army's former spy master had sold secret

information to potential future enemies was deeply embarrassing for the General Staff. To make things worse, [Austria-Hungary's](#) counterintelligence had depended on the Germans to catch Redl. On top of this, Conrad also had to worry about the possibility that one of his sons might be implicated in the affair. Redl had sold military secrets to sustain a lifestyle that was far too costly for someone of his pay-rank and without an inherited fortune to make up for the insufficient income. The public focus on Redl's homosexuality, his predilection for luxury and his greed were certainly a blow to the military's prestige, but it also helped to detract from flawed counterintelligence structures and insufficient oversight by Conrad and Urbanski.

The heir-apparent of the Habsburg Monarchy and inspector general of Austria-Hungary's armed forces, [Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este \(1863-1914\)](#), a faithful Catholic, strongly disapproved of the General Staff's decision to let Redl kill himself. His anger about Conrad's handling of the affair flared up again as Franz Ferdinand learned of another blunder: In January 1914 it became known that military secrets fell into the hands of an unsuspecting civilian because the *Evidenzbüro* had failed to screen Redl's camera when his assets were sold to clear some of his debts. Had it not been for [Sarajevo](#), the Archduke would have fired Urbanski in summer 1914 and sacked Conrad before long.

Relevance

While Franz Ferdinand was at odds with Conrad's crisis management, [Germany's](#) General Staff wondered whether Redl might have sold information about plans for coalition warfare to the Entente. As documents from the Viennese war archive that were long missing and resurfaced only a few years ago suggest, the Austro-Hungarian General Staff deliberately misled its opposite number in Berlin about the time span and the extent of Redl's betrayal. Quite likely, Archduke Franz Ferdinand did not get the whole picture of the investigators' findings either.

At least from 1907 onwards, Redl had sold sensitive information to [France](#), [Italy](#), and Russia. The material included orders of battle and mobilization plans and as – the military judge in charge of the investigation put it – there was every reason to assume that Redl would have sold any secret he could access. As a high-ranking member of the General Staff for many years, that would have been a substantial part of Austria-Hungary's war plans and preparations. Indeed, the Russians were able to enhance their knowledge of the Habsburg Monarchy's military capacity, options and plans. But in 1914, Russia's successful pre-war military intelligence operations did not have a crucial impact on operations. Thanks to Redl, Austria-Hungary could not count on her own espionage in Russia in the pre-war years of crisis. Because of his tips, Russian counterintelligence had the ability unravel the Habsburg Monarchy's spy network.

Günther Kronenbitter, University of Augsburg

Selected Bibliography

- [Kronenbitter, Günther: 'Krieg im Frieden'. Die Führung der k.u.k. Armee und die Großmachtpolitik Österreich-Ungarns 1906-1914, Munich, 2003: Oldenbourg.](#)
- [Markus, Georg: Der Fall Redl. Mit unveröffentlichten Geheimdokumenten zur folgenschwersten Spionage-Affaire des Jahrhunderts, Vienna, 1984: Amalthea.](#)
- [Moritz, Verena / Leidinger, Hannes: Oberst Redl. Der Spionagefall, der Skandal, die Fakten, St. Pölten; Salzburg; Vienna, 2012: Residenz.](#)
- [Pethö, Albert: Agenten für den Doppeladler. Österreich-Ungarns Geheimer Dienst im Weltkrieg, Graz, 1998: Stocker.](#)
- [Schindler, John: Redl - Spy of the Century?, in: International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence 18/3, 2005, pp. 483-507.](#)

Citation

Günther Kronenbitter: Redl, Alfred, in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer D. Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.10139](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10139)

External Links

- [Alfred Redl \(Austria-Forum\) \(Article\)](#)
- [McFarland, John: Redl, Alfred \(1864-1913\) \(gltq.com\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Redl, Alfred \(Encyclopædia Britannica\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Schmidt, Robert: Oberst Redl - Der Spion, multicolour poster, 1924 \(Österreichische Nationalbibliothek\) \(Article\)](#)

- [Sked, Alan: A Patriot for Whom? Colonel Redl and a question of Identity, History Today 36/7, 1986 \(historytoday.com\) \(Article\)](#)

Metadata

Regional Section(s)

[Central Europe](#) > [Austria-Hungary](#) > [Austria](#)

[Central Europe](#) > [Austria-Hungary](#) > [Hungary](#)

Thematic Section(s)

[Power](#)

[Pre-war](#)

Subjects

[Politics, law](#) > [International relations](#) > [Espionage](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Command and control](#) > [Officers](#)

Author Keywords

Austria-Hungary; Russia; general staff military intelligence

GND Subject Headings

[Redl, Alfred](#)

LC Subject Headings

[Redl, Alfred, 1864-1913](#)

Rameau Subject Headings

[Redl, Alfred \(1864-1913\)](#)

Key Person(s)

[Urbanski, August von](#); [Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este](#); [Conrad von Hötzendorf, Franz Xaver Josef Graf](#)

Key Location(s)

[Kazan](#); [Lemberg](#); [Prague](#); [Vienna](#); [Lwów](#); [Lviv](#)

Title

Redl, Alfred

Author(s)

[Günther Kronenbitter](#)

Article Type

Encyclopedic Entry

Classification Group

Persons