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Fourth Reich plot revealed

Jewish group uncovers secret papers that prove conspiracy by 'Odessa File' Nazis

Saturday 07 September 1996 00:02 BST •  Comments



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Secret United States documents uncovered by a Jewish human rights group have proved the existence of a Nazi support group that sought to smuggle people and gold out of Germany in 1945, and worked for the establishment of a Fourth Reich.

The group is vividly portrayed in Frederick Forsyth's novel *The Odessa File*. Mr Forsyth confirmed yesterday that his novel was based on reports of a meeting in France in August 1944. This meeting is detailed in US documents seen by The Independent which were collected by a top-secret intelligence operation called Project Safehaven at the end of the war.

"The Odessa existed and they removed billions of dollars in looted Jewish assets from Germany," Elan Steinberg, executive director at the World Jewish Congress (WJC), said. "Their plan was to re-establish the Nazi Party from safe havens outside Germany and many of the assets they smuggled out must still exist." The WJC is seeking to recover Jewish assets which were stolen by the Nazis.

The Odessa document is a US intelligence report stamped "Secret", written in November 1944. It is based on the work of a French intelligence agent deployed by the Deuxieme Bureau which penetrated Nazi organisations in Paris during the occupation. The agent observed an August 1944 meeting of German industrialists held in Strasbourg. It was presided over by SS Obergruppenfuhrer Dr Scheid, managing director at the Hesse company before the war.

"Their plan was to smuggle gold, patents and art out of Germany along with top industrialists," Mr Steinberg said. "Meanwhile, the Nazi Party would re-establish itself in Germany as an underground movement." The document was discovered in July when Mr Steinberg gained access to recently declassified papers from the National Archive in Washington. Mr Steinberg has authenticated the report and linked it to others which show that the German Reichsbank was involved in the plot.

According to a secret US State Department telegram dated 4 December 1945, the Reichsbank maintained a depot of gold at the Swiss National Bank throughout the

war. By 1945 it had accumulated bullion worth \$123m which was earmarked for Odessa operations.

The Strasbourg meeting laid out a comprehensive plan for resurrecting the Reich. Executives from Volkswagen, Krupp Steel, Brown-Boveri, Messerschmidt, Zeiss and Leica were ordered to establish operations overseas and finance the Nazi Party from abroad. The intelligence report quotes SS Obergruppenfuhrer Scheid on post-war strategy: "From now on, German industry must realise that the war cannot be won and that it must make steps in preparation for a post-war commercial campaign," he said.

This and other documents in the possession of the WJC may have adverse implications for the modern descendants of leading German corporations. "We now have sufficient evidence for an indictment," Elan Steinberg said yesterday.

The Odessa document came to light after the WJC failed to persuade Switzerland to open secret Nazi bank accounts in May this year. "The documents are evidence of the biggest robbery in the history of mankind," said Mr Steinberg, who has now forced the Swiss government to begin a full inquiry.

The Independent reported yesterday that Hitler had been reported to have held numbered accounts at Union Bank of Switzerland. UBS yesterday issued a statement denying that it was still handling funds deposited by Nazis during the war.

Robert Vogler, the bank's chief spokesman in Zurich, could not say whether such an account had ever existed but he said that all funds belonging to Germans were frozen after the war, their owners vetted, and those traced to known Nazis handed over to the Allies.

Not few people believed Frederick Forsyth when he said the villain of *The Odessa File*, Eduard Roschmann, the Butcher of Riga, was a real character, writes Steve Boggan. Or that a meeting of high-ranking SS officers and industrialists took place at the Maison Rouge hotel in Strasbourg in 1944 to discuss ways of moving Nazi gold out of Germany and France.

Yet Mr Forsyth always insisted that large elements of his book were true, based on information from "friends in low places". The US report talks of a meeting at the Hotel Rotes Haus. "I believe there were a number of meetings there at which the SS and industrialists carved up much of the proceeds of the Third Reich," he said.

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