

**Lord Lexden**

Conservative peer and historian

**While Tim Willasey-Wilsey has ensured that an unsung hero finally gets the attention he deserves, this book however suffers from a surfeit of detail**

## The Spy and the Devil

The untold story of the MI6 agent who penetrated Hitler's inner circle

By **Tim Willasey-Wilsey**  
Publisher **Blink Publishing**

**T**his book opens with a tremendous flourish. "Hardly anyone realises that Britain had a spy with direct access to Adolf Hitler and his inner circle throughout the 1930s."

Our virtually unknown master spy in Berlin seems to have been entirely content to serve Britain, his adopted country, without any kind of official recognition or thanks after the Nazis had been destroyed. He had supplied nearly three-quarters of all the political intelligence on Hitler's Germany that reached MI6 in London, helping to shape government policy. Now, through this book, he has at last secured the attention he deserves.

His name was Baron Wilhelm von der Ropp. He was born in 1886 into a Lithuanian noble family of German descent. After 1910 he turned himself into an English country gentleman with a property outside Devizes provided by the first of his two English wives (the second, who had less money, took a considerable

interest in other men).

He became a British citizen in 1915, and joined the fledgling Royal Flying Corps as a balloon officer. Perched perilously above

German infantry lines, his observations were sent by field telephone to comrades on the ground. Anything could happen. A training session ended with "an unintended descent into Holborn". Spying seemed hardly more risky. A charming man, he was well-qualified for the work, speaking all the major European languages faultlessly.

Bill de Ropp, as he was generally known (though

**"A charming man, he was well-qualified for the work"**

always "the Baron" to Hitler), thought of himself as living in a century which was "totally at the mercy of the Dark Force. If I were a religious man I suppose I'd call it the devil" (hence its inclusion in the book's title). For him, the greatest evil was to be found in Soviet communism, which he regarded as an even more terrible threat to civilisation than Nazi Germany.

He never seems to have been repelled by the Nazi leaders, who enjoyed his company and took him into their confidence. What he



Berlin 1938 Chamberlain with Hitler

learnt convinced him that Neville Chamberlain was right to try to seek peace with Hitler while at the same speeding up British rearmament, which had begun in 1935, in case war became unavoidable.

In September 1938 de Ropp told his masters in MI6 that Czechoslovakia should give Hitler the Sudetenland, but "we should unremittingly build up our armaments". Chamberlain would go on to devote over 40 per cent of GDP to them.

The advice from Berlin also included a reminder that Germany sought "the downfall of the USSR". Nothing seemed more desirable to de Ropp than that the two embodiments of the devil should fight each other, leaving everyone else in peace. That was the outcome for which many in the Conservative Party fervently hoped too.

Sadly, this book is not a delight to read. The author, a

former diplomat, has scoured the world for information about the unsung secret agent. He includes almost everything he has found out. Miscellaneous details sometimes overwhelm

the book's main themes. We do not need to be told that one of de Ropp's distant relatives killed herself on an Athenian beach after King Zog of Albania had discarded her as his mistress.

The nobleman who had been brought up on a great estate in Lithuania retired in old age to a small, one-bedroom house in Herefordshire with his daughter. His death in 1973 at the age of 87 passed unnoticed. 🏴󠁧󠁢󠁥󠁮󠁧󠁿

