

US documents from the 1940's: FBI spied on the Finnish Embassy in Washington

Federal Bureau of Investigation spied on the Finnish Embassy in Washington in the 1940's during World War II . According to documents obtained by two Swiss newspapers SonntagsZeitung and Le Matin Dimanche FBI intercepted coded messages between Washington and Helsinki. FBI also had an inside source in the embassy, US documents reveal.

By Jarkko Sipila (MTV.fi)

SonntagsZeitung and Le Matin Dimanche requested documents under the US Information act and have published them on their special website. <http://room6527.com/>

The Finnish data consist of around 200 pages .

The FBI 's interest towards Finnish diplomatic messages seems to be have been awakened in the late summer of 1942. FBI started to investigate a suspected spy ring based on a Finnish foreign ministry inquiry to the Finnish consulate in San Francisco whether one lady living in San Jose was still alive.

At that time FBI was unable to decipher the Finnish secret code, but US Military Intelligence had broken it, at least in part. At first FBI was focusing on messages caught by New York listening posts. FBI decided to open a file called "Finnish Government Group".

US was monitoring the radiotransmissions during World War II quite comprehensively, and Finland, of course, was not the only country spied on . Some events have been also discussed in Tim Wieners book "Enemies - The History of the FBI".

The Finnish material published by the Swiss newspapers website dates mainly to the spring of 1943. At that time the espionage investigation had turned into political interests as official coded messages were picked up between the Finnish Embassy in Washington and the Foreign Ministry in Helsinki. Messages are no longer from New York, but Washington listening post.

One document reveals that the Americans knew that Finns were using two different cryptographs, Hagelin C-36A and C-362 devices. Difference was that the other changed text to five-digit series and the other to five-character sets.

The monitoring also faced difficulties. One document states that the FBI could not decode messages after May 1943 as the Finns had changed their own code in the Hagelin machines.

In WWII Finland was the ally of Germany, but the United States never declared war on Finland. The Finnish Embassy in Washington operated until 1944 when the diplomatic relations were finally broken.

A document signed by J. Edgar Hoover also reveals that FBI received information from the inside of the Embassy. FBI had photographs of the Finnish coding equipment and also photos of the scrap papers used to write and decode secret messages. Documents do not reveal how the FBI obtained this material. It seems that the FBI did not have a high ranking source in the embassy staff because of the problems in continuing the decoding after May 1943.

Copies of the photographs were distributed by the FBI to the US Naval Intelligence.

Main intelligence obtained by spying the Finnish coded transmissions links to the US roadmap to peace -proposal to Finland in March 1943. Germany had just suffered a major defeat in Stalingrad and the US representative in Helsinki, Robert McClintock, presented a memo to the government of Finland.

The Finnish government rejected this plan. According to the historians the major reason to this was that the Finns knew that Germans could read the codes on which the US plan was transmitted to Helsinki. Finland feared that Germany might be thinking that Finns were on the verge of betraying Germans.

The US did not know that the Germans could break the code nor that the Finns knew of this. Finnish radio intelligence was also reading the Strip, most secret US diplomatic code. Some knowledge – not all - of the Finnish internal negotiations and the positions were forwarded to the embassy in Washington and these were intercepted by the US. FBI also intercepted the messages sent from the Embassy in Washington describing how this situation was seen by the US officials. One document states that the Americans suspected that the Finnish government was no longer representing the Finnish people because the newly appointed state secretary Henrik Ramsay had dashed to Berlin and was under German pressure.

In reality, according to historians, Ramsay was trying to prevent repercussions from the Germans by revealing the proposal to Germans.

At that time the aging Finnish military commander Mannerheim was resting in Lugano and according to FBI papers there seems to have been suspicions that he was really in Berlin. This was denied by the Helsinki.

J. Edgar Hoover reported these exchanges of information to the US State Department which was of course directing McClintock – on a code that the Finnish intelligence was reading. By the way the newly published document states that J. Edgar Hoover used a courier, not radio, when passing this information forward.

In the end Finland refused this peace plan and eventually was forced after the major Soviet summer offensive of 1944 to a separate armistice with Soviet Union. The Russians were more interested in the race to Berlin than conquering Finland.

In September 1944, on the day when the Soviet armistice was signed, the head of the Finnish radio intelligence fled to Sweden with many of his staff and the intelligence archives in a operation called “Stella Polaris”. Archives were microfilmed in Sweden and eventually disappeared. It has been told that the files were sold to several intelligence services because the Finns had broken the Russian code with the aid from the Japanese.

Some of this Stella Polaris material has been later found in NSA’s Historical Cryptographic Collection.

One more note. In April 1943 the head of the Finnish Embassy was invited to attend the 200th birthday celebration of one of Americans founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson. After that he sent a secret cable – intercepted by the FBI – to Helsinki and urged the Finnish foreign secretary, or even the President, to cite Jefferson’s words on the importance of freedom. Jefferson should not be mentioned, but the similar words would make Americans feel more **positive on Finland.**