An impassioned plea

A biographer defends ‘Axis Sally,’ the Ohio-born radio announcer who broadcast Nazi propaganda from Berlin throughout World War II and was convicted of treason in the US

• GLENN C. ALTSCHULER

In 1943, in one of her six-days-a-week broadcasts from Berlin’s Reichsradio, “Axis Sally” (Mildred Gillars) told the mothers, wives and sweethearts of GIs to “damn Roosevelt, damn Churchill and damn all of their Jews who have made this war possible.” Although she was an American girl from Ohio, Sally declared, she would stay “over here on this side of the fence, on Germany’s side because it is the right side.”

Axis Sally remained on the air until the very end of World War II, taunting servicemen with the fate in store for them and drawing on German intelligence to demonstrate that the Nazis knew precisely where each American unit was deployed. Arrested in 1948, she was returned to Washington, charged with treason and convicted.

In Axis Sally, Richard Lucas, a freelance writer, provides the first full-length biography of Gillars, taking her from an unsuccessful career as a Broadway actress to “rewarding employment” in Germany as a film critic and then a radio announcer. Falling under the influence of her lover, Max Otto Koischwitz (the Foreign Office’s chief liaison to Reichsradio), a naturalized citizen of the United States who had taught German literature at Hunter College in New York City, Lucas points out, Gillars disseminated Nazi propaganda with a seductive voice, surrounded by soothing music, including her signature song, “Lili Marlene.”

Lucas acknowledges that Gillars “accepted the Nazi worldview” was “willfully blind” to the plight of Jews and insisted on remaining in the limelight even after it became clear that the Allies would win the war. Nonetheless, he believes she should not have been tried – let alone convicted – for treason. In hindsight, he writes, the “punishment meted out to Axis Sally seemed like a quaint relic of a bygone national morality.”

Lucas advances a blizzard of reasons to support his claim that Axis Sally had a “tragic end,” hoping, it seems, that some of them will stick. By remaining an American citizen, he reveals, Gillars unwittingly put herself in jeopardy of prosecution. Had her defense counsel documented her assertion that she had expatriated herself in 1941, he implied, not for her actions, but for her visibility, as the American “poster girl” of Reichsradio. The jury, quite reasonably (since just about anyone could use the threat of force as a defense) that such a defense must be accompanied by proof that the accused left the service as soon as possible. Gillars, Lucas acknowledges, stayed on until the end, lecturing reporters about the “correctness” of Hitler’s views about communism and repeating her on-air assertions that the war was a legitimate struggle by Germany against England and international Jewry.

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Although Mildred Gillars seems to have led an exemplary life following her release from prison – she converted to Catholicism, completed an undergraduate degree at Ohio Wesleyan University, tutored language students at Bishop Watterson High School and tended a small flower garden – she doesn’t really deserve all that much sympathy.

But Lucas does raise some important questions about whether her punishment fit her crime. The terms “giving aid and comfort to the enemy” and “intent to betray” the United States are surely subject to a wide array of interpretation. Absent evidence of harm actually done, which was not presented in court, Gillars’s lawyer insisted, her “mere words,” which were protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution, even in wartime, should not be enough to constitute treason. She had been singled out, he implied, not for her actions, but for her visibility, as the American “poster girl” of Reichsradio. The jury, which convicted her on only one of eight counts, may have been moved by this argument. And Judge Curran, emphasizing that Gillars did not “formulate policy,” declined to sentence her to death.

At the very time Gillars was sent to prison for 10 to 30 years and fined $10,000, Lucas reminds us, the US government was welcoming “dyed-in-the-wool Nazis – some with blood on their hands” – into the country as valuable assets in the Cold War struggle against communism. Reluctant as we are to admit it, and who wouldn’t be reluctant, Axis Sally may not have received equal justice under the law.

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