

From her early twenties to her death, Nellie Bly did it all—daredevil, investigative reporter, manufacturer, war correspondent, and humanitarian.



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German troops advance to Warsaw during World War I. Nellie Bly, the first woman reporter on the eastern front, was eager to see battle conditions for herself.

lengthy newspaper stories, all in the first person, written over the course of thirty-six years. A similar search of other newspapers, journalism trade magazines and gossip sheets of the time added another thousand stories of direct relevance to Bly's story. Taken together, these elements formed an ersatz journal. When supplemented by a myriad of legal documents and records and the 130 personal and business letters ultimately amassed, a more multidimensional portrait finally began to emerge.

The quest for Bly's actual birth date—Bly always claimed 1867 as her birth year—sparked another line of inquiry that led to another unexpected cache of detailed documentation. In her book *Around the World*, Bly reports that she applied for a passport in London in November 1889, on the first leg of her journey. Reference archivists in the National Archives retrieved the original passport application. Not even to her government was Bly prepared to reveal her actual age, but the application does confirm other important personal details: her height, hair and eye color, even the shape of her turned-up nose. Other passport applications also appeared in State Department files, confirming the dates of later trips abroad. This information

became extremely helpful in filling in what became a reasonably complete month-by-month chronology of her life.

National Archives records brought two fascinating and almost unknown aspects of Bly's life to light: her four-year sojourn in Austria during World War I and the immediate aftermath of that curious stay.



While President Woodrow Wilson was at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, Nellie Bly tried to warn him of the impending threat of Bolshevism.

and the painful, final severing of relations with her family over control of her steel barrel company.

Bly sailed for Austria in August 1914, just as the war broke out. She reported from the Russian and Serbian fronts in 1914 and appealed through U.S. newspapers for aid to Austrian war widows and orphans in 1915 and 1916. She remained in Vienna throughout the war—despite United States entry on the opposing side in 1917—and returned to the United States in early 1919. This much could be traced through the New York newspapers of the time, but nothing else about this strange period in her life was known.

From National Archives collections it was possible to learn a great deal more. The hand-signed citizens' register of the U.S. embassy in Vienna confirmed that Bly checked in with the embassy on August 11, 1914. The same files also confirm that she and U.S. Ambassador Frederic Penfield were longtime friends and that he supported her request to report from the war front with a very persuasive letter of recommendation to the appropriate Austrian authorities.

The United States broke off diplomatic

relations with Austria-Hungary in 1917, making Bly a very warm and friendly "enemy alien" for the remainder of her stay. Spain handled the representation of U.S. interests in Vienna for the duration of the war. Copies of the Spanish representation files confirm that Bly was never interned, as many American nationals in Austria-Hungary were. The records also give details of her departure: by special train to Berne, Switzerland, on January 25, 1919, with nineteen other U.S. citizens, among them several children. Her destination was Paris.²

Both from the standpoint of the storyteller and the researcher, Bly's decision to remain in Austria after 1917 raised two intriguing possibilities: that the U.S. government had serious questions about what Bly was doing there or that it had asked her to do so for its own reasons. John Taylor of the National Archives reported with enthusiasm the uncovering of a sizable file on Bly. U.S. Military Intelligence officers had compiled it, starting with her arrival in Paris in early 1919 and ending shortly after her return to New York a few weeks later.

While in Austria, Bly managed to ingratiate herself with the highest echelons of Viennese officialdom and society.³ In fact, the new republic of German Austria paid for a special train compartment for her to travel to Paris because Bly had a quasi-official assignment from its leaders: to argue their nation's case before President Wilson and to warn him against the perils of Bolshevism.⁴ Though she never saw Wilson personally,⁵ she did have lengthy conferences with Gen. John J. Pershing, commander of the force at Chaumont, and with Brig. Gen. D. E. Nolan, the assistant chief of staff.

Bly piqued the attention of U.S. Military Intelligence on February 4, 1919, when she applied for a visa at the Passport Bureau in Paris to return to the United States.⁶ This was her first opportunity to explain to "a G2 representative" exactly what she was doing in Austria throughout the war. The representative made full report to the Office of Military Intelligence. Two days later, Bly's casual

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General Pershing did meet and talked with Nellie Bly in Paris when she could not reach President Wilson.

but emphatic conversation with an American soldier on a Paris street triggered another letter for the file. "She said that all France was not worth one American life," the young private reported. "[She] said the Germans were more like our people in regard to their attitude towards women." She told him she had met the kaiser personally and that she liked and admired him.

In the meantime, Bly dashed off an urgent, handwritten letter to President Wilson, requesting an immediate personal interview. An aide replied to Bly's appeal, saying this was out of the question because of the pressures of the Peace Conference, but that she should send a detailed statement containing the information she wanted to impart. "Believe me," she wrote in reply,

if my communications were not more important than the Peace Conference for the safety of the world, I should not ask for a personal interview at this time. But of what use will be the Peace Conference or the League of Nations if meanwhile Central Europe becomes a second Russia? For once the middle countries are in the clutches of the Bolsheviks, nothing can save the rest of the world from the same dreadful fate. *The salvation of the world depends upon what you do now. Every hour is precious.*⁷

Bly had a second debriefing at Chaumont with General Nolan and his assistant, Col. A. B. Cox. At the same time, the State Department was asked to investigate her citizenship status and sent inquiries back to the embassy in Vienna. Bly remained at headquarters for three days, at the end of which Military Intelligence requested from headquarters a full report on what had been learned from Bly "in order that our information in this case may be as complete as possible." Nolan clearly harbored no more doubts about Bly's American loyalties or the reasons for her pro-German views. He told the inquiring officer, Lt. Col. Cabot Ward, on February 15, 1919:

She went to Austria in 1914 when war was declared by that country against Serbia. She was with the Austrian Army as a correspondent until our entry into the war, when she returned to Vienna and did not again go to the front. She had met and is on friendly terms with many of the government officials and men in public life. She has not corresponded with her friends or relatives in the United States, and has received no news directly from the United States since our entry into the war. Her only information regarding our participation in the war has been received from German and Austrian

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sources. She is convinced that England brought on the war for commercial reasons and believes that we entered the war to recover the money we had advanced to the Allies. She is apparently a perfectly loyal American woman, who has heard only the arguments of the Central Powers regarding the war for four years and who knows nothing of the Allied point of view.⁷

Ward responded again, confirming to Nolan that the Passport Bureau had been instructed to facilitate Bly's return to the United States "at the earliest possible date." He explained that the further questioning resulted from concern over Bly's pro-German leanings.

With U.S. clearance to travel, Bly boarded the SS *Lorraine* at Bordeaux for New York on February 22, 1919. Ward sent to Washington the earlier, more suspicious reports on Bly that preceded her final questioning and permission to leave. Ward told his Washington counterparts that the reports demonstrated Bly's "pro-Germanism" and her attitude toward Bolshevism, on top of which she was "outspoken in her opinions going to the extent of being aggressive and defiant."⁸

Unsure if she should be granted permission to return to the United States, Ward explained that his office had referred the question to Brig. Gen. D. E. Nolan at general headquarters and to a Colonel Van Deman. Both, he said, "were of the opinion that she would do less harm in America than in France where at this time tendencies such as she has manifested may be serious in their consequences." This, of course, had not been

I asked her if she had ever been in Germany and she replied that she had. I asked her how the German people as a whole felt towards the people of the United States and she replied that they had shed tears when our men first fell on the field of battle, or something to that effect. Then I said that I did not think that it was as much the German people as a whole that were to blame as it was the Kaiser. She replied that he was the finest man she had ever seen, that she knew him personally. She said that all France was not worth one American life. Said the Germans were more like our people in regard to their attitude towards women.

Pvt. John N. Moffitt reported his conversation with Nellie Bly to Military Intelligence, and they were very interested in her comments about Germany.



Nellie considered Kaiser Wilhelm II to be "the finest man she had ever seen" and was proud of her acquaintance with him.

3. The question of this lady was also taken up with Colonel Van Deman before your letter was received and he advised us that in agreement with C. F. Q. Miss BLY was to be allowed to go to the United States. At the same time this office showed to Colonel Van Deman reports which it had made on this subject and copies of which are enclosed with this letter. We feel that we were not in possession of all the facts which would show that Miss BLY is a loyal American woman, for up to the present our investigations had shown that she had strong pro-German leanings. In any case we are signalling her departure to the United States.

Nellie Bly's request to return to America after the war triggered a military investigation into her loyalty. Though still suspicious of her pro-German leanings, the authorities permitted her to set sail from Europe.

the expressed view from general headquarters at all.

Word of Bly's departure was cabled immediately to Washington and from there to Capt. J. B. Trevor in New York with the added note: "Although residents of New York, Mayflower descendants and original members of the Pilgrim Society will remember Nellie's activities, our files however are not sufficiently antiquated to furnish any information."¹⁰

Trevor met Bly at Military Control House in New York following her arrival February 28. On March 6 he reported back to Washington:

Nellie is a bit hazy as to her exact reason for visiting the Central Empire, and still more hazy with regard to prolonging her stay there even after the entrance of her native land into the world war, and there is no doubt as to Nellie being a bit pro-German. Nellie is an avowed hater of England and all that is English, and out of this hatred of the land of the Lion and the Unicorn grew her hope for the success of German arms. She avows and declares, however, that the United States of America is nearest and dearest to her heart, and that her reason for returning to this country was to save us from the perils of Bolshevism.¹¹

He went on to explain how Bly's unrequited desire to see soldiers under fire drove her to Austria at the end of July 1914, that she had visited the front, "and that she did not mind at all whether or not she was killed because of her discouragement over her financial affairs in this country previous to her departure."¹² He went on to report Bly's statement that the Germans and the Austrians treated her

with utmost courtesy even after the United States had entered the war. He also wrote of her efforts to give President Wilson the benefit of her advice and how the Austrian government had encouraged and enabled her to do so. She reported her conversations with Pershing, Nolan, and Coxe and how Coxe had a stenographer make a verbatim transcript of her remarks while promising never to reveal their source. "We are hereby violating this agreement" was Trevor's facetious aside.

As to specifics, Bly told Trevor that while in Austria she "enjoyed the rare and distinct privilege of being in the inner councils of the Bolshevik leaders," that the leader of the movement was "the scion of a wealthy family and somewhat of a writer." Trevor reported the man's name as "Kiss," possibly a misspelled ref-

3. Briefly, Nellie went to Austria in July of 1914 because she was anxious to see something of the fighting between Austria and Serbia - that it had long been her desire to see soldiers in the field under fire, but because of her marriage previous to our war with Spain she had not been able to visit the fields of glory in Cuba and so decided to see the blood and carnage in Serbia. She said she was permitted to go to the front under fire, and that she did not mind at all whether or not she was killed because of her discouragement over her financial affairs in this country previous to her departure.

In explaining her desire to see first-hand action on the battle front, Nellie Bly reveals the financial troubles still awaiting her in America.

5. Nellie outlined at great length her scheme to down Bolshevism. We shall not bore you with the details. Suffice to say that her main weapon is the throwing of a line of troops along the Russian frontier to cut off the passage of agents to and fro, and so having prevented the Bolshevik agents from entering or departing from Russia that the cause would burn itself out of the late Czar's land without spreading into the other countries of Europe. She warns us that France is soon to succumb to Bolshevism and that our day is not far distant.

Captain Trevor did not think much of Nellie and declared he would spare his superiors the boring details of her plan.

reference to the journalist Egon Erwin Kisch. Trevor said Bly "avow[ed] and declare[d] that one Bauer, Secretary of the Austrian Foreign Office is one of the ring leaders of the Bolshevik group in Austria" and claimed that both men had entrusted her with valuable secrets. Trevor's report went on:

What these secrets were Nellie did not dilate upon. However, she states that the Bolshevik headquarters in Austria is sending forth forty agents amply provided with funds and a diversified supply of passports, their objective being the United States; that the Bolsheviks feel that if they can win the United States to their cause they have conquered the world. Nellie could not be specific as to the routes to be taken by these agents but was certain that they would obtain entrance into the United States. She praised the cleverness of the leaders of the Bolshevik cause, and declared that they were not a lot of long haired, dirty peasants, but were astute and clever diplomats.¹³

Trevor decided not to "bore" headquarters with Bly's detailed plan for defeating

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February 25, 1919.

From Acting Director of Military Intelligence.

To: Captain J. B. Trevor, 302 Broadway, N. Y. C.

Subject: Nellie Bly.

1. The following highly edifying paraphrase of a sub-gram has been received from our Intelligence Officer at Bordeaux, France:

"Nellie Bly sailed February 22nd for New York City on board the S/S *Lorraine*."

2. Although residents of New York, Mayflower descendants and original members of the Pilgrim Society will remember Nellie's activities, our files however are not sufficiently antiquated to furnish any information.

J. H. Dunn,
Colonel, General Staff.

By:
J. B. Moore,
Captain, U. S. A.

In reporting Nellie Bly's departure from France, Military Intelligence scornfully dismissed her past exploits as belonging to the long-forgotten past.



Nellie Bly began her remarkable career when she was in her early twenties. She broke new ground for women reporters and became the forerunner of all investigative journalists.

Bolshevism, but he summarized it: to throw a line of troops along the Russian frontier to cut off the passage of agents to and fro. He went on to say that Bly was "eager to devote her remaining days" to the cause of stopping Bolshevism and "is

eager to get in touch with such Government officials as may wish to make use of her efficient self, to send her back to the Dual Empire and from there into Russia where she can get into the confidence of the leaders."¹⁴

He said she could be reached at the McAlpin Hotel for the time being, but "her funds have been so dissipated that she will have to seek cheaper quarters." In this connection, he added:

Miss Bly . . . was arrested yesterday on the charge perjury and interfering with justice and held in \$1000 bail in the Federal Court of Brooklyn. It will be recalled that back in 1914, previous to her departure abroad, Mrs. Seaman was president of the Ironclad [sic] Manufacturing Co., of Brooklyn which went into bankruptcy and brought Nellie into considerable prominence in the courts. It was charged that she was secreting books and documents so that the Commissioner in Bankruptcy could not get possession of them.¹⁵

Military Intelligence's glib summation: "It is our opinion that Miss Bly's aspirations should not be taken seriously."¹⁶



In the National Archives, another little-known cache of Bly information told the sad, sad end of Bly's barrel-manufacturing career.¹⁷

Bly, upon her arrival in Austria back in 1914, arranged to travel to the Russian and Serbian fronts with a group of correspondents. Her stories appeared over a number of months in the *New York Evening Journal*, until Austrian officials blocked all reporting to the Allied nations. The temptation to involve herself in war work—first reporting, then appeals for food for Austrian war widows and orphans—belied her original intent in traveling to Vienna. Bly actually went to see her friend, Oscar Bondy, a wealthy Bohemian sugar refiner, in order to arrange new financing for her company. At the same time, she managed to flee further prosecution on contempt charges

in connection with the bankruptcy proceedings against her company.

Before leaving New York, Bly put the company in the name of her eighty-year-old mother, Mary Jane Cochrane. This was an apparent move to keep it out of the hands of its many creditors. While in Austria, Bly instructed her mother to transfer title of the company to Bondy, probably to secure a personal loan he had made to Bly to defray her expenses while in Austria. Bly's mother followed her daughter's instructions but soon regretted doing so. For as soon as the United States declared war on Austria, Bondy became an enemy alien. The company, by then in his name, immediately fell under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Alien Property Custodian. National Archives files illuminated this unhappy chapter in Bly's life for the first time, including the final and irrevocable breach in relations between Bly and her mother.

Bly's mother filed suit against the Alien Property Custodian in an effort to restore her ownership of the firm. By the end of February 1920,¹⁸ U.S. District Court Judge Edwin L. Garvin ruled that Bly—not her mother—was the firm's rightful owner and that nothing improper had been done in getting Mary Jane to sign control over to Bondy. Bly's mother retained income from the shares of the company for her lifetime, after which the shares were to revert to Bly.

Judge Garvin said so much bitterness between the parties surrounded the case that the court had made every effort to reconcile their conflicting interests "and to restore the natural relation of mother and daughter." That proved impossible, he said. Even though Bly won the case, it turned out there was nothing left to fight over. The firm was too heavily in debt. The severing of relations with her mother, whom Bly had cared for and supported all her adult life, broke Bly's heart. The illustrious history of Nellie Bly and the steel barrel ended in dissipation by litigation.

For the two and a half years remaining until her death from pneumonia on January 27, 1922, Bly was as active and

Claim No. 173
Trust 3574-B
Report 2669,16457
00618
Docket No. N. Y. 95

Title
Mary J. Cochrane, plaintiff, vs. I. Mitchell Palmer, Alien Property Custodian, Oscar Bondy, Steel Barrel Co. of America, Inc. Samuel Blake, George A. Demarest, trustees, defendants.

Venue
District Court, Southern District of New York.

Type of action—
Action to return property seized upon claim of ownership.

Issue and amount involved.
Bill in equity to establish claim under Section 9 to certain stock assigned to defendant enemy Oscar Bondy, Plaintiff claims equipment obtained by fraud and asks to have same set aside. Affidavit under Section 9 dated August 6, 1918, and further duplicate affidavit were filed August 15, 1918. These affidavits were based on allegation that the voting trust certificate representing the shares in the enemy from complainant by fraud.
Except for the possible question of the jurisdiction of

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The final, sad chapter of Nellie Bly's steel-barrel manufacturing career is told in records of the case brought by her mother against the Alien Property Custodian.

engaged as she had been as a young daredevil reporter. Her ruinous finances led her to appeal to Arthur Brisbane, her old friend from *New York World* days, for a job on the *New York Evening Journal*. He put her to work as a feature writer and advice columnist on the editorial page. Bly turned her column into a social service clearinghouse. If an unwed mother needed work to support her child or a new home for the infant, Bly found it. If American seamen could not get work because foreign laborers underbid them for jobs, Bly organized the workers into

an association and wrote repeatedly about their plight. From whatever her place or circumstance, Bly viewed every situation as an opportunity to make a difference in other people's lives as well as her own. As the most famous journalist of her day, as an early woman industrialist, as a humanitarian, even as a beleaguered litigant, Bly kept the same formula for success: Determine Right. Decide Fast. Apply Energy. Act with Conviction. Fight to the Finish. Accept the Consequences. Move on. □

NOTES

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This essay is based on a talk given by Ms. Kroeger at the National Archives on April 25, 1995, on her book *Nellie Bly: Daredevil, Reporter, Feminist* (New York: Times Books, 1994). A documentary about Nellie Bly based on Ms. Kroeger's book is currently in production for the PBS series "The American Experience." The National Archives Office of Public Programs schedules author lectures throughout the year.

The following records in the National Archives were particularly useful in uncovering the portion of Nellie Bly's life described in this article:

Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, Record Group 84: Great Britain, passport vouchers, vol. 5, no. 182.

General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59: Passport Application No. 530, Nellie Bly, dated Aug. 11, 1914, Paris, France; Passport Application No. 1250, June 4, 1915, Vienna, Austria; and Lost or Stolen Passport Files, 138.7/35, Aug. 11, 1915, Jan. 8, 1919, Feb. 13, 1919, Apr. 7, 1919, May 17, 1919, June 4, 1919, June 13, 1919; Vienna embassy, Registration of American citizens, 1907-1920; U.S. Ambassador to Vienna Frederic Penfield's correspondence, 1914; Spanish embassy representation of the United States in Austria, 1917-1922.

Records of the War Department General and Special Staffs, Record Group 165: Military Intelligence Division files, MID 10297-331.

Records of the Office of Alien Property, Record Group 131: Alien Property Custodian, entry 242, Records of GAO Audits, exhibit D-19; entry 199, Report 1709, *Cochrane v. APC*; entry 61A, Records of the Bureau of Trusts, Trust File, 1917-42, Trust 3574; and entry 138, Bureau of Audits, report #3669.

¹ She also worked very briefly in 1895 for *The Chicago Times-Herald*.

² Cable to Spanish embassy, Berne, Switzerland, confirmed No. 4798, Jan. 29, 1919, Spanish embassy representation of the United States in Vienna, 1917-1922, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, National Archives, Washington, DC (hereinafter, records in the National Archives will be cited as RG ____, NA).

³ Brooke Kroeger, *Nellie Bly: Daredevil, Reporter, Feminist* (1994), pp. 393-395.

⁴ Chancellor Karl Renner's office to Nellie Bly, Jan. 23, 1919, Archive der Republik, Österreichisches Staatsarchiv.

⁵ Bly's letters to Wilson, and the replies of his aide, are included in the Woodrow Wilson Papers at the Library of Congress, Paris Peace Conference, 1919.

⁶ A long report of Bly's appearance at the U.S. Passport Office in Paris was filed by 2d Lt. John A. Chamberlain on February 4, 1919, and retransmitted on February 24, 1919, by the assistant chief of staff, G-2, to the chief of the Military Intelligence Division. Statement made by Pvt. John N. Moffitt, Feb. 12, 1919. Both documents are in 10297-331, Records of the War Department General and Special Staffs, RG 165, NA.

⁷ Bly to Woodrow Wilson, Feb. 9, 1919, Wilson Papers, Paris Peace Conference, LC.

⁸ Brig. Gen. D. E. Nolan to assistant chief of staff, G-2, Feb. 15, 1919, Military Intelligence Division, 10297-331, RG 165, NA.

⁹ Correspondence of Lt. Col. Cabot Ward enclosed in Nolan to acting director of military intelligence, Feb. 22, 1919, Military Intelligence Division, 10297-331, RG 165, NA.

¹⁰ Acting Director of Military Intelligence Col. J. M. Dunn to Capt. J. B. Trevor, Feb. 25, 1919, quoting cable from Bordeaux, Military Intelligence Division, 10297-331, RG 165, NA.

¹¹ Trevor to Dunn, Mar. 6, 1919, Military Intelligence Division, 10297-331, RG 165, NA.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Brig. Gen. M. Churchill to Nolan, assistant chief of staff, G-2, GHQ, AEF, May 16, 1919, Military Intelligence Division, 10297-331, RG 165, NA.

¹⁷ This material was originally retrieved from the National Archives by Russell Adams, who passed it along to the author.

¹⁸ See *New York Evening Journal*, Feb. 22, 1920, 22: 3.