

New Labour, the Media, and the British Secret State

Just after the previous issue of Variant appeared I talked with one of the editors and we agreed that I would write something about the relationship between the secret state—the spooks—and the media for this issue. It turned out to be one of those serendipitous occasions, for since then there has been, by British standards, a veritable torrent of information. But while I was thinking about the shape of this essay Foreign Secretary Robin Cook presided over the publication of a Foreign Office report on the notorious Zinoviev letter, which embodies many of the issues; and it is with this that I begin.

Zinoviev

In opposition politicians talk the talk. It is always interesting to see if they can walk the walk when they get into office. Robin Cook began life as a feisty Edinburgh MP who was asking awkward questions about the role of Special Branch in the late 1970s. He was asking some of the right questions about MI5 as the revelations of Peter ‘Spycatcher’ Wright and Colin Wallace came to light in 1986/7; and in the 1990s he was asking some of right questions about the entire British intelligence complex in the wake of the publication of the Scott Report on British arms sales to Iraq. For example, here’s Cook in December 1986 in the first flush of the Peter Wright allegations about MI5 plotting against the Wilson government. ‘Today’s security services are not pitted against the KGB, they parallel it in the surveillance of their domestic population.’ Considering reform, he wondered ‘whether it would not be simpler merely to legislate for the abolition of the security services’, especially in light of Peter Wright’s revelation ‘that MI5 provides no discernible service to the public, even in the intervals between swapping personnel with the Russians and destabilising democratically elected governments.’ 1

These are not the words of someone who understands much about the security and intelligence services—very few politicians do: The subject is complex and being interested in it is rarely good for political careers—and though Cook never followed through on any of these issues, the basic impulse was radical.

On 4 February this year as Foreign Secretary, Cook made extravagant claims for the publication of an official Foreign Office report on the notorious Zinoviev letter. In 1924, the minority Labour Government lost a vote of confidence in the House of Commons, which meant a general election. The next day the Foreign Office was sent a copy of a letter, purporting to come from Grigori Zinoviev, the president of the

Soviet Union’s international organisation, the Comintern, addressed to the central committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain. The letter urged the party to stir up the British proletariat in preparation for class war. Just before the election the letter appeared in the Daily Mail 2 and helped the Labour Party lose the General Election.

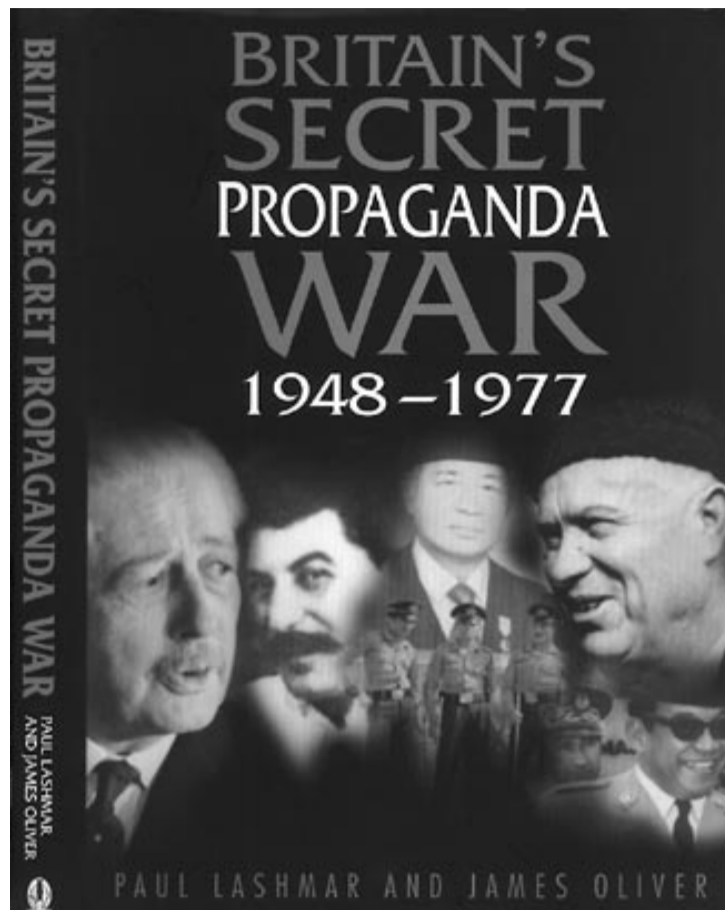
Soon after becoming Foreign Secretary Cook had been asked by a Liberal-Democrat MP if he would open the official MI6 files on Zinoviev. He wouldn’t, but he did commission the Foreign Office’s Official Historian to write a report on the matter. This report, claimed Cook in the Guardian, was ‘a remarkable exercise in openness’... a ‘huge amount of material [was put] into the public domain’. But only the official historian of the Foreign Office is allowed to see the files and the ‘huge amount of material’ consists merely of the report’s 124 pages of text and annexes. This pathetic, officially-filtered dribble of material from 75 years ago could only be described as ‘remarkable’ within the context of the obsessive secrecy of the British state. Further, despite the fact that the official report concludes that two MI6 officers were involved in passing the fake to the Foreign Office, and the Foreign Office was provided with ‘corroborative proofs by MI6 which have now been shown to be suspect’—i.e. more forgeries to support the first one—the report concludes, and Cook accepts, that ‘there is no evidence of an organised conspiracy against Labour by the intelligence agencies’. Quite what is being implied here by the use of ‘organised’ is beyond me. A disorganised conspiracy?

The Zinoviev letter incident is a kind of template for one aspect of the relationship between the British secret state and sections of the British press: Intelligence officers give disinformation to the Tory press to publish to damage the British left. Zinoviev was the big stinky fact that the British secret state could never quite dispose of when it denied running covert operations inside British politics. Which is why, despite being 75 years old, it is still a sensitive subject for Whitehall.

Patriots not sneaks?

In his Guardian piece on the Zinoviev report Cook commented that it represents ‘the maximum amount of material into the public domain without betraying the trust of those who helped Britain by co-operating with our intelligence services.’ Home Secretary Jack Straw has come up with the same line when resisting appeals to open MI5 files. Speaking anonymously to

Robin
Ramsay



David Aaronovitch in the *Independent* on Sunday, Straw was asked when people like Aaronovitch—like Straw, a left-wing student leader in his youth—would get to see their MI5 files.

'Never...you see, these informers, no matter how you feel about them, were recruited on the basis that they were doing a job for their country. As far as they were concerned they were patriots not sneaks.'³

Clearly this is Whitehall's first line of defence against any possible Freedom of Information legislation which might try to include the secret state. And it is, of course, baloney: the 'trust' which is so important to our secret servants can easily be preserved by doing what the Americans do, deleting the names of individuals in the files. Just how far we are from anything resembling the kind of openness to be found in the United States can be seen by comparing this measure, officially sanctioned and written report on Zinoviev, with the publication, via the Freedom of Information Act, of the actual CIA documents which began the CIA's operations against Chile in the 1970s which led to the dictatorship of General Pinochet.⁴

Until fairly recently the identification of a journalist with the intelligence and security services was a news story in itself—and something that would set the pigeons fluttering in the secret sections of Whitehall. But things have changed. Gordon Brook-Shepherd is a journalist who worked in the field of intelligence, chiefly for the *Telegraph*. He is the author of a pair of books about intelligence history which were obviously written with the assistance of the British secret state, chiefly MI6—*The Storm Birds and The Storm Petrels*. In his latest book, *The Iron Maze: the Western Secret Services and the Bolsheviks* (Macmillan 1998), he remarks on page 2 of his 'two volumes on Soviet defectors to the West (a project also launched on my behalf by British intelligence)' (emphasis added). The blurb on the book jacket says that after a war-time career in military intelligence, ending up a Lieutenant-Colonel with the Allied Commission in Vienna, Brook-Shepherd became a journalist.

'His first civil post-war post, as head of the *Daily Telegraph's* Central and South-East European Bureau during the Cold War Years, brought him again in touch with the Western intelligence community. These contacts were renewed at intervals right down to the war in Afghanistan, which he covered on the spot when Deputy Editor of the *Sunday Telegraph*.'

Compare that with the autobiographical blurb on his *The Storm Petrels*, published a decade earlier in 1988. Then Brook-Shepherd was described as having 'a deep understanding of the world of espionage'

(wink, wink) and being a 'much-travelled foreign correspondent'.

The change has come about with the end of the Cold War. But the change, though real, should not be exaggerated. Brook-Shepherd's book *Iron Maze* is a re-examination of certain intelligence aspects of the invasion of the newly-born Soviet Union in 1919 by the combined forces of the US, Japan, the UK and France. While he has had access to newly opened French and Soviet intelligence files, in the UK he was given a series of 'briefings' on the content of the British equivalent files. Not even a long-term associate of MI6 is apparently to be trusted with the British files.⁵

IRD

Though the spook-state relationship—and the spook-state-Conservative Party relationship—can be clearly traced back to the First World War, it expanded enormously after the Second. The psychological warriors and intelligence officers who had worked against Hitler slipped easily into similar roles against the Soviet Union. These changes were formalised with the creation of propaganda wing of the secret state, the Information Research Department (IRD), in 1948. Labour junior Foreign Minister of the time, Christopher Mayhew, died recently thinking IRD was his creation⁶ but he merely adopted proposals which had already been agreed on within Whitehall. The recent very important book by Lashmar and Oliver, *Britain's Secret Propaganda War* (Sutton Publishing, Gloucestershire, 1998) tells the story of IRD in unprecedented detail.

IRD began as Mayhew intended, as the British contribution to the propaganda war then going on between the West and the Soviet Union. But what began as an anti-Stalinist outfit slipped naturally into being an anti-anyone-who-is-anti-British outfit—but using the struggle with the Soviet Union as the framework.⁷ All nationalist and liberation struggles in the British empire in the post-war years were portrayed by IRD as being aspects of a great global conflict with the agents of international communism. IRD became the British enthusiasts for the Great Communist Conspiracy Theory—and not just abroad. As Lashmar and Oliver show, in 1956 they began running operations in the UK against the British Communist Party; and eventually, absurdly, and unsuccessfully, tried in the early 1970s to portray the Provisional IRA as somehow run by Moscow. At the height of its operations, IRD was feeding secret briefings to dozens of British journalists and hundreds world-wide—as, of course, was the CIA and the KGB.⁸

IRD's massive briefing system was the first really organised spin-doctoring of the British media in peace-time. But MI5, MI6 and the Armed Forces also had journalists they could trust to publish information and disinformation for them. The doyen of the Fleet St. spook's conduits in the 1960s and '70s was Chapman Pincher at the *Daily Express*,⁹ who was succeeded at the *Express* by William Massie.¹⁰ In the 1980s the major transmitter of secret state disinformation, mostly from MI5, was *The Sunday Times*, among whose many disgraceful smear campaigns those against Arthur Scargill and the unfortunate Carmen Proetta, who witnessed the SAS execution of the three IRA members on Gibraltar, remain in the memory.

During the Cold War the British intelligence and security services used the media as a source of cover for agents abroad and as a vehicle for anti-Soviet and anti-left propaganda and disinformation. With the end of the Cold War and with the collapse of the British left and trade union movement as serious opponents of capital, the intelligence and security 'game' has changed. MI5 is still doing its best to generate domestic 'threats' to justify its continued existence; but the green movement, the anti-roads and the animal welfare groups hardly constitute an equivalent to the intelligence services of the Soviet bloc. The spooks still have their media assets—as a quick perusal of the *Sunday Telegraph* and *Sunday Times* will

show—but these days, so does every other government department. The Ministry of Defence currently employs 160 PR staff,¹¹ many of whom will have been through the Army's psy-ops training courses. The line between active public relations, spin-doctoring, and running psy-ops campaigns is so faint as to be invisible.

When the Foreign Office's Zinoviev report appeared in early February this year the major media had forgotten—or chose to ignore—the fact that it wasn't the first time since Prime Minister Blair took office that the Zinoviev story had appeared. In August 1997, just after Labour won the General Election, MI6 leaked material about Zinoviev to a couple of friendly journalists, Patrick French ('Red letter day' in the *Sunday Times* 10 August 1997) and Michael Smith ('The forgery, the election and the MI6 spy' in the *Daily Telegraph* 13 August 1997). Both articles were based on the release of certain documents from MI6's archives which purported to throw light on the Zinoviev incident.

French's piece used a briefing about the contents of the documents *before* they had been released. He argued that they show that the 'red menace' depicted in the Zinoviev forgery was real, and thus 'The Zinoviev letter did not need to be faked'. It was a fake which described the real situation; and so, implicitly, was justified.¹² Smith's article, written *after* the documents had been made available, argued that the letter 'may have been forged to protect a British spy at the heart of the Kremlin'—and so, implicitly, was justified.

In other words, the Zinoviev letter not only described the real situation, it was produced to save a brave British agent who had penetrated to the heart of the red menace pointing at the heart of the British way of life. And which right-thinking person could object to that?

These Zinoviev leaks from MI6 were counter-balanced by one from MI5, the tale of Andy Carmichael who described in the *Sunday Times* (27 July 1997) his 'five years as a fully salaried MI5 agent' inside the National Front (NF). According to Carmichael, the National Front, in the guise of National Democrats, had planned to disrupt the Referendum Party's General Election campaign in the Midlands because the Front believed that the Referendum Party would take votes from them (standing as National Democrats). But the NF plot, we are told, 'unsettled senior MI5 officers'. Interference with a British general election 'would prove an enormous scandal' and Carmichael was told to 'pull the plug' on the NF plot. In case we hadn't got the point, the author of the piece, David Leppard, not noticeably critical of the British security and intelligence services in the past, tells us that 'Shortly afterwards MI5 decided to wind down its operations against all extremist parties'.

Patently designed to help persuade the security and intelligence services' new political masters that they had nothing to fear from their secret servants, these stories were crude examples of a fairly recent phenomenon in British politics: The leaking of secret information in the political and bureaucratic interests of the secret services in the Whitehall 'game' of budgets and roles in the changed circumstances of the post Cold War era.

Throughout 1994, for example, the Metropolitan Police and MI5 waged a press war as MI5, *sans* the Red Menace, tried to move in on areas hitherto the property of the police. For the first time in this country the politics of intelligence and security agency budgeting were being acted out—in part—in public. Even the *Daily Telegraph*, was moved to comment on 5 November 1994 on 'a burst of activity among defence institutions scurrying to identify new roles for themselves to justify their budgets and bureaucracies.'¹³ Final confirmation of this aspect of the contemporary spooks' relationship with the media came from the former MI6 officer Richard Tomlinson, who told us that '[MI6] devotes considerable resources to lobbying its position in Whitehall, and has a specialised department whose role is to spin-doctor the

media by wining and dining favoured journalists and editors.¹⁴

It was recently alleged that Dominic Lawson, the editor of the *Spectator*, is a paid asset of MI6. Lawson and MI6 have denied this but, if true, it would be an interesting example of the changing world (alternatively, of declining standards.) For until fairly recently the editor of a conservative (and Conservative magazine) like the *Spectator* could have been relied upon to open his columns to (dis)information from MI6 out of a sense of patriotism and duty. But with the Cold War over, the empire gone, much of the City of London now foreign-owned, Britain now merely a declining region of the European Union, the old discourse of nation and state within which concepts like 'duty' and 'national interest' were meaningful is in disarray. What is 'the national interest' these days? Who is the enemy?¹⁵

notes

- 1 *New Statesman*, 12 December 1986, pp.7 & 7. Thanks to David Turner for the quotation.
- 2 Thus beginning that paper's reputation which led Michael Foot always to refer to it as the Forgers' Gazette.
- 3 *Independent on Sunday* 9 April 1998. The unidentified Minister to whom Aaronovitch talked is obviously Straw.
- 4 The CIA documents are at:
<<http://www.seas.gwu.edu/nsarchive/NSAEBB/NSAEBB8/cho3-01.html>>
<<http://www.seas.gwu.edu/nsarchive/NSAEBB/NSAEBB8/cho3-01.html>>
- 5 He may have been an MI6 officer under cover. There have been persistent rumours that in the 1950s and '60s MI6 paid for the *Telegraph's* foreign news operation. Cf Brook-Shepherd's 'Central and South-East European Bureau' of the *Telegraph*.
- 6 Mayhew's memories of IRD in its early days are to be found in his *A War of Words: A Cold War Witness* (I.B. Tauris, 1998).
- 7 Even this had been prefigured during the war. One of the bits of the story of WW2 which the official British legend is reluctant to acknowledge is the massive campaign of propaganda, smears and blackmail waged by the British state against the isolationists in the United States in the period leading up to US entry into the war.
- 8 This is described in detail by Lashmar and Oliver. The fact that so many of Britain's journalists and newspapers were regurgitating unattributable briefings from IRD may explain why this extremely important book has had virtually no reviews. To my knowledge there is no single volume on the CIA's media operations but Carl Bernstein (of Woodward and Bernstein fame) made a start in his piece 'The CIA and the Media', in *Rolling Stone*, October 20 1977. I can't think of an equivalent for the KGB that is worth reading.
- 9 Pincher's many books, notably the 1978 *Inside Story*, are a testament to a career publishing material given to him by the secret arms of state. In 1991 his *The Truth about Dirty Tricks* contained a staggeringly inaccurate chapter on Colin Wallace which Wallace himself demolished in *Lobster* 21 (May 1991).
- 10 Massie was prolific in the *Daily* and especially the *Sunday Express* in the late 1980s. For perhaps the most grotesque example of his use of spook information see the front page lead in the *Sunday Express* of 14 February 1998, 'Labour MP and the girl reds', which was based round a surveillance photograph of a Labour MP taken in 1964!
- 11 *The Armour-Plated Ostrich*, Tim Webb, Comerford and Miller, West Wickham, Kent, 1998 p.82.
- 12 A new branch of historical research suggests itself: history with the documents included which should have been written but weren't.
- 13 For a couple of examples see the *Independent* of 9 November 1994, which reported that 'MI5 ... and Special Branch are vying to take the lead in representing Britain at Europol's headquarters in The Hague. MI5 is making an aggressive bid to take-over the European Liaison Unit of the Metropolitan Special Branch ...'; and *Computer Weekly* of 10 November, 1994, which reported that 'The security service MI5 is to offer advice to government IT managers on nearly all computer security issues further diluting the role of Whitehall's dedicated computer agency the CCTA.' MI5 successfully moved into both the above and organised crime as well as taking over most of the Metropolitan Police's anti-terrorist operations. MI6 moved into 'the war on drugs' as well as international organised crime.
- 14 *The Guardian* 15 August 1998.
- 15 It is striking that in the 1980s the US citizens, notably the senior CIA officer Aldrich Ames, who were caught spying for the Soviet Union did it simply for money, not for ideology.