Britain's Spies: Meddling Through

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Second of a Series

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Other Cloaks, Other Daggers--II

LONDON—British Intelligence stage-manages coups, burgles safes, blackmails the vulnerable and practices most of the other curious arts familiar to well-endowed agencies with overseas interests.

They have been at it here in a systematic way at least since the 17th Century when Sir Francis Walsingham recruited bright Oxford and Cambridge clerics to spy for the first Queen Elizabeth at the French court.

There have been some notable hits. The overthrow of Mossadegh in Iran has been popularly but wrongly credited to the CIA. According to the best sources here, it was a joint exercise with the British and their superior Persian contacts playing the senior role in selecting General Fazoltah Zahedi, father of the present Iranian ambassador to Washington, to lead the "popular" revolt.

Just recently, Sultan Qaboos of Oman, who owes his throne to a British-staged coup against his father, claimed victory after 10 years' struggle against Communist-supported tribes. The triumph reflects a combination of forces from London and Teheran.

There have been some remarkable misses too. Bruce Lockhart, the British envoy to Moscow and "Master Spy" Sidney Reilly used lavish bribes to buy up the Lithuanian regiments in 1918. But they still failed to seize the Bolshevik Party Central Committee and, as planned, march Trotsky, Lenin and the others half naked through the streets to prison. A parallel plot a few days later to assassinate Lenin misfired only because Dora Kaplan's pointblank shots somehow failed to prove fatal.

A long line of admiring British journalists, some of them undoubtedly on the agency's payroll, have painted the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), as the British foreign intelligence agency is now known, as the world's greatest. When the U.S. got into the business in World War II, OSS officials sat ad-

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miringly at the feet of SIS and used it as a model.

But the tarnish has long since corroded that shine. SIS was painfully damaged when two of its most valuable officers, Kim Philby amd George Blake, turned out to be Soviet agents all along. In 1965, the agency endured the supreme humiliation. It was entrusted to a new Chief or "C" Sir Dick Goldsmith White, who came over from the rival "firm", the counter-espionage agency MI-5).

Today, "C" is Sir Maurice Oldield, 60, a widely respected career spy-bureaucrat. He has displayed remarkable success in battle of Whitehall, expanding SIS budgets at a great rate while everyone else suffers cuts. How good the information his agency produces is another question.

A former SIS officer of great distinction says "SIS is tremendously amateurish, very, very bad. It is irredeemably inefficient."

An ex-research officer who covered a key region from a desk in the 19-story, L-shaped office tower that houses the agency behind Waterloo Station thinks its reports are not much better than those a skillled journalist could produce. This is not surprising. A remarkable number of British journalists abroad are reputed to be SIS officers.

There is little evidence that SIS wavers from the foreign policy line laid down by the Foreign Office. Even its research projects are drawn up with Foreign Office advice. A former British ambassador with an excellent entree to intelligence operations said he was "satisfied that competent political authority would be clued in entree to intelligence operations said he was "satisfied that competent political authority would be clued in on any intelligence operation."

This is not to say that free-wheeling field officers would not hold back on their bosses. "If I was instructed to report on Swiss banks attacking the pound," a former spy recalled, "I certainly would omit the bank that was laundering the payments to my agents, particularly if I had bribed a clerk there."

The most notable modern gaffe came in 1956 when an insouciant SIS asked an overweight and middle-aged frogman, Lionel Crabbe, to look at the bottom of the cruiser bearing Bulganin and Khrushchev on a goodwill trip to London. Crabbe botched the job and died or was killed. The Soviet leaders publicly trumpeted the perfidy of Albion and bad will was spread all around.

Even on that occasion, SIS had gotten clearance from the Foreign Office adviser who sits in on its secret doings. The adviser, who is said to have been egged on by an over-eager subordinate, demonstrated incredible misjudgment, but the affair was not one in which SIS ran a solo off the rails.

There is no solid evidence that the spy agencies have interfered in domestic politics, at least since 1924. But that one makes Watergate look like the fumbling of amateurs. SIS (or MI-IC as it was known then) planted, and probably created, the forged "Zinoviev Letter."

It purported to come from the Kremlin and urged the miniscule British Communist party on to sabotage and subversion.

With the collaboration of MI-5, top Foreign Office civil servants and the Conservative Party, the letter was made public on the eve of an election. It had the desired result, crushing Ramsay MacDonald's first Labor Party government and stopping cold proposed treaties with the young Bolshevik state. There was never any serious inquiry into this fraud, partly because the Daily Mail and The Times of London had lent themselves to the scheme.

Now, says a former MI-5 case officer, it would be unthinkable for a prime minister to ramble through that agency's tens of thousands of dossiers for the sake of a bedtime peek at the sexual aberrations of the famous. He adds, however, that Labor prime ministers are "much more hawkish" than Tories over security breaches and tend to "love all the (security) stuff about their colleagues." The Tories in contrast, "still have a whiff of the gentlemen and respect the notion that you don't open other people's mail" provided, of course, they are of the same class and

nationality.

On paper, there is a tidy division of labor between the Secret Intelligence Service and the Security Service, or MI-5.

SIS does the spying abroad and organizes sabotage and subversion outside the United Kingdom. It is ultimately responsible to Foreign Secretary James Callaghan and, the highest ranking civil servant in the Foreign Office.

The relationship between the Permanent Under Secretary and "C" is crucial. "C" not only needs Foreign Office approval for operations but also its cooperation in placing officers at British embassies abroad. If an SIS man wants to approach a foreign official or civil servant overseas, tap an Oleg Penkovsky in Moscow for information, he nust get Foreign Office approval.

"SIS must go cap in hand to the Foreign Office," says on authority. "They are fleas on the FO back."

Until recently, Sir Thomas Brimelow was the Foreign Office Permanent Under Secretary and he reportedly dined once a week with "C", Sir Maurice Oldfield. More recently, Sir Maurice has had to rebuild this intimate contact with Brimelow's successor, Sir Michael Palliser. Oldfield is planning to retire soon, reportedly giving way to one of his deputies, thereby preserving the post of "C" for a career spy-bureaucrat.

Abroad, many SIS officers, like their counter parts in CIA, employ a diplomatic cover, using the title of embassy first, second or third secretary. Senior officers may be listed as embassy counselor in Washington, Paris and Bonn.

Other SIS officers use the cover of businessman. An unknown number are posing as journalists.

"Fleet Street relies on the secret vote to keep its correspondents in the field these days," one authority insists. The "secret vote" is the figure publicly published for the SIS budget.

This statement is surely an exaggeration. Nevertheless, a contributing editor at one of Britain's most distinguished journals estimates that more than half of the that particular paper's fulltime foreign staffers are on the SIS payroll. There is no evidence, however, that this high proportion is found elsewhere in Fleet Street.

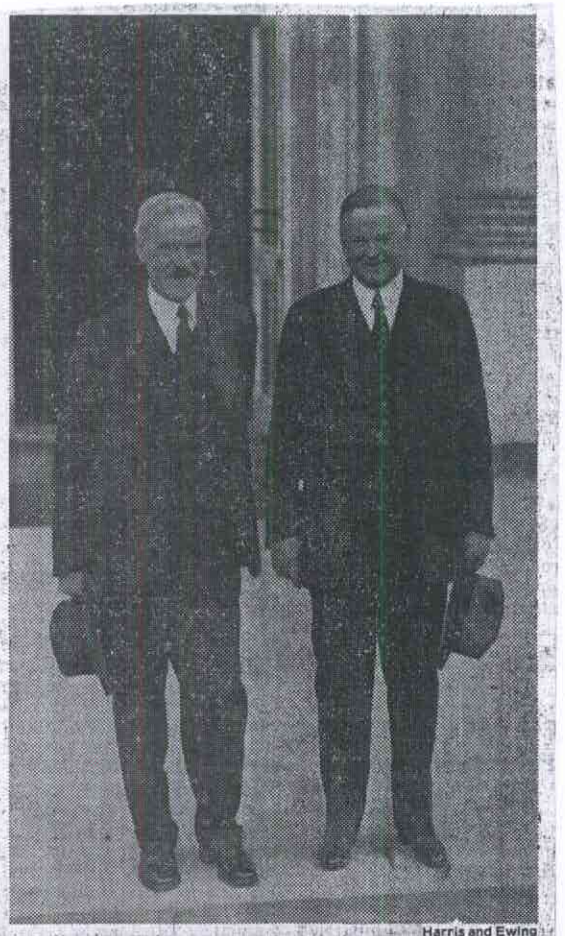
Who is and who is not, is a game non-British foreign correspondents often play among themselves. None is known to have guessed that Philby was still working in 1962 for the SIS' (to say nothing of the KGB) when he was correspondent in Beirut for both The Observer and The Economist. The fact that Foreign Office intervention had landed him The Observer job was successfully concealed.

SIS London headquarters, a characterless office block on Westminster Bridge Road, is labeled only "Century House." Innocent callers are told it houses the Department of the Environment. But each morning, a West Indian bus driver piloting the No. 53 for Plumstead Common cries out as he pulls to the stop: "All right. This where all you spooks get off."

The structure is built around a Mobil gas station, fitting symbol for the agency's long interest in oil and the Middle East, its area of greatest expertise. The young Cockney woman at the pump says of course she knows who her neighbors are. "CIA, inn't it?"

The "other firm" or "those shits across the river," as they often refer to each other, is MI-5, the Security Service. It is a gamekeeper to SIS' poacher, as night watchmen to

THOMAS BRIMELOW MAURICE OLDFIELD
. . .weekly dinner partners



Harris and Ewing

Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, left, on a visit with Herbert Hoover in 1929, after recovering from electoral defeat attributed to 'Zinoviev letter.'

burglar. MI-5 is charged with keeping spies and subversives out of Britain.

Its director general, Sir Michael Hanley, reports to Home Secretary Roy Jenkins. In fact, he has direct access to Prime Minister Harold Wilson on any important or delicate matter.

MI-5's case officers have no power to arrest anyone. They must nail their targets through the Special Branch detectives of Scotland Yard. Together, then, MI-5 and Special Branch constitute a kind of political police, roughly equivalent to the FBI.

If either SIS or MI-5 want a safe burgled in Britain, they must turn to Special Branch. Its detectives will either employ their own skill or find a pliable underworld character.

Those familiar with SIS and MI-5 agree that the latter is remarkably scrupulous. Every wiretap, house search or other questionable invasion of privacy sought by MI-5 should be approved by "The Mothers"— the elderly ladies who review all such applications for the Home Secretary. His signature is required on each one.

Interviews with even the most skeptical of former MI-5 officers did not turn up an instance in which this safeguard was said to have been violated.

To explain the difference between the two services, one man who had been an officer in both, told these stories:

"MI—5 was vetting (examining) a candidate for a sensitive nuclear post and discovered his mistress had been a Communist at university. Under interrogation, the man lied about his relationship with her. Even so, MI-5 cleared him, contending that it really had no business inquiring into his private, sexual life."

"An SIS field officer seduced the mistress of a key minister in a 'hot' country. He then threatened to expose her infidelity unless she turned agent for him. She committed suicide, and that was that."

"The life of an SIS man is squalid and, in human terms, very sad," this ex-officer said. "In MI-5, you feel you're a virtuous man, that Mother London is in your care. MI-5 is anti-revolutionary in the English sense."

Some critics think that MI-5 can be overly scrupulous, at least toward Establishment figures of influence. In SIS certainly, Philby's Westminster School and ChristChurch, Oxford, connection protected him for years. This at least was the judgment of "The Philby Conspiracy" by Bruce Page, David Leitch and Philip Knightley of The Sunday Times, one of the rare adult non-fiction books in this overripe field. books in this overripe field.

A less irregular and vital arm of SIS are the dirty tricks commandos, the Special Air Service or SAS. SAS was founded in World War II by Col. David Stirling and grew to several regiments of handpicked fighters trained in the black arts. It was used for long -range raids behind enemy lines, a characteristic that still makes SAS a valuable tool.

SAS belongs to the army but its forces are on tap for SIS operations. "If we ever take out Andrei Sakharov from some Baltic port at night, the men in that rubber dinghy will be SAS," one espionage authority here says.

SAS officers and noncoms have worked for SIS in Oman for years, staged assaults and ambushes to help topple Sukarno in Indonesia and operate in some murky fashion in Ulster. There, they presumably are working for MI-5 and the army. The IRA accuses SAS operatives of assassination, but no convincing evidence has been presented.

When SIS is interested in a civil war in which the British presence must be at least thinly disguised, it turns to Stirling, now a retired colonel, to supply mercenaries from discharged SAS types. Thus, it was ex-SAS operatives who helped Yemen's royalists in their long and losing battle with left-supported "Republican" tribes.

The IRA's charges, no matter how dubious, raise the question of whether the British services ever resort to assassination today. One well-placed ex-diplomat says:

"Of course there are contingency plans for the assassination of leaders. It's perfectly normal in this sort of dirty game."

He insisted, however, that he had never heard of any such plan having been approved since World War II. "We might winkle out the inconvenient odd sheikh or two," he said, but those are planned as bloodless affairs.

Playing around with the politics of sheikhdoms is probably as much as a diminished British lion can take on these days. Even in Uganda, when Milton Obote was toppled, the London services are said to have played second string to Washington. (That they got Idi Amin in Obotes's place is just another in an endless series of sour projects by all intelligence agencies.)

Despite Britain's shrinking influence and wealth, SIS has prospered. Its real budget is secret. But the published "secret vote" at least gives a clue to spending trends.

In fiscal 1967, the secret vote was 10 million pounds (about $20 million at today's exchange rates.) Five years later, it had grown only 750,000 pounds. But then it rose in successive years to 13 million pounds, 17 million pounds and for the current fiscal year is 22 million pounds. This suggests the budget has more than doubled in three years, a great tribute to the skill of "C", Sir Maurice Oldfield.

"Trade is good, never better," an SIS man remarked at a party the other night.

Some authorities think the real budget is two to three times "secret vote" figure, suggesting that SIS disposes of a little more than $100 million.

What it spends the extra money on is unclear. SIS dislikes the James Bond gadgetry favored by the CIA. It does, however, pay out a lot for electronics, intercepting the messages of others and trying to keep its own secure.

There are few questions raised here about the utility and more or less law-abiding character of MI-5, the counterspy agency. But whether SIS does very much that is helpful or learns a great deal that could not be learned from more conventional sources is unclear.

Unfortunately for its own image, it has recruited at various times some remarkably able writers—Graham Greene, Compton MacKenzie, John Le Carre among others. Their novels picture the service as a haven for silly, reckless and easily gulled characters, hotly pursuing either the worthless or the absurd, frequently leaving sordid tragedies in their wake

They no doubt exaggerate. But the judgment of a professional customer is interesting. Admiral Rosslyn Wemyss, First Sea Lord in World War II, concluded that secret intelligence produces "uncertain information from questionable people."

NEXT: How the Soviets Spy