

CIA Accused in '64 Thames Collision

By Jack Anderson
and Les Whitten

Early on the fog-shrouded morning of Oct. 27, 1964, the East German freighter Magdeberg steamed slowly down the Thames River toward the North Sea. Lashed to her decks were several buses bound for Cuba.

Suddenly, out of the mists appeared a Japanese cargo ship, the Yamashiro Maru, which plowed bow-first into the Magdeberg's side. Fidel Castro's buses wound up ingloriously in the Thames.

An official inquiry concluded that the collision was an unfortunate accident, and to this day the records contain not the slightest hint to the contrary.

But competent sources have told us the forgotten mishap on the Thames was quietly arranged by the Central Intelligence Agency to keep the buses from reaching Cuba. We have now confirmed the fascinating details from sources in both the CIA and the National Security Agency.

The story began with Castro's attempt to break the U.S. economic boycott by purchasing buses from Leyland Motor Corp., the largest vehicle manufacturer in Britain.

Long before the deal was announced, the U.S. government became aware of the negotiations and sought to squash the sale. It would rip an immense hole, Washington feared, in the economic embargo.

Leyland, nevertheless, agreed to supply Cuba with 400 buses and spare parts for \$12.2 million. Castro also took an option to buy 1,000 additional city buses for another \$20 million.

In Washington, Commerce Secretary Luther Hodges didn't attempt to conceal his displeasure. "I don't like it a bit," he fumed. "That hurts us." A State Department spokesman concurred that the sale "certainly does not help."

Officially, U.S. spokesmen warned that any vessel hauling buses to Cuba would be black-listed and denied government-financed cargoes. Unofficially, the CIA began looking for ways to prevent the delivery of the buses.

British intelligence kept Washington advised, according to our sources, on progress of the negotiations and shipping arrangements. The information came in part, from a wiretap the British maintained on Cuban of-

fices in London, our sources say.

The information was transmitted, like other intelligence of mutual interest, by diplomatic pouch to a British Intelligence liaison office in the National Security Agency at Ft. Meade, Md. The details about the buses were relayed by Telex to the CIA.

The first shipment of 16 Leyland buses, nevertheless, arrived safely in Havana aboard an East German cargo ship on July 15, 1964. Our sources don't know whether the CIA attempted to sabotage this shipment. Perhaps there wasn't enough fog on the Thames for a successful ramming.

But the fog was just right when the Magdeberg shoved off with the second load of buses. The Yamashiro Maru struck the East German vessel broadside. Over the Magdeberg's side, 54 crewmen and two passengers scrambled down rope ladders into rescue boats.

Then the big ship heeled over on its side, and the tide dragged it up on the beach. The Yamashiro Maru received minor bow damage but steamed up the river under its own power to the Royal Docks.

Fidel Castro's buses, of course, were baptized in the Thames. British newspaper accounts of the incident report that 42 buses received a damaging drenching. Leyland's own records indicate only 24 buses were aboard the Magdeberg.

Even in a thick London fog, collisions on the Thames are highly unusual. We could find records of only four major accidents on the river during the entire 1960s, the other three involving smaller vessels. That one of these rare accidents, the biggest collision of the decade, should sink Castro's buses was a coincidence that apparently didn't strike the British.

Our associate Joe Spear spoke with Leyland official David Boole in London. There was "never any scandal" about the accident, he recalled. A deliberate sinking, he said, was "certainly something we were blissfully ignorant of."

The waterlogged buses were pulled out of the Thames, dried out and put to use in England. Castro eventually got new buses as replacements.

Footnote: A spokesman said that the CIA had nothing to do with the Thames River accident. He called our account "utter and total poppycock."

Bicentennial Bombs—Law enforcement experts fear that revolutionaries, citing the 1776 revolution as justification, may use violence to attract attention to their radical causes during the bicentennial celebration next year.

This threat of terrorism has prompted the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration to set aside \$1 million to help beef up police forces in the 13 original colonies.

Most of the LEAA money will be spent in Washington, Phila-

delphia and Boston where the largest bicentennial crowds are expected. But the revolutionaries are also expected to stage incidents in the small, historic villages along the East Coast where the original revolution was fought.

In these towns, the police forces aren't trained or equipped for such emergencies. Some LEAA funds, therefore, may go for anti-terrorist training and equipment.

©1975, United Feature Syndicate, Inc.