

and more sensitive role now being undertaken by MI5 in industry and socialist movements. Its work now 'called for new techniques and, above all, for a new type of agent who could infiltrate among the workers without arousing suspicion.'<sup>16</sup>

On several occasions prior to this the Special Branch and MI5 had come under attack in parliament. This usually occurred when the annual Secret Service Vote for 'the foreign and other secret services' came up for consideration. In 1913 the sum agreed to was £46,840; in 1918-19 it was £1,150,000 and in 1919-20 some £400,000. In December 1919 a supplementary sum of £200,000 was agreed by parliament, and one MP took the opportunity to ask a question.

*Mr A. Short:* Apart from the use of that service as a diplomatic weapon, there was a growing volume of opinion, particularly among the organised working class, that the fund was being used for purposes alien to its usual purposes.

*Mr Baldwin* replied: He had no knowledge of the way in which the money was spent.<sup>17</sup>

And again in May 1920 the Chancellor, Mr Chamberlain, declined to give details of the Secret Service Vote.

*Captain Benn:* asked if the Secret Service had not in recent years altered from being a purely military service to being a political service.

*Mr Chamberlain:* said he was not aware of any such change; but if he were to answer even harmless questions, the service would cease to be secret . . .<sup>18</sup>

On 8 October 1924 the Labour government was defeated in the House of Commons because of its withdrawal of the prosecution against John Campbell, the acting editor of the Communist Party journal, *Workers Weekly*. In the ensuing General Election the Labour Party was defeated and the Tories returned to power. Labour's defeat was sealed by the publication of the notorious Zinoviev Letter. The 1,200-word letter, produced on the official notepaper of the Third Communist International, purported to be a communication between Gregory Zinoviev, the President of the International, and Mr A. McManus, a member of the Communist Party and the British representative on the International's executive committee. The letter suggested

<sup>16</sup> Deacon, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

<sup>17</sup> *The Times*, 10 December 1919.

<sup>18</sup> *The Times*, 12 May 1920.

that the British comrades should be working to create a revolutionary insurrection and included the directive that 'Armed warfare must be preceded by a struggle among the majority of British workmen, against the ideas of evolution and peaceful extermination of capitalism. Only then will it be possible to count on the complete success of an armed insurrection.'<sup>19</sup> At this time ruling-class paranoia over the revolution in Russia and the militancy of socialist movements in Britain was at a high-point. Many in the Tory Party, the press, the Ministries and the intelligence agencies considered the Labour Party and the MacDonald government as being only one step removed from the Russian Bolsheviks – the reality of MacDonald's reformism and clear hostility to the working class notwithstanding. What tended to confirm this belief was the strong lobby within the Labour ranks for a trade agreement with Russia. When the election was called this put an end to the ratification of the Anglo-Russian trade treaties then before parliament. However, the proposed treaty together with the Zinoviev letter 'enabled the Conservative Party to paint MacDonald as the dupe and abettor of Bolshevism's subversive aims'.<sup>20</sup>

The Zinoviev plot involved two groups of conspirators. Firstly, there were the two White Russians who forged the letter and Zinoviev's signature. Secondly, a group in Britain who sought to exploit the letter's implications and who provided 'proof' of its authenticity – these were a middle-man named Thurn, members of MI6 and MI5, the top personnel at the Foreign Office, and the Tory Party. The two forgers in Berlin were Alexis Bellegarde and Alexander Gumansky, who were both members of an exiled White Russian organisation, the Brotherhood of St George. The precise route of the letter to Britain is still uncertain but what is clear is that a copy was in the hands of the Foreign Office by 10 October. Thurn also had a copy and touted it around trying to ensure that its contents were made public. At the Foreign Office, the head of MI6, Sinclair, got together with Admiral 'Blinker' Hall (the ex-chief of the Naval Intelligence Department) and several others. The upshot was that Thurn appeared to have been paid £7,500 by Tory Party Headquarters and they in turn arranged for the letter's publication in the *Daily Mail*. Throughout Sinclair master-minded the operation. The publication of the letter was essential to the plotters to bring it to public attention, but it was even more important for the Foreign Office to authenticate the letter's origin.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted by Deacon, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

<sup>20</sup> Chester, Fan and Young, *The Zinoviev Letter* (1967) p. 33.

Before looking at the motivation of the Foreign Office it must be asked what the Prime Minister, MacDonald, was doing about the letter?<sup>21</sup> MacDonald, who was away from London campaigning in the country and his own constituency, had been sent a copy of the letter by the Foreign Office – who, as already mentioned had a copy on 10 October. MacDonald instructed the Foreign Office to establish the authenticity of the letter and, pending the outcome of this, to draft a protest to the Russian government. On 23 October MacDonald got a copy of the draft protest which he returned uninitialled – that is, no authority to act was being given until proof of the letter's origin had been established. On 24 October, without the permission of the Prime Minister or any other member of the government, the Foreign Office sent the protest to the Russian embassy and without waiting for a reply the whole story was given to the press – four days before the election. The publication of the protest to the Russians itself served as authentication of the letter's contents and origin.

This unauthorised action by the Foreign Office was no accident. The top administrator at the Foreign Office, Sir Eyre Crowe, the Permanent Under-Secretary, and Sinclair, head of MI6, were convinced that a new Labour government would seek to limit the work of the secret service. 'And once a small, but powerful group of threatened men had convinced themselves that the letter was genuine, their incipient institutional paranoia made it almost inevitable that they should become equally convinced that Ramsay MacDonald was secretly plotting to prevent the letter's publication.'<sup>22</sup> It is clear MacDonald had no such intention, but the informal network of conspirators within the Foreign Office and outside expressly set out to do the maximum damage to the Labour Party. The steps taken by the Foreign Office to authenticate a letter they wanted to believe was genuine were laughable. Trevor-Roper describes the report from Sinclair to Sir Eyre Crowe as follows:

'It amounts to simply this: our man in Riga (which was not then in the Soviet Union) says that he knows of a conversation between Chicherin and Zinoviev which proves the letter to be genuine. That so contemptible a snippet of unverifiable gossip from an unidentified and distant source – and Riga was notoriously the factory of anti-Soviet propaganda and fiction – should have been sent, as authoritative proof of fact, by the Head of the Secret Service to the Permanent Under-Secretary of the Foreign Office, shows

<sup>21</sup> MacDonald combined the posts of Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary.

<sup>22</sup> Chester, Fay and Young, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

that MI6 under Admiral Sinclair, had lost all contact with rational methods . . .'<sup>23</sup>

What must remain a strong suspicion in this whole affair is that one of the SIS's notorious anti-Russian spies, Sydney Reilly (who was conversant with all means of forgery), set the whole operation up in Berlin. Moreover, the unidentified source in Riga used by Sinclair may well also have been Sydney Reilly. Although the Labour Party had its suspicions about the document it was not until 1966 that most of the story came out when the widow of Alexis Bellegarde, one of the two White Russians, spoke to the *Sunday Times*.

Immediately after losing the election the Labour Party, not knowing the whole story but at least being aware of how the Foreign Office's release of the protest without MacDonald's agreement influenced the result, launched into an attack on the intelligence agencies in general. *The Daily Herald* declared that 'the cleaning up of Scotland Yard and of its allied and associated departments will be one of the first jobs of the next Labour government.'<sup>24</sup>

At the Labour Party Conference the next year the call to expose the spies on the working class was repeated. No Labour government has however instituted a full-scale investigation into internal surveillance and curtailed the spying activities of these agencies on working-class movements. For all their huff-and-puff when in opposition the Labour Parliamentary Party when in office has not wanted to appear less patriotic than the Tories.

The recruitment of new agents and personnel to MI5 continued throughout the 1930s and the source of recruits extended from the tried and trusted ex-Army and colonial officers to include people from all parts of the country and from many different occupations.<sup>25</sup> A teacher recruited in 1936, Dick Goldsmith White, later went on to head both MI6 and MI5.<sup>26</sup> On the one hand intellectuals were recruited for assessment and decision-making jobs at Headquarters, and on the other people were engaged who could pursue their normal occupations while reporting back either on an organisation they had joined or the industry they worked in. Many of the new recruits

<sup>23</sup> Trevor Roper, *The Philby Affair* (1968) pp. 70-71.

<sup>24</sup> 6 November 1924.

<sup>25</sup> Of this period H. Trevor Roper commented that 'no one was more fanatically anti-communist, at this time, than the regular members of the two security services, MI6 and MI5.' *The Philby Affair* (1968) p. 28.

<sup>26</sup> See p. 189.