# Spycops in context:
# A brief history of political policing in Britain

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## About the author

Connor Woodman is the 2017/18 Barry Amiel & Norman Melburn Trust Research Fellow, hosted by the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies.

## Acknowledgments

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# Foreword

Since late 2017 the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies has been delighted to host The Barry Amiel & Norman Melburn Trust Fellow, Connor Woodman. This annual research fellowship gives young researchers the opportunity to further develop their skills and interests through partnering with a host not-for-profit organisation.

The undercover policing of political groups in England and Wales was one of two subjects selected for this fellowship. Developing a research agenda about the hidden subject of undercover policing requires many skills. Connor has approached this opportunity with an energy and determination that are in evidence in this, his first of two *Spycops in context* papers.

During the course of the year, Connor has produced a number of online articles published by the Centre, *Novara Media, Jacobin* and others, commenting on matters including the progress of the third year of the ongoing public inquiry into undercover policing. This publication allows Connor to explore aspects of undercover policing in more detail than that afforded by his online articles.

In this publication, Connor looks to place the two undercover police units which are the focus of the current Undercover Policing Inquiry, within a longer history of state surveillance of political groups in Britain. This is a huge task. Ambitious in scope and breadth, the account offered here is not intended to be comprehensive or the final word.

As Connor states, 'when it comes to the secret state, one has to collect granules of information, put them together and a larger sculpture emerges.' Connor's 'collecting' has involved drawing from a wide range of sources. The 'granules' that have emerged are shared in a number of discrete examples of state interference and spying on political groups across a time period from the late eighteenth century to the early twenty-first century. Each of these cases is fascinating and many have been the subject of detailed study in their own right. But it is the scope provided by bringing these examples together that underscores the key point of this briefing: interference, repression, and deception are consistent elements in the state's approach to political protest and dissent.

**Helen Mills is Senior Associate at the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies**

The companion paper, *Spycops in context: Counter-subversion, deep dissent and the logic of political policing,* provides a more in-depth analysis of how political policing has functioned to eliminate deep dissent against the status quo in Britain.

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# Introduction

*It was the fond belief of the English people that the employment of spies in domestic affairs was un-British, and belonged to the 'continental spy system'. In fact it was an ancient part of British Statecraft as well as of police practice.*
Thompson, 1963[1]

*Intelligence is not about rogue agents operating wildly and freely; nor is it an unaccountable business far removed from the corridors of political power [...] The link between Number 10 and Britain's intelligence agencies, as intimate as it is secret, lies at the heart of the British establishment.*
Aldrich and Cormac, 2016[2]

Since 2010, coverage of the two police units dedicated to the undercover infiltration of political groups, the Special Demonstration Squad (SDS) and National Public Order Intelligence Unit (NPOIU), has fixated primarily on the *individual* impacts of the operations, and criminal activity by individual officers. Concern has often centred on the women who were deceived into relationships and, as one put it, 'raped by the state',[3] the Debenhams store allegedly firebombed by an undercover police officer in the 1980s,[4] and the officers who may have committed perjury by standing in court under false names.[5]

Whilst understandable – the immediate human impacts of the operations are a key issue – this focus has rarely been complemented by an analysis of how these operations fit within the broader history of the state management of dissent. A focus on the particular harms committed allows the units to be described as a 'rogue' aberration, a solar flare disturbing an otherwise placid horizon.[6]

The state has thus far oscillated between justifying the operations as legitimate responses to subversive and public order threats, and disowning the most extreme undercover behaviours as deviations from a fundamentally noble enterprise. At the height of pressure in 2014, when it was officially confirmed that the SDS had spied on the Stephen Lawrence justice campaign, the Conservative police minister, Damian Green, could only declare the unit 'out of control'.[7]

Sir John Mitting, the chair of the Undercover Policing Inquiry – announced in 2014 with wide-ranging terms of reference – similarly appears to be limiting the Inquiry's remit to *particular instances of wrongdoing* rather than considering the question of the undercover operations' role and justification as a whole.[8] In the dominant media discourse, at least, consideration has rarely been given to wider questions: why were the police carrying out these operations? And in whose interest?[9]

With the Inquiry not set to report until 2023 at the earliest, the urgent need for a longer historical view of the police and intelligence agencies is clear. Spycops – undercover police officers – need to be placed within the context of British history.

The details of the immediate institutional causes of the two units' formation can currently only be outlined in embryonic form. There is enough material about the British state's long-running concern with domestic dissent, however, to discern how the units fit within a structure of state control: these undercover units were one section of an entire apparatus, the function of which is to bound, constrain and delimit the acceptable parameters of political dissent. These undercover operations are the sharpest edge in an armoury of political policing, an armoury which is an inextricable feature of Britain's social system. Indeed, as Brodeur stated in 1983, political policing is 'a core feature of high policing instead of merely being a suspicious peripheral aspect of the police apparatus'.[10]

The two publications in the *Spycops in context* series are concerned with establishing this general point about the secret state's political aims over time. This publication is best read before and alongside its companion paper, *Spycops in context: Counter-subversion, deep dissent and the logic of political policing*. The companion paper provides a more explicit examination of how the secret state has functioned to contain and undermine dissent, the relation between counter-subversion, counter-domestic-extremism and public order policing, and the role of industry and economics. This is the story of state repression, the dark counterpart to the social struggles that have long been waged within the UK.

## Terminology, intelligence and state agencies

This publication provides a general empirical overview of domestic political policing within Britain, demonstrating how vast the state's system of political monitoring has been and situating the SDS and NPOIU within that history. The first major section, 'Before the SDS: political policing until the 1960s', covers the emergence of the formal police and its specialised political section, Special Branch, in the nineteenth century. The section then touches on the early development of the official intelligence agencies in the first half of the twentieth century and ends with a detailed case study of how the state worked overtime to surveil and restrict the activities of the Communist Party of Great Britain. The second substantive section, 'Political policing, 1956-present', spans the latter half of the twentieth century, dealing with the founding of the SDS in the context of extra-parliamentary upsurges and state concern with Trotskyism and Black Power. After examining suspected plots to undermine and overthrow Prime Minister Harold Wilson, the section ends with a case study of the development of NPOIU.

What follows below is based on a confluence of publicly-available sources: newspaper reports, scholarly studies, authorised or semi-official histories of the intelligence agencies, memoirs of former state officials, accounts of whistleblowers, investigative reports, books and documentaries, state documents released under *The Freedom of Information Act 2000* and published on the Special Branch Files Project and, in the case-study of the NPOIU's development, previously unexamined documents held in the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) archives at Hull History Centre. When it comes to the secret state, one has to collect granules of information, put them together and a larger sculpture emerges. Rarely has such a panoramic view of the British domestic anti-subversion apparatus been offered, drawing out the patterns and continuities unapparent when examples, like undercover policing, are viewed in isolation.

> **When it comes to the secret state, one has to collect granules of information and a larger sculpture emerges**

The purpose of what follows is to show that the SDS and NPOIU were not inexplicable phantasmagoria, appearing suddenly in ghostly disconnection from the state and political power. Rather, the units were imbued with the rationale and tactics of political policing evident across the whole period.

### 'Political policing' and imperialism

The term 'political policing' demarcates supposedly ordinary, non-political policing from that aimed at explicitly political actors. Whilst this captures a certain reality – that political and campaigning organisations have been targeted by different sections of the state than, for instance, criminal gangs – it also wrongly suggests that policing can be non-political. In reality, and as parts of the *Spycops in context* papers will suggest, the function of the police is political *in general,* in the sense that it is part of a system of social control aimed at particular sections of the population. Political policing here, then, is used to describe those branches of the secret state aimed at *explicit political dissenters* – rather than to imply that only this form of policing can be political.

This publication focuses primarily on domestic political policing, largely because the SDS and NPOIU were deployed overwhelmingly – but not exclusively – within the territory of England and Wales.[11] Their umbrella organisations, the Metropolitan Police Special Branch and ACPO, were largely national bodies – this paper is, for the most part, constrained by that institutional demarcation. It is important to remember, however, that up until the 1960s the organisations which appear in this story were often imperial institutions, spanning a global empire. MI5, for example, as intelligence historian Calder Walton puts it, 'was not simply a "domestic" intelligence service, as is sometimes thought, but was Britain's imperial intelligence service, responsible for security intelligence matters [...] in all territories across Britain's global empire'.[12]

> **Counter-subversion has been, to an extent, rebranded in the twenty-first century as 'domestic extremism' policing**

### Intelligence agencies and methods

Intelligence agencies are roughly demarcated by their territorial reach, and the form of intelligence they collect. I use the term 'secret state' as short-hand for the collection of agencies which constitute the (semi)clandestine monitoring, investigation and secret operations arm of the state. 'Informers' is used to refer to largely untrained individuals who are recruited by the secret state to pass on information, usually about an organisation they are already part of. 'Agents' and 'officers' are used to denote state employees – for example, MI5 employees – who are sent to clandestinely penetrate particular organisations as part of their

paid employment. 'Agents provocateurs' refers to informants or agents who deliberately seek to incite radical action by a political organisation in order to legitimise a state crack-down.

The activities of each of the agencies which feature in this paper vary and overlap. Of primary interest here is what is officially termed 'counter-subversion': state activity aimed against domestic political actors who seek to undermine or overthrow the established authorities.[13] Counter-subversion has been, to an extent, rebranded in the twenty-first century as 'domestic extremism' policing. Other sections of the intelligence agencies deal with 'counter-espionage' (combatting foreign intelligence operations in British territories), and more pro-active operations, including 'strategic deception' (deceiving hostile intelligence agencies) and cyber-war. Special Branch, as part of the police, also had intelligence-gathering duties for public order issues. The slippery and contentious definition of subversion, and its relation to domestic extremism and public order, is taken up in the companion paper, *Spycops in context: Counter-subversion, deep dissent and the logic of political policing.*

MI5, also known as the Security Service, is a key player within the secret state. The intelligence agency emerged from the Secret Service Bureau in 1909. It holds no executive powers of arrest, but sends agents and informants (human intelligence) across the country. It is also permitted to commit crime within the borders of the UK.[14] MI5's 'eyes and ears', and the service which has traditionally executed arrests and warrants, is Special Branch.[15] The original Special Branch emerged in the 1880s as a department of London's Metropolitan Police, which had national policy-setting duties until its absorption into the Metropolitan Police's Counter-Terrorism Command in 2006. The Special Demonstration Squad was a section within the Metropolitan Special Branch.

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Following the establishment of the leading Special Branch in the capital, most other provincial and urban police forces developed their own special branches, which had secure lines of communication back to Scotland Yard and would gather local intelligence for the Metropolitan Special Branch and MI5. In the 1970s, for example, MI5 asked local special branches across the country to gather information on the activities of the National Council for Civil Liberties (later Liberty), which was a listed 'subversive' organisation at the time.[16] In Northern Ireland, the Royal Irish Constabulary's Special Branch was also relatively independent from the mainland's special branch system. Local provincial special branches still exist in England and Wales. In this paper, 'Special Branch' is used to refer to the Metropolitan Police Special Branch.

> In the 1970s MI5 asked local special branches across the country to gather information on the activities of the National Council for Civil Liberties (later Liberty)

MI6, another child of the Secret Service Bureau and also known as the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), is Britain's overseas human intelligence and espionage agency. Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), formerly Government Communications and Cypher Security (GC&CS), mainly intercepts electronic and online communications (signals intelligence) and, although the largest and most secret of all the agencies, features in this history the least. The Association of Chief Police Officers was a private company which brought together the Chief Constables (and equivalent) of the 40+ English and Welsh police jurisdictions. The Association shared information, developed national police policy and deployed training programmes. Under its Terrorism and Allied Matters (TAM) section, ACPO eventually moved into national intelligence collection. In 1999, TAM established a specialist police unit with powers of undercover infiltration, the National Public Order Intelligence Unit. (See *Table 1: Elements of the British Secret State*, overleaf)

The responsibilities of, and demarcation between, the different agencies has shifted considerably over the decades, sometimes as the result of fierce turf wars. As early as the 1930s, at the behest of MI5, Special Branch was sending undercover police officers to the London speeches of anti-colonial leader, Jawaharlal Nehru, later to be prime minister of India between 1947 and 1964.[17] Special Branch was founded over two decades before MI5, but the latter agency slowly whittled away responsibilities from the former. Whilst Special Branch was broadly mandated to focus on politically-tinged public (dis)order, and MI5 on high-level subversion, in reality the two were often intermingled, a fact recognised in the Home Office guidelines.[18]

Histories of British intelligence and policing have tended to separate Special Branch and MI5 activity, rarely bringing the two together – and often making substantial errors of fact when dealing with their unfamiliar half.[19] Special Branch is usually viewed as the younger sibling of MI5, ignored in many histories in favour of the latter. In reality, Special Branch was a powerful political policing agency in its own right, and the exact power relation between the two organisations is largely 'obscure' to outsiders.[20] This paper, whilst focusing on the Branch, seeks to bring the two together.

**Table 1**. Elements of the British Secret State

| Agency | Extant | Territory | Intelligence type | Activities |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| MI5 (Security Service) | 1909 (predecessor) - present | The UK and British imperial territories; later just the British realm, and as of 1992 Northern Ireland | Human intelligence, signals intelligence | Counter-subversion, counter-espionage, counter-sabotage, strategic deception |
| MI6 (Secret Intelligence Service) | 1909 (predecessor) - present | Non-British overseas territories | Human intelligence, signals intelligence | Counter-espionage, espionage, strategic deception |
| Government Communications Headquarters | 1921 (predecessor) - present | Global | Signals intelligence | Counter-espionage, strategic deception, cyber war |
| Metropolitan Police Special Branch | c.1883 - 2006 | Britain and (until 1992) Northern Ireland; primarily London | Human intelligence, signals intelligence | Police investigation and arrest, counter-subversion, counter-espionage, public order policing |
| Association of Chief Police Officers | 1948-2015 | Britain and Northern Ireland | Human intelligence, signals intelligence | Coordination of national policy across all police forces |

## Secrecy and sources

A perennial problem facing those who seek to delve into Britain's secret state is the country's 'culture of eye-watering secrecy' which,[21] as Christopher Moran puts it, became 'an obsession and all-consuming' for the British elite post-1945.[22]

### The paper-pulpers and posterity pilferers

The very existence of the major intelligence agencies was officially denied for decades; the façade was only lifted at the turn of the 1990s.[23] Some cabinet committees dealing with covert action and intelligence – like the Joint Action Committee, created in 1964 – have been considered so secret that their name has rarely been spoken, even in government circles.[24] As late as the 1980s Margaret Thatcher was still concealing the truly massive size of GCHQ from government ministers.[25] Lord Neuberger, a senior judge, accused MI5 of a 'culture of suppression' during Gordon Brown's premiership.[26]

As historian Bernard Porter puts it, the practice of the secret state is largely 'nothing but mystery and deception: which, because it extended to posterity, affects the historian too'.[27] Porter, seeking access to the pre-First World War Special Branch archive in the 1980s, was falsely told that the Branch's records had been destroyed during the War;[28] two decades later another researcher would have to fight a drawn-out battle through the Information Commissioner's Office to gain access to them.[29] Some of the most detailed works on the intelligence agencies have been official or authorised histories, like Christopher Andrew's 2009 history of MI5, which rely primarily on closed archives unavailable to other scholars.[30]

We now know that the British Empire, for its part, enacted a massive process of document destruction and concealment, termed Operation Legacy, in order to mask its misdeeds as the sun set on the imperial leviathan.[31] As late as 1991-1992, 170 boxes of some of the most sensitive imperial papers were destroyed in Whitehall, possibly in anticipation of an incoming

> The country's 'culture of eye-watering secrecy' became 'an obsession and all-consuming' for the British elite post-1945

Labour government.[32] This process of historical eradication appears to be alive and well today: the Metropolitan Police have been accused of shredding a 'lorry load' of documents relating to mass corruption in 2003, and possibly destroyed thousands of relevant documents two months after the Undercover Policing Inquiry was announced in 2014.[33] All government departments

have 'Sensitivity Reviewers', dedicated staff who systematically weed the historical record for anything which might cast the state or their department in a negative light.[34]

What dark secrets have been forever lost to the shredders and paper-pulpers, however, and just how far the British state has been willing to go in its political wars, we are unlikely to ever know. In an interview with *Guardian* journalist Ian Cobain, published in 2016, one Royal Navy Sensitivity Reviewer confessed that parts of the paper trail he shredded, double-

> **What dark secrets have been forever lost to the shredders and paper-pulpers, we are unlikely to ever know**

shredded and then burned dealt with 'exceptionally dark' episodes, such as British service-people being sacrificed in order to protect intelligence sources and methods.[35] The Sensitivity Reviewer's claim, it seems, is not far-fetched. It is highly likely that Freddie Scappaticci, head of the IRA's internal security unit and a top British informer, was given the green-light by British military intelligence to kill other British informers in order to maintain his cover.[36]

## The Official Secrets Act

Gluing the whole edifice together is *The Official Secrets Act* (1889, 1911, 1920, 1939, 1989), a draconian piece of legislation wielded freely to intimidate civil servants and state officials into concealing almost anything to do with intelligence and operations. The Act has been a key legislative and cultural institution enforcing the extreme secrecy of the British establishment. During the 1950s, an entire civil service working group designed posters outlining the provisions of Section 2 of the Act to adorn the walls of government departments.[37]

Although state officials insist that the Act is a necessary national security protection, it is routinely ignored when state officials want to write retirement memoirs or spin doctors want to leak tit-bits to the press. Special Branch willingly cooperated with the 2002 BBC documentary, *True Spies,* which first publicly revealed the existence of the Special Demonstration Squad (SDS). The then-head of Special Branch privately asserted that the programme would be 'enormously to the credit of those who served in Special Branch'.[38] A decade later, the police were threatening an SDS whistle-blower with the Act, attempting to have court cases thrown out, and arguing for a public inquiry to be held in secret in order to prevent anything about the SDS emerging – the same SDS which they had revealed, when it suited them, in the 2002 BBC documentary.[39]

> **The Act is routinely ignored when state officials want to write retirement memoirs or spin doctors want to leak tit-bits to the press**

Often, the only thing the Act works to protect the public from is the reality of the British state's actions. As Ian Cobain repeatedly points out in his 2016 book, *The History Thieves,* governments have routinely gone to extraordinary lengths to conceal aspects of the secret state, long after foreign powers have acquired extensive knowledge of the phenomenon in question: the key population being kept in the dark is the British populace. This secrecy has been, to an extent, successfully overcome by enterprising journalists and historians. But as researchers Dave Smith and Phil Chamberlain put it, 'What activists and researchers have discovered so far is just the tip of an anti-democratic iceberg'.[40]

# Before the SDS: political policing until the 1960s

## The early police: between the people and the army

The presence of spies, citizen informers and infiltrators is not an aberration of British history, an unexpected ailment beginning and ending in a late twentieth century spasm. Rather, spying and informing have been corollaries of British modernity, tools of the state (and private) power drawn upon for political purposes.

### Before the professional police

State spies concerned themselves with political and industrial matters as early as the 1790s, as a wary British establishment looked askance at the revolutionary ferment across the Channel. The Home Office sent 'Citizen' Groves and William Metcalfe to penetrate the reformist London Corresponding Society (LCS) in 1794.[41] The LCS sought universal male suffrage and increased parliamentary powers, goals considered dangerously revolutionary by the contemporaneous authorities. Groves' initial probing was followed by the state sledgehammer, as LCS and similar organisations were flatly outlawed in 1799. State infiltration has, from the start, been one component of a wider repertoire of repression.

Informant use became 'virtually a routine practice' in 'the larger industrial centres during the Luddite years' of the early nineteenth century,[42] as insurgent textile workers resisted the imposition of new livelihood-destroying industrial technologies. Local magistrates and the Home Office sought whatever

> **State infiltration has been one component of a wider repertoire of repression**

intelligence necessary to crush the Luddites. 'Oliver the Spy', who toured the militant industrial regions of the Midlands and the North, played a part as agent provocateur in the armed 1817 Pentrich rising in Derbyshire, which was quashed with banishments and beheadings.[43]

### The Metropolitan Police

Prior to the establishment in 1829 of the earliest British police force in London, the army was often deployed to manage public disorder and expressions of discontent. Troublingly for the state, military tactics honed for foreign battle translated poorly when directed against demonstrations and strikes. A harsh military put-down of non-violent demonstrators often served to bolster the cause in question.

> **Prior to the establishment in 1829 of the earliest British police force in London, the army was often deployed to manage public disorder and expressions of discontent**

Most infamously, in 1819, the army was let loose on a mass assembly calling for the extension of the voting franchise in Peterloo, Manchester, killing 18 and injuring over 650. The massacre outraged radicals, liberals and reformers, and prompted the establishment of the *Manchester Guardian* as a critical liberal voice. Clearly, relying on brute force of arms was failing to effectively manage dissent.[44]

Although the domestic deployment of the army continued – 24 times from 1878-1908, for instance – a new force was pioneered,[45] one which could stand between the army and the people as a domestic institution blending the required mix of coercion and consent. Overcoming significant opposition – one parliamentary committee in 1822 argued it would be 'difficult to reconcile an effective system of police, with that perfect freedom of action and exemption from interference which are the great privileges and blessings of society in this country' – the Metropolitan Police was founded in 1829.[46]

As new police forces were rolled out across the provincial areas towards the middle of the century, heavy working-class resistance attempted to halt the expansion. Police were described as 'blue devils', a 'horde of blue locusts',[47] and mass gatherings, pamphleteering and anti-police riots greeted their arrival. As Robert D Storch puts it, 'A great deal of the bitterness

against the new police was a consequence of the fact that they were placed among the working classes to monitor all phases of working-class life – trade-union activity, drinking, gambling, sports as well as political activity'.[48] Even Sir John Woodcock, then HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary, admitted in 1992 that, 'the police never were the police of the whole people but a mechanism set up to protect the affluent from what the Victorians described as the dangerous classes'.[49]

A key battle emerged between the newly formed police and the National Political Union of the Working Classes (NPU). As police attempted to break up an NPU demonstration in London in 1833, one officer was killed. The jury, reflecting the depth of anti-police feeling at the time, returned a verdict of justifiable homicide.[50] One of the earliest known professional police infiltrators was Sergeant William Popay, deployed into the NPU in 1832. A parliamentary inquiry later found that Popay 'incited members of the organisation to commit offences which they would not otherwise have done',[51] acting as another agent provocateur. Crucially, the targeting of political movements by the state long pre-dates the commencement of the Cold War, a common explanation (and often justification) proffered for the extensive state monitoring of the twentieth century.

> **As new police forces were rolled out across the provincial areas heavy working-class resistance attempted to halt the expansion**



## The emergence of British intelligence: a product of the imperial boomerang effect

> *Our Security Service is more than national; it is Imperial.*
> Sir Eric Holt-Wilson, Deputy-Director of MI5, 1934[52]

Special Branch emerged within the Metropolitan Police in the 1880s. Originally designed to combat the activity of the Irish Fenians – armed anti-colonials set on expelling the British from Ireland – the Branch would develop into the UK's quotidian political police, responsible for the day-to-day monitoring of dissidents, particularly on the Left. Although the Branch's responsibilities would come to include border monitoring, VIP protection, and Islamist groups, keeping tabs on the Left was a *raison d'être* for most of its existence.

The predecessor to MI5 and MI6, the Secret Service Bureau, was founded in 1909, 'in the context of a wave of greatly exaggerated official and popular concern over the threat of foreign espionage',[53] and 'shrouded in secrecy from the start'.[54]

These pillars of the British secret state were, in part, a product of what Hannah Arendt called the 'imperial boomerang' effect.[55] A mechanism perceptible within colonial state structures, the imperial boomerang occurs when techniques of repression intended to maintain control over colonised populations migrate back into the domestic metropolis, often initially targeting those migrant populations hailing from the colony.

Special Branch, for example, was initially informally known as the Special Irish Branch, designed to scupper militant pro-independence actions by Irish anti-colonials. Numerous intelligence and investigation techniques, from fingerprinting to signals intelligence collection, were pioneered in the imperial context, often in India.[56] Slowly the mechanisms of social control, honed and perfected in the colonial laboratory, are incorporated into the domestic sphere and expand their targets to include a range of movements and individuals outside the original purview. The Metropolitan Police, from which Special Branch was spawned, was itself modelled directly on Sir Robert Peel's experience in forming a professional police force in colonial Ireland.[57]

> **The imperial boomerang occurs when techniques of repression migrate back into the domestic metropolis**

The Secret Service Bureau, it should be noted, was founded by the Committee of Imperial Defence.[58] At the time, the intelligence apparatus was crafted with the maintenance of empire in mind, not just domestic control. Indeed Calder Walton (2013) notes that, 'it was a violent colonial "small war" in an outpost of the British empire, the Second Anglo-Boer War in southern Africa [...] which first alerted the British government to the need for establishing a permanent intelligence service'.[59]

Top secret state officials usually possessed extensive experience in maintaining colonial control. Sir David Petrie, head of MI5 from 1941-1946, for example, cut his teeth as head of the Delhi Intelligence Bureau in India, which monitored subversion against the British Raj.[60] Many MI5 officers later in the century, vetting the civil service, BBC and industrial posts for subversive workers, referred to themselves as 'the Malayan Mafia' or 'the Sudan Souls',[61] harking back to their earlier work as imperial masters. As Walton writes, 'Officers in Britain's intelligence services brought to their new roles many of the practices they had acquired in their colonial postings'.[62] To the secret state, inoculating both imperial power and the domestic order from 'subversives' was two sides of the same coin.

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In true boomerang fashion, Special Branch quickly turned its attention to anarchists based in the British mainland, often based in foreign émigré communities in London, as soon as the Fenian threat died down. Branch officers infiltrated anarchist meetings,[63] tracked individuals at the behest of European governments, and raided the anarchist paper, *Commonweal,* in 1892. A second raid in 1894, Bernard Porter writes, did 'so much damage that the *Commonweal* was forced to stop publication, which may have been one of the aims'.[64] Elsewhere on the Left, Special Branch recruited an informant, Auguste Coulon, to report on the Socialist League during the 1880s.[65]

The Legitimation League, which campaigned to remove stigma from children born out of wedlock, was destroyed by the Branch at the end of the nineteenth century. Penetrated by a Branch officer who set out to, in his own words, 'kill a growing evil in the shape of a vigorous campaign of free love and Anarchism',[66] its publication, *The Adult,* was charged with obscenity and the League collapsed in 1898. From the start, undercover operations betrayed a concern with more than just a group's supposedly violent potential.

> Branch officers infiltrated anarchist meetings, tracked individuals at the behest of European governments, and raided an anarchist paper

## The First World War: the state apparatus expands

Special Branch's net slowly widened. In the early twentieth century, anti-colonial Indians, the Independent Labour Party, syndicalists, and Bolsheviks all fell under the Branch's broadening gaze. Suffragettes, later described by one head of Special Branch as likely 'a more troublesome problem than all the rest put together', were a major preoccupation of the Branch.[67] By 1912, every single telegram sent to and from any member of the Women's Social and Political Union was being intercepted.[68] As late as 1948, MI5 was still internally discussing ways to 'muzzle the tiresome Sylvia Pankhurst',[69] the left-wing former suffragette who had her own MI5 file from 1914.[70] Individuals and organisations seeking to win the right for women to vote, organise trade unions to further workers' interests, and end the British colonisation of India, were routine objects of state surveillance and suspicion as the twentieth century heated up.

> In the early twentieth century, anti-colonial Indians, the Independent Labour Party, syndicalists, and Bolsheviks all fell under the Branch's broadening gaze

### The attack on pacifism

During the First World War, armed with 'restrictions on personal and civil liberties of a quite extraordinary scope',[71] the secret state honed its glare on what was sometimes called 'subversive pacifism' – although a sympathetic history of the Branch by two former officers admits that barely any of the anti-war groups targeted for surveillance 'could be described as remotely subversive'.[72]

The Union of Democratic Control (UDC) was a particular target. The UDC, a mass movement with a membership of over 650,000 by the end of 1917,[73] sought moderate demands including negotiated peace without annexations, parliamentary approval of any peace treaty, and international arms controls. These aims were sufficient for its members and leaders to be placed under 'various forms of surveillance and harassment',[74] for police to infiltrate mass meetings, and for its key organiser,

E R Morel, to be prosecuted and eventually imprisoned three days after a cabinet meeting discussed 'the importance of taking more active steps to combat peace propaganda'.[75] The UDC's pamphlet printers were raided and the government established a National War Aims Committee, sponsoring nation-wide public lectures to propagandise against the UDC's efforts.[76]

> **During the First World War the secret state honed its glare on what was sometimes called 'subversive pacifism'**

### Industrial union, industrial spy

Alongside this attack on the anti-war movement, there was a general 'proliferation of labour intelligence agencies' during the First World War.[77] In February 1916, the Ministry of Munitions set up an industrial surveillance unit, PMS2, which was tasked, in the Ministry's words, with being 'in a position to control [labour strikes] by finding out the ring-leaders and dealing effectively with them'.[78]

One PMS2 agent, William Rickard, visited local picket lines, the British Socialist Party and the International Workers of the World, attempting to stir local workers into radical action: an early agent provocateur.[79] Intelligence complemented a broader state offensive against industrial struggle. At Clydeside, for instance, labour unrest during 1915 and early 1916 was crushed by the wholesale 'imprisonment and deportation of the political and industrial leadership' of the strikes.[80]

PMS2 was not the only political intelligence unit to spring up during the War. Another police spy, Alex Gordon, attempted to infiltrate the 'flying corps' of objectors fleeing police and army capture around the country. Gordon entrapped one woman in Derby into a conspiracy to spring several objectors from prison, for which she was sentenced to ten years (she was released after two and, as a result of the experience, died shortly after).[81]

> **At Clydeside, labour unrest during 1915 and early 1916 was crushed by the wholesale 'imprisonment and deportation of the political and industrial leadership' of the strikes**

As one study of domestic wartime intelligence states, 'much of the rapid wartime expansion of domestic counter-espionage came not in response to a growing threat from enemy spies, but through the increasingly widespread use of numerous semi-independent counter-espionage units in investigating dissident groups'.[82] By the end of the War, thousands of left-wing organisers with no connection to Germany had their own state files.[83] In an oft-repeated pattern, the threat of foreign attack, espionage and defeat was conflated with, and then superseded by, a fear of subversive internal elements.

## Basil Thomson and the Directorate of Intelligence

The intensity of the secret state's stare, the breadth of its net, and the tone of its fury often tracks the level of political organisation and mobilisation among the general population. Following the First World War, a period of trans-European, Russian Revolution-inspired unrest broke out, eager for a new arrangement after the harrowing experiences of war. The reactions of the British state usefully illustrate wider dynamics.

### Elite anxiety and the 1917 Russian Revolution

Fear of revolutionary upheaval ran deep within power centres at the time. As the Right-leaning intelligence scholar Kevin Quinlan puts it, the success of the Russian Revolution threatened to reorder existing civil and economic norms – it threatened to destroy capitalism and imperialism, two of Britain's guiding principles of administration for previous centuries'.[84] Even Sergei Eisenstein's famed 1925 film, *Battleship Potemkin,* was banned in Britain until 1954 for promoting revolutionary glamour.[85] Despite later commentators' preoccupation with the USSR's operations on the British Isles, 'it was Moscow's interference in areas such as India that really got the British cabinet excited'.[86] Protection of (neo)imperial interests is a fundamental and recurring feature of the British secret state.

A hint of elite anxiety can be gleaned from the diaries of Thomas Jones, a long-running deputy cabinet secretary who served immediately following the Russian Revolution. In 1920, his writings and correspondence concerned minsters' 'dreadful state of nerves' over the emergence of the trade union 'Triple Alliance': railway, transport and mine workers.[87] At a high-level conference on industrial relations held on 2 February, 1920, proposals were brought by senior ministers and military officials for weapons

'to be available for distribution to the friends of the Government',[88] part of a series of 'private steps to secure the aid of a certain class of citizen'.[89] The atmosphere in the peaks of government was, the then-Cabinet Secretary Sir Maurice Hankey wrote at the time, 'Red revolution and blood and war at home and abroad!'[90] 'We cannot hope to escape some sort of revolution', declared Lord Burnham, 'and there will be no passionate resistance from anybody'.[91] Field Marshall Sir Henry Wilson, for his part, informed the cabinet that 'a Bolshevik uprising was likely'.[92] The twin threat of the Russian Revolution and domestic industrial militancy combined to shake the halls of Westminster.

> **The twin threat of the Russian Revolution and domestic industrial militancy combined to shake the halls of Westminster**

### Crippling the opposition: Special Branch breaks away

In step with increased working-class unrest, the period marks ramped-up activity by Special Branch and a higher-level connection between the secret state and government officials. Much to the irritation of MI5 – inter-intelligence-agency rivalry frequently recurs – the Branch broke away from the Metropolitan Police and became an independent organisation under the reign of Basil Thomson in 1919.[93]

The renamed Directorate of Intelligence was given full responsibility for countering subversion within the UK, and from 1919-1921 Thomson issued the cabinet a fortnightly 'Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom', keeping the country's managers informed of the range of political threats facing the government. Under Thomson, 'no union, group, meeting, or demonstration was beyond reach'.[94]

During his time as head of the Directorate of Intelligence, Thomson believed that Britain had not 'been so near revolution' 'at any time in history since the Bristol Riots'.[95] This is no mere hyperbole: a large number of ex-servicemen, militarily trained, exposed to radical ideas and discontented with Britain's social order, constituted, in the words of one historian, 'a movement whose disruptive power was capable of destroying the government'.[96] The Soldiers', Sailors' and Airmen's Union, which campaigned to end British intervention in Russia and attempted a general bottom-up demobilisation in May 1919, was infiltrated by the Directorate of Intelligence and its plans 'crippled' by the state.[97] As this episode demonstrates, intelligence is rarely passively collected – it is used as a basis for counter-operations, interventions in the political sphere.

> **Intelligence is rarely passively collected – it is used as a basis for counter-operations, interventions in the political sphere**

Ultimately, Thomson was pushed out in a bureaucratic power-wrangle in 1921 and the Directorate of Intelligence was transformed back into the Metropolitan Police Special Branch. The reorganisation of the secret state was, as is often the case, a direct response to this climate of political struggle. As intelligence historian Victor Madeira writes, '[f]ear that Bolshevism threatened domestic social order and imperial interests prompted a handful of politicians and bureaucrats to press for intelligence reform'.[98] With the post-war storm successfully navigated, weekly reports on British revolutionary movements continued beyond Thomson's departure.[99]

## MI5 ascendant: the interwar period

Although this had been far from guaranteed at the outset, MI5 and MI6 were maintained post-First World War. A bureaucratic fight between the Security Service and Special Branch broke out over who would have ultimate responsibility for countering domestic subversion – a battle decided in favour of MI5 in 1931.[100]

### Labour, the Zinoviev Letter, and anti-subversion in the military

Before 1931, however, MI5's responsibility was largely confined to a special anti-subversion role: monitoring the internal situation in the army. The importance the state places on keeping the army free from radical influence is clear from the fact that, in 1912, five trade union activists were imprisoned after writing an open letter pressing soldiers to hold their fire during industrial disputes – just two years after a miner had been killed during industrial action in Tonypandy, Wales.[101] The trade unionists were charged under a dormant piece of legislation, *The Incitement to Mutiny Act* 1797, dating from the period of late-eighteenth century anti-Jacobin sentiment.[102] In 1931, two people were sentenced to imprisonment and hard labour for supporting a strike in the Royal Navy.[103] In 1934, *The Incitement to Disaffection Act* made it illegal to 'seduce members of His Majesty's forces from his

duty or allegiance to His Majesty'.[104] MI5, for its part, viewed the commitment of the Comintern (Communist International) to organising within the British army with 'peculiar horror and almost continuous concern'.[105]

It was not only MI5 and Special Branch who had their eyes on the domestic sphere. MI6, nominally the overseas intelligence agency for non-imperial domains, also involved itself at a high level. In 1924, just weeks before a general election, a forged letter given to the press suggested a plot between Grigory Zinoviev, a high-ranking Soviet official, and the Labour Party. Timed to cause maximal damage to Labour's election chances, the involvement of former and contemporaneous MI5 and MI6 agents in the letter's dissemination is now largely undisputed.[106] The identity of the leaker(s) has never been established. There were so many powerful individuals who had a strong motive and ability to leak the letter that establishing precisely *who* did has proven nigh-on impossible.[107]

> The Zinoviev letter is the most well-known case of a group of reactionary intelligence officers conspiring to scupper the parliamentary Left in the interests of the Conservative Party

The Zinoviev letter is the most well-known case of a group of reactionary intelligence officers conspiring to scupper the parliamentary Left in the interests of the Conservative Party – a particular category of the secret state's manoeuvres.[108]

## The 1926 General Strike

Throughout the 1920s, the state feared the latent ability of organised labour, through a general strike, to bring capitalism to a standstill. Whitehall feared the 'Triple Alliance' – railway, transport and mine workers – combining with the Labour Left and drawing on Soviet support. As a stalling Scotland Yard report put it, 'the General Strike, whether regarded as a single incident or a rehearsal was and unless revolutionary propaganda is checked or counteracted, must remain, a menace'.[109]

> Throughout the 1920s, the state feared the latent ability of organised labour to bring capitalism to a standstill

'As organised labour came together and appeared increasingly potent,' Quinlan argues, 'the government sought tighter coordination and more efficiency in British intelligence'.[110] The search for increased national coordination and intelligence-gathering capabilities usually follows in the wake of intensified political militancy and working-class upsurges, a mechanism crucial to the later development of the NPOIU.

When the General Strike was finally declared on May 3, 1926 – the second-largest strike in Western European history – the government was well-prepared.[111] A 1925 Special Branch raid on the Communist Party of Great Britain, ordered by the Home Secretary, was likely an explicit attempt to knock out the Party leadership prior to the anticipated walk-out.[112] Party publications were banned, over 1,000 members arrested, and the Home Secretary even wrote to all chief constables asking them, with no legal authority, to bar Communist meetings throughout the strike.[113] The state was not willing to stand by as a legal, but politically militant, organisation attempted to influence the outcome of the showdown.

National strike-breaking logistics were managed through the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies, and undercover MI5 agents were dispatched across the country to monitor political activity and public opinion. A new 'Defence Force' of MI5 and the military was given nine priority tasks, from examining the 'loyalty of the local authorities and population generally' to monitoring 'undesirables' within government forces.[114] Emergency regulations similar to those used during the First World War were mobilised for 1,760 prosecutions during the General Strike – one component of the 7,960 political prosecutions across the year, most directed at the much longer miners' strike.[115]

> Emergency regulations similar to those used during the First World War were mobilised for 1,760 prosecutions during the General Strike

Some of the MI5 undercovers, for example those deployed in Aldershot town, became agents provocateurs, attempting to provoke soldiers into subversive talk. Ultimately, the undercover operations were crucial in scuppering attempts to intensify the strike. Agents were 'able to discover enough of the subversives' propaganda methods to enable the authorities to develop means of countering them'.[116] Again, intelligence-gathering was no passive endeavour; surveillance was, to paraphrase Seamus

Milne, an instrument of power.[117] As two leading intelligence scholars, Richard Aldrich and Rory Cormac put it, 'Intelligence is a force multiplier. It is a special kind of information that not only provides warning, but also allows more effective action'.[118]

### The National Unemployed Workers Movement

The global economic instability and depression of the 1930s preserved the radicalism of the late 1910s. The National Unemployed Workers Movement (NUWM), which peaked from 1929-1936, sought to push the government to take action against the mass unemployment ravaging working-class communities, causing particular alarm within the state.

> **The global economic instability and depression of the 1930s preserved the radicalism of the late 1910s**

It is almost certain that 'at least one police agent reached the inner councils of the NUWM, and gained access to the most secret meetings of the movement's leaders'.[119] NUWM leaders were kept under 'constant surveillance' during the 1930s Hunger Marches, and other informers were embedded in branches across the country.[120] Wal Hannington, the NUWM's national coordinator, was arrested for a speech in 1932 and given three months in prison. Sidney Job Elias, the NUWM chairman, was arrested and charged with inciting 'discontent, disaffection and ill-will between different classes of His Majesty's subjects'.[121] Astonishingly, even the formal wording of the law prohibited attempts to bring class antagonism to the fore – presumably only from the working-class side.

## Case study: the Communist Party of Great Britain, Olga Gray and the long-term infiltrator

> *Our ultimate aim must be the keeping of accurate records of all members of the [CPGB].*
> MI5, 1948[122]

Whilst MI6 would come to spend 'years penetrating the official Communist Parties in Western Europe',[123] the UK's domestic state apparatus firmly fixed its sights on the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). Up until the 1960s, the Party was something of a *bête noire* of the state, so intensely monitored and infiltrated that any threat of a Russian revolutionary repeat in Britain was effectively neutralised.

### Raids, arrests and surveillance: the noose tightens

After the CPGB was founded in 1920, 'the full panoply of State power' was swiftly arrayed against it.[124] Whereas continental European states were more concerned with the electoral threat posed by the larger Communist parties of France and Italy, British governments were alarmed primarily by 'communist subversion of industry and the labour movement'.[125]

By 1924 John Campbell, editor of the CPGB's *Workers Weekly*, had been arrested under the first Labour government for urging the military not to slaughter striking workers at home.[126] This would not be the last time the Party's propaganda and reporting output would be targeted. During a naval mutiny in 1931, Special Branch raided the *Daily Worker's* offices,[127] and the paper

> **All correspondence to and from the CPGB headquarters in London was opened and read by Special Branch**

was shut down for over a year during the Second World War for its early anti-war stance.[128] All correspondence to and from the CPGB headquarters in London was opened and read by Special Branch,[129] members were watched and followed, and as early as the 1920s, 'on at least one occasion [Branch officers] had passed themselves off as Party members to gain greater access to the organisation'.[130] Two legal scholars, Keith Ewing and Conor A. Gearty, reviewing the state's manoeuvres around the Party before the Second World War, conclude that, 'so far as the Communist Party was concerned there was no freedom of association, no freedom of assembly and no freedom of expression'.[131]

The highest levels of the British state took a personal interest in the Party. In 1925, Home Secretary William Joynson-Hicks ordered Special Branch to raid the Party and arrest 12 key organisers, including the general-secretary. All were subsequently imprisoned.[132] Sir Wyndham Childs, who took ultimate responsibility for Special Branch in 1921, spoke openly of his desire to 'smash the

organisation'. He would later write that it was, 'impressed upon [him] by the particular representative of the Government concerned with these matters that here actually lay the most important part of [his] work'.[133] For Childs, the Party was the 'one barrier standing between us and commercial prosperity' and 'class good feeling'.[134] From which side of the class divide he wrote, we can only guess. Capitalist stability – or 'commercial prosperity' – is foundational in the mental architecture of secret state officials, even if rarely explicitly stated.

> **Sir Wyndham Childs, who took ultimate responsibility for Special Branch in 1921, spoke openly of his desire to 'smash the organisation'**

### The original deep swimmer: Miss X

Perhaps the most audacious manoeuver of the security services started in 1931, when the codenamed Miss 'X' – Olga Gray – was tasked with penetrating the Party as a long-term 'sleeper' agent.[135] Gray's deployment ended in 1938 when her information resulted in the arrest and imprisonment of three Party members, including six years with hard labour for founding member Percy Glading for passing classified information to the Soviet Union.[136] This infiltration presents a particularly useful case-study as a rare long-term undercover operation with a minor documentary record on the state's operational justification, and usefully illustrates some of the tactical logic underlying the state's long-term infiltration operations later taken up by the SDS and NPOIU.

An asset of Maxwell Knight, MI5's mysterious agent-runner, Gray was celebrated as one of the most successful infiltrators in the secret state's history. Crucially, she operationalised Knight's maxim that the initial approach to an infiltration target (body), 'should if humanly possible always be made by the body to the agent, not the agent to the body'.[137] That is, an undercover agent should allow themselves to be recruited by the target organisation, rather than actively attempting to join. This tactical advice was revealed by former SDS officer, Peter Francis, to be still-operational in the 1990s. Francis, tasked with infiltrating the anti-racist movement in London, cleverly manoeuvred a group in north London to recruit him, rather than the other way around;[138] the logic of Knight's doctrines, it seems, recurs throughout the secret state's generations.

> **One good agent, carefully trained and well placed, is worth half-a-dozen indifferent agents**

Olga Gray became, in the words of Knight, 'a piece of furniture' in the CPGB, working as a secretary in Party headquarters.[139] As Knight wrote, 'one good agent, carefully trained and well placed, is worth half-a-dozen indifferent agents'.[140] This principle was also implanted within the culture of the SDS decades later, which venerated 'deep swimmers' (those officers who infiltrate long and deep into a political milieu) over 'shallow paddlers'.[141] Crucially, as Quinlan (2014) describes, Knight 'did not expect immediate gains but fully anticipated waiting several years for meaningful results. Reducing pressure to provide "tactical" intelligence minimised Gray's exposure to risk and allowed her to concentrate on building relationships and gaining access to sensitive material for a more comprehensive view of the organisation and its operations'.[142] This illustrates the logic underlying the SDS' and NPOIU's decision to often forgo acting on a particular piece of intelligence about an upcoming direct action in favour of deeper, longer and more comprehensive penetration, and the concomitant breadth of information it provides.[143]

### Labour's post-Second World War offensive against Communism

Following the end of the Second World War, the state was once again fearful of a post-War ferment; MI5 worried in 1948 that the radical Left might be able to generate, in their words, 'the revolutionary situation' through 'discontent and social unrest'.[144]

Indicative of the times, the CPGB reached a peak of over 40,000 members,[145] returning two MPs and over 100,000 votes in the 1945 election.[146] In a story repeated throughout the twentieth century, the Labour government which entered office in 1945 intensified many aspects of Britain's political policing and intelligence apparatus in response to this increasing radicalism.

> **MI5 worried in 1948 that the radical Left might be able to generate, in their words, 'the revolutionary situation' through 'discontent and social unrest'**

Formalised political purging of public and industrial posts began during this period. A cabinet Committee on Subversive Activities was set up in 1947 to coordinate the national effort to undermine groups and movements to the Left of Labour.[147] In March 1948 a new purge procedure was established to keep the far-Left (and, as a token, the far-Right) out of the civil service.[148]

The following year, formal industrial vetting was agreed, where applicants for state-contracted private sector work would have their political record examined.[149] If any evidence of subversive attitudes or affiliations emerged, hiring was halted.[150]

> **From the 1950s to the 1980s, MI5 had 60-70 full-time officers garnering around half a million files on Party members and sympathisers**

Simultaneously, the Information Research Department (IRD) in the Foreign Office – which had been set up in 1948 to coordinate overseas propaganda operations against Britain's enemies – formed a Home Desk in 1951 to generate unattributable domestic propaganda against Soviet-linked organisations. Clement Attlee even declared a state of emergency and deployed over 12,000 troops during a 1949 CPGB-backed dock strike, 'effectively a declaration of war' on the Party.[151] The Official Committee on Communism (Home) was formed in 1951 to 'focus all available intelligence about Communist activities' and 'co-ordinate any anti-Communist activities',[152] operating along-side the IRD's Home Desk.

Of particular concern for the state was the Party's expansion into the 'professional classes', those influential elements of civil society which the IRD identified as 'key' in 1951.[153] As a result, famed academics associated with the Party – from E P Thompson to Eric Hobsbawm – were placed under substantial surveillance.[154] From the 1950s to the 1980s, MI5 had 60-70 full-time officers garnering around half a million files on Party members and sympathisers,[155] broke into every Party office in Britain and Northern Ireland,[156] identified 90 per cent of Party members,[157] and tapped the Party headquarters.[158] As one director-general of MI5 said to a home secretary in 1959, 'we [have] the British Communist Party pretty well buttoned up'.[159]

## Conclusion

British domestic intelligence often developed in response to the prevailing political challenges of the time. Nineteenth-century apprehension over industrial unrest and Irish anti-colonialism gave way to turn-of-the-century alarm directed towards Indian nationalism, foreign anarchism, and suffragettes. A new period was marked by the success of the 1917 Russian Revolution, which 'exacerbated older [establishment] fears'.[160] The CPGB, seen as both a relatively large working-class vehicle for socialism and a potential collaborator with an international enemy – the USSR – came under heavy surveillance, long-term infiltration, and a domestic 'grey' propaganda campaign, all explicitly designed to restrict the Party's influence among the general population. With the CPGB 'buttoned up', the secret state had new political threats to deal with as the twentieth century rolled into its second half.

# Political policing, 1956-present

The new political upsurges of the 1960s presented fresh challenges for the secret state. A more diffuse and militant 'New Left', non-aligned Trotskyist organisations and a British Black Power Movement required the development of a more systematised method of police infiltration to keep political radicalism under watch and within bounds. The development and operations of the Special Demonstration Squad (SDS) from 1968-2008 and National Public Order Intelligence Unit (NPOIU) from 1999-2011 should be seen in this light.

## '68: the extra-parliamentary Left ascends

A global upsurge in struggle occurred from 1956 – with the emergence of the 'First New Left', the crisis of Soviet-aligned Communist Parties, and the rise of anticolonial revolts – to around 1979. Often, the year 1968 is taken as a high-water mark for this period, when a 10 million-strong general strike nearly brought down the French Fifth Republic, anti-Vietnam War protests shook the US, and rebellions dotted the globe.[161] As in the late 1910s, Britain's ruling elite took fearful note; having lost many of their colonial possessions, they were once again facing a growing upswell at home.

In Britain, the New Left largely took two (intertwined) forms. Mass social movements like the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign stood in often-uneasy relation to smaller militant groups, like the Trotskyist International Socialists (IS) and International Marxist Group (IMG). Alongside this, counter-cultural and Black Power movements developed, intersecting to varying degrees with the New Left.

> Britain's ruling elite took fearful note; having lost many of their colonial possessions, they were once again facing a growing upswell at home

### Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the Committee of 100

One of the earliest signs of this new militancy and willingness to commit mass direct action came in the form of the Committee of 100, a Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND)-break-away. The Committee held its first civil disobedience action, a sit-down protest outside Whitehall, in 1961; its second that year was met with 826 arrests. The Committee's third was hit with *The Justices of the Peace Act* 1381 and, 'in an attempt to pre-empt a further mass demonstration' – in the words of two former Special Branch officers – 100 members of the organisation were banned from demonstrating for a year.[162] Thirty-two were subsequently sent to prison, and, on the day of the march, 1,314 arrested.[163]

> Special Branch was required to provide a report on each CND action, march and protest by 10 am the following day – these would often be 'more than sixty pages' long

The Home Office took a piercing interest in the marches of the CND and Committee of 100. Special Branch was required to provide a report on each CND action, march and protest by 10 am the following day – these would often be 'more than sixty pages' long.[164] As the Committee targeted its protests at nuclear bases across the country, the state drew on its successful methods for neutering the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1925: decapitate the leadership. Six key organisers were prosecuted under the *Official Secrets Act* and sentenced to a year or more in prison.[165]

## Grosvenor Square, the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign and the foundation of the Special Demonstration Squad

The most large-scale challenge came from the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC), which was established by the IMG and Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation in 1966. Its two anti-Vietnam War demonstrations in 1967 were followed in March 1968 by one of the most militant pre-planned demonstrations in British history, when thousands gathered at Grosvenor Square, and 117 police officers were injured. When the French May erupted shortly afterwards, the British establishment's collective breath quickened.

The press was alight with reports of impending revolutionary violence in the run up to the VSC's huge demonstration in October 1968. As a Special Branch memo noted, the reports were mainly a 'carefully constructed pastiche of information... spiced with inspired guess work'.[166] It was later revealed by one of *The Times* journalists on the frontline of the media frenzy, however, that part of the 'inspired guess work' emanated from Special Branch itself. The secret state was stoking the flames, creating the smoke necessary to delegitimise the VSC.[167]

> **Across the establishment, elaborate defences were constructed to pre-empt the potential influence of the October VSC demonstration**

No less an authority than the Home Secretary and Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police met with newspaper proprietors in the run-up to the demonstration to express their desire that the press divert its gaze from police violence.[168] Underlining the political function of the judicial system, the Home Secretary declared that he wanted to see 'short sharp sentences imposed' on the demonstrators.[169]

Across the establishment, elaborate defences were constructed to pre-empt the potential influence of the October VSC demonstration. The use of troops was considered,[170] the offices of the left-wing *Black Dwarf* magazine – which all MI5 officers were required to read – raided by Special Branch,[171] and an amendment tabled in parliament which would have allowed overseas demonstrators – or 'foreign scum', in the words of the proposer – to be deported.[172] Special Branch requested information on the personal politics of those attending the demo from outside London,[173] lists of key attendees were compiled,[174] and reports written on internal splits between Maoist and Trotskyist sects.[175] The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) dedicated a day to studying public disorder, senior Special Branch officers and chief constables gathered at Scotland Yard to discuss the crisis, and seminars with MI5 were arranged.[176] As during the crisis moments of the 1926 General Strike or the 1984-1985 Miners' Strike, the British state wasn't taking any risks. Preparation had to be detailed and extensive.

> **As during the crisis moments of the 1926 General Strike or the 1984-1985 Miners' Strike, the British state wasn't taking any risks**

This is the context within which a Chief Inspector in the Metropolitan Police, Conrad Dixon, penned a six-page memo that would birth the SDS in 1968.

The memo is explicitly counter-revolutionary. Dixon wrote:

> *The climate of opinion amongst extreme left-wing elements [...] has shifted [...] to active confrontation with the authorities to attempt to force social changes and alterations of government policy. Indeed, the more vociferous of the Left are calling for the complete overthrow of parliamentary democracy and the substitution of various brands of 'socialism' and 'workers control'.*[177]

These left-wing elements were intent on 'engineering a break down in our current system of government and achieving a revolutionary change in the society in which we live' – something which he was not prepared to allow.[178] 'Give me £1m and 10 men', Dixon claimed, 'and I can deal with the problem for you'.[179]

The SDS immediately got to work penetrating the VSC. Working through 'ad-hoc committees' comprised of a coalition of groups and independent left-wingers, the VSC was harder to predict and monitor than the CPGB because of its diffuse structure.[180] As one Special Branch officer put it in a speech to senior police officers in 1968, the VSC was not run by 'one single disciplined organisation but, under the umbrella of an Ad Hoc Committee,' by 'a multiplicity of groups'.[181] An adequate, qualitative understanding of what was happening across the organisation could only be achieved through undercover penetration – informers, replete with a range of motivations, were notoriously less reliable sources of information than trained undercover

police officers. At least eight undercover officers are known to have infiltrated various branches of the organisation.[182] The SDS would get to work for the next 40 years penetrating hundreds of dissenting organisations.

### The Black Power and Anti-Apartheid movements

The Black Power Movement was also a prevailing concern for Special Branch during this period, one stunningly understudied by researchers. The Branch's Black Power Desk was set up in 1967 and tasked with, according to the scholar who discovered its existence, 'surveilling, infiltrating, and decapitating the movement'.[183]

Centres of Black politics and culture, like the Rio Café and the Mangrove restaurant in London, were raided an inordinate number of times on unfounded claims of drug dealing.[184] Obi B Egbuna, a key Black Power figure, was jailed in 1968 after the police received drafts of his militant writings from an informant. The arrest was made one day before the release of BBC documentary examining accusations of police racism, in what seems to have been an 'attempt to disrupt the fledging Black Power Movement and put pressure on the BBC to withdraw the programme'.[185]

> The Branch's Black Power Desk was set up in 1967 and tasked with 'surveilling, infiltrating, and decapitating the movement'

Commenting on the arrest, Detective Chief Inspector Kenneth Thompson wrote that year that, 'The arrest of Egbuna ... at this stage anyway, put the [Black Panther] party in confusion and it is not likely to resurrect for many months to come'.[186] After a march in defence of the Mangrove restaurant in 1970, Home Secretary Reginald Maudling demanded a Special Branch dossier on British Black Power, which came replete with legal advice on the best strategy for smashing the movement.[187] The explicitly stated aims of the state were not purely to stop law-breaking, but to break radical Black self-organisation in its entirety.

> The explicitly stated aims of the stxate were to break radical Black self-organisation in its entirety

Similar treatment was meted out to the Anti-Apartheid Movement, particularly when the campaign focused on disrupting South African attendance at sports competitions. The surveillance, which lasted at least 25-years, was vast, spanning at least '30 inch-thick files'.[188] Peter Hain, a leader of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, had an undercover SDS officer as his right-hand man,[189] and surveillance of Hain would continue after he became an MP.[190] Although the British establishment would uniformly attempt to recuperate the legacy of the anti-apartheid struggle after 1994, the British state had in fact waged a long campaign of infiltration and surveillance against it.

## The 1970s: political conflict intensifies

The 1970s witnessed the breakdown of the social compromise which had governed British life since 1945. The struggle over who was going to emerge from the crisis as the new dominant social force saw the eruption of political conflict, across which the shadow of the police and intelligence agencies often flickered. Industrial militancy, plots against Labour, and polarisation to Left and Right characterised the period. By the early 1980s, MI5 alone reportedly stored one million personal files, the 'vast majority [...] permanent files on subversives'.[191]

### The 'guiding principles of administration' threatened

British ruling class fear of revolution was at its highest since the years between 1919 and 1926. A 1976 MI5 paper to the Joint Intelligence Committee summed up the institutional anxiety which permeated the secret state. Voicing concern over the 'growth in the general public uneasiness about the current aims of government', the paper – according to a report in the *Financial Times* – outlined a scenario 'in which a Labour government, acceding to trade union and other militant demands, radicalised its policies against the private sector and the UK's NATO commitments'.[192]

An anxious 1970-1974 Edward Heath government, afraid of unprecedented levels of strike activity, authorised a plan to use the armed forces to stop Britain becoming a 'Communist state'.[193] The government also formed an inter-departmental working group on Subversion in Public Life (SPL) to 'supervise and direct the collection of intelligence about threats to the internal security of Great Britain arising from subversive activities, particularly in industry'.[194]

Britain's upper echelons had long been fearful of the links between the radical Left, trade unions and the Labour Party. As Quinlan notes, the Bolshevik revolution earlier in the century had threatened 'capitalism and imperialism, two of Britain's guiding principles of administration'.[195] Nineteen-seventies apprehension over the Left's ability to undermine 'the private sector and the UK's NATO commitments' betrayed MI5's continuing commitment to those two 'guiding principles'.

## Trotskyism, within the Labour Party and without

Trotskyism, the most substantial organised pole of attraction on the British far-Left after the CPGB declined, became a running issue for the state throughout the period. When Trotskyist groups emerged as substantial organisations in their own right, or threatened to become an influential force within the Labour Left, the police and intelligence services took note.

The International Socialists (IS) (later Socialist Workers Party – SWP), for example, was a primary target of Special Branch and the Security Service. The IS/SWP – which represented the independent wing of Trotskyism, eschewing entry into the Labour Party and building its own power base – was, on the basis of current publicly-available sources, the most heavily

> **When Trotskyist groups emerged as substantial organisations the police and intelligence services took note**

penetrated single organisation in the history of the SDS.[196] Over 20 officers clandestinely entered the IS/SWP throughout its history;[197] the story of what these officers did within the organisation is yet to transpire.

> **Militant became a bugbear of the British establishment in the 1970s and 1980s, and figures associated with it were heavily surveilled**

The 'entryist' wing of Trotskyism became prominently associated with Militant, which organised within Labour from the bottom-up, aiming to take over Labour councils, CLPs, and eventually the entire Party apparatus. Militant became a bugbear of the British establishment in the 1970s and 1980s, and figures associated with it were heavily surveilled. Under Thatcher, the committee on Subversion in Public Life (SPL) was resurrected after a Militant-influenced strike by computer operators at the Department of Health and Social Services in 1984. The SPL warned internally that Militant was 'the largest and most threatening Trotskyist group in Britain'.[198] Most MI5 intelligence on the group came from informers, an estimated 30 across three decades.[199] The Security Service even ran an agent in Coventry Labour Party, considered a bastion of Militant influence at the time.[200] Slowly, a media campaign combined with relentless state harassment to reduce Militant's influence; the organisation collapsed and splintered along with much of the Left after the evaporation of the USSR in the early 1990s.

## The 'Wilson Plot'

Rumours and murmurings of 'plots' to undermine, or even overthrow, the Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson, during his two terms as prime minister in the 1960s and 1970s, have persisted. It is clear that during the latter decade in particular, sections of the establishment – from the landed aristocracy to military generals – were beginning to discuss the need for a forcible change of government. As Aldrich and Cormac put it,

> **Rumours and murmurings of 'plots' to undermine, or even overthrow Harold Wilson, during his two terms as prime minister in the 1960s and 1970s, have persisted**

'Serious historians [...] remain certain that some dirty work was afoot, and there is clear evidence pointing to smear campaigns against the prime minister'.[201] The episode ranks alongside the Zinoviev Letter as one of the most striking examples of deeply conservative elements of the security services attempting to directly intervene in parliamentary politics.

### Discredit, undermine, overthrow?

Wilson and his political inner circle were targeted for propaganda, surveillance and harassment. They suffered repeated burglaries, during which particular files would go missing but valuables were left untouched. 'Such activity', Aldrich and Cormac write, 'lies beyond the realms of coincidence'.[202] Conversations held in private in Downing Street were being inexplicably leaked, fuelling suspicion of Security Service bugs, and a shadowy intelligence unit within Britain's military apparatus in Northern

Ireland worked overtime to spread malicious rumours about Harold Wilson, according to one army whistle-blower.[203] Ultimately, as Lord Hunt, Wilson's cabinet secretary who investigated the whole affair, would later say: 'there is absolutely no doubt at all that a few, a very few, malcontents in MI5 ... [were] spreading damaging, malicious stories about some members of that Labour government'.[204]

A wider establishment milieu was beginning to mobilise for more drastic action. Right-wingers, like journalist Brian Crozier and former colonial anti-subversion officer Frank Kitson, were actively lobbying the army's top brass to consider intervening in industrial disputes like the 1974 Miners' Strike.[205] Some quarters even considered a military coup: 'Action which armed forces might be justified in taking, in certain circumstances,' wrote one top army official, 'is in the forefront of my mind at the moment'.[206]

> **A wider establishment milieu was beginning to mobilise for more drastic action**

### Rightist paramilitaries form

A disparate, loosely-connected network of hard-right, elitist paramilitary organisations emerged during the decade, often linked to military officers hardened during brutal colonial wars in Kenya, Malaya and elsewhere.

David Stirling, the founder of the famed British special forces unit, the SAS – who considered the Left of the Labour Party a 'cancer' – formed GB75,[207] a hard-line Royalist organisation preparing for an anticipated show-down with the Left.[208] According to one of his associates at the time, Stirling casually discussed the need to provoke a confrontation with the unions by getting their leaders 'run over by a bus'.[209] The former deputy director of MI6, George Young, set up Unison, another rightist paramilitary, and Sir General Walter Walker – a former colonial army official who apparently offered himself up as Britain's Pinochet – created Civil Assistance, a network of conservative citizens who would volunteer their unarmed services in a crisis.[210]

Although intended to be powerful right-wing paramilitaries, groups like Unison and GB75 largely failed to progress past infancy. They remain, however, indicative of the lengths to which certain establishment figures are willing to go in the face of rising social unrest and an ascendant Left.

> **Right-wing paramilitaries are indicative of the lengths to which certain establishment figures are willing to go in the face of rising social unrest and an ascendant Left**

Ultimately, a military coup, army intervention on the mainland and right-wing paramilitaries were all unnecessary. By the end of the decade, as Moran writes, 'these right wing networks had converted their energies to getting Margaret Thatcher elected as head of the Conservative Party'.[211] The Thatcherite project successfully transformed Britain's political settlement without needing to forcibly topple a Labour administration.

## The 1980s: the neo-liberal imposition

The single most important object of the secret state's ire during the seventies and eighties was the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). After humiliating the Tories with its successful 'flying pickets' at Saltley Gate, Birmingham in 1972 and effectively ending Heath's government in 1974, 'the Conservative Party and its allies in the security services and the wider governmental machine set themselves the strategic objective of breaking the NUM'.[212] After the 1972 strike, MI5 shifted resources from combatting foreign espionage to monitoring left-wing trade unions.[213] Breaking the unions was a central and open objective of the Thatcherite project, and the NUM was a key target. Propaganda, legal action, infiltration and more were mobilised against the union throughout the 1980s and early 1990s.

### The 1984-1985 Miners' Strike

During the 1984-1985 strike, Special Branch had at least one agent inside the NUM, 'Silver Fox', who was described by the Assistant Chief Constable for South Yorkshire Police as a 'fairly senior man' who would 'sit round the table with the NUM leadership'.[214] John Nesbit, a senior South Yorkshire police officer, would later state, 'That information we got from Special Branch [from Silver Fox] I think beat the strike, there's no doubt about that. And without that information I don't think we could have managed it'.[215] This represents, once again, an admission from a state official that intelligence was a weapon in a political conflict.

Roger Windsor, the NUM's chief executive from 1983-1989 – the highest non-elected official within the union – has also been named in parliament as an MI5 agent, tasked with disrupting and undermining the NUM's activities.[216] MI5, John Major and Windsor have all denied the accusation. Around the same time, one MI5 whistleblower publicly stated that she was told 'that MI5 had long-term moles inside certain trade unions, so deep that even their own families didn't know their true purpose'.[217] Cathy Massiter, another MI5 whistleblower, also confirmed that MI5 had moles embedded inside trade unions.[218]

With the NUM's assets seized by a court-imposed receiver and the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) coordinating national police reinforcements, harsh policing tactics were deployed in line with ACPO's *Public Order Manual.* Striking miners were routinely stopped and turned back on their way to picket lines, baton-charges liberally utilised, and mass beatings meted out nearby Orgreave coking plant in South Yorkshire in June 1984. The organs and satellites of the state worked in effective harmony to roundly crush the strike by 1985; the BBC would even admit that it reversed the order of footage when broadcasting about the Battle of Orgreave, as Tom Mills writes, 'to make it appear that the miners had provoked the police'.[219]

### The organs and satellites of the state worked in effective harmony to roundly crush the strike by 1985

With the final large-scale bastion of working-class resistance to neo-liberalism defeated, the cycle of struggle which had riven Britain's political landscape since the 1960s ebbed. Not content to let a wounded lion lie, however, a 1990-1991 media storm was launched to finish off the NUM and its leader, Arthur Scargill. The campaign was stoked up, according to whistleblowers, by a Government Communication Headquarters (GCHQ) grey propaganda campaign, as recorded by Seamus Milne in *The Enemy Within*.[220]

Miners were not the only workers placed under the state's watch across this period. Documents show routine police surveillance of the 1977-1978 Grunwick and 1988 Wapping strikes in London,[221] with at least one SDS officer penetrating the former strike.[222] With public sector unions broken and union membership in freefall, the state's concern with industrial militancy declined after the eighties. The task was, for now, largely complete.

## CND, Animal Rights and Hilda Murrell

Extra-parliamentary social movements continued to be monitored in the 1980s. The first specialist unit dedicated to monitoring animal rights groups, for example – the Animal Rights National Index – was set up within Special Branch in 1986. The first of what would become sustained and intense undercover infiltration of the animal rights milieu began in this period. Bob Lambert, the SDS's hailed master-infiltrator, went into the Animal Liberation Front and other groups in the mid-1980s. Two more officers, Mike Chitty and John Dines, followed.

### Extra-parliamentary social movements continued to be monitored in the 1980s

The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) re-emerged as a state priority for the first time since the early 1960s. The post-1979 Conservative governments launched, in the words of Douglas Hurd, a home and foreign secretary under Thatcher, a 'successful campaign against CND'.[223] A private organisation, the Coalition for Peace Through Security, was 'conjured into existence' and infiltrated CND,[224] stealing paperwork from its headquarters. According to Aldrich and Cormac, 'nothing moved in the offices of CND without the knowledge of this band of secret watchers'.[225] At least one member, Harry Newton, was tasked with penetrating the social movement by MI5, according to a Security Service whistleblower.[226] Michael Heseltine, the then-Minister of Defence, set up a state propaganda unit, DS19, to combat CND's public work. The unit turned to MI5 for information about the political affiliations of leading members of CND in order to better smear the organisation – another example of intelligence being operationalised in a political war against dissent.[227]

### The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) re-emerged as a state priority for the first time since the early 1960s

Contingency Services, a private security firm, was hired during the decade to conduct 'deniable "dirty work" that the Home Office did not want the Security Service and Special Branch to undertake',[228] according to one scholar. How deep the effects of this state-corporate effort against CND went is still unclear. Hilda Murrell, an anti-nuclear campaigner, was killed in 1984 during the peak of her public activism. The police story – that she was the victim of a random, largely motiveless murder – has been

questioned by many, including Murrell's nephew, Robert Green, a naval intelligence commander during the Falklands War.[229] Former Home Secretary Roy Jenkins suggested in 1993 that a private firm hired by the state to surveil Murrell may have killed her in an unexpected confrontation.[230]

The 1980s, thanks to an aggressive ramping up of the Cold War by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, was almost the last decade of human history: on several occasions, the world teetered on the precipice of nuclear war, a product of rising

> **The unit turned to MI5 for information about the political affiliations of leading members of CND in order to better smear the organisation**

paranoia and increased tensions.[231] The organisers of CND, who attempted to help unwind this apocalyptic scenario, were met with wire taps and an entire state propaganda unit dedicated to their defeat.

## The Cold War ends: surveillance continues

*The police department is the biggest gang in New York. You mess with the police department and the retaliation is direct and absolute.*
Anthony Miranda, NYPD police officer for 20 years, 2016[232]

*When someone poses a risk or threat to the [Met], they try and dig the dirt.*
Leroy Logan, former chair of the Metropolitan Black Police Association, 2014[233]

Given that the anti-subversion apparatus described above was often rhetorically legitimated by reference to the threat of foreign manipulation by the overseas menace of the Soviet Union, one might have expected Special Branch and MI5 to abandon much of their political policing operations following the end of the Cold War. Instead, Special Branch expanded, and to the extent that Security Service operations against the Left decreased, it was more a reflection of the objective decline of the progressive movement than the evaporation of the USSR. Indeed, according to an MI5 intelligence officer from the time, Annie Machon, MI5 continued to intensively spy on political dissenters for several years after the end of the Cold War before deciding dissent was in terminal decline.[234]

### Animal Liberation and Militant

As the 1990s began, the state continued to consider Militant a subversive threat due to its key role in the anti-poll tax movement. But as the Left declined world-wide following the collapse of the Soviet Union, responsibility for keeping tabs on Militant – a diminished force – shifted from MI5 to the SDS. Peter Francis, the SDS officer-turned-whistleblower, was tasked with penetrating Youth Against Racism in Europe (YRE), a Militant-established campaigning group. Francis became an official MI5 informer, passing on intelligence to the senior Security Service. According to Francis, Special Branch had files on approximately 100 members of Militant, YRE and 'other anti-racist campaigners'.[235] During Militant conferences in the 1990s, Special Branch would put surveillance photographers outside to snap pictures of all attendees.[236]

Whereas a primary object of the state's gaze had been the CPGB from the 1920s to the 1950s and extra-parliamentary social movements, unions and Trotskyism in the seventies and eighties, animal rights and environmental activists increasingly took centre-stage during this period. By 1998, the Animal Rights National Index was running over 100 informers on an annual

> **By 1998, the Animal Rights National Index was running over 100 informers on an annual budget of £140,000**

budget of £140,000.[237] At least eight undercover police officers were sent into the animal rights movement in the 1990s and 2000s, and an entire 'National Forum on policing and prosecution of animal rights cases' coordinated a nation-wide response under Tony Blair's government.[238]

### Undermining anti-racism

Black liberation groups and police-corruption monitoring centres, like the UK Black Panther Party and the Colin Roach Centre in Hackney, have long been subject to police surveillance, infiltration, and suspected burglary. As Britain's ex-colonial populations migrated to the old imperial heartland in increasing numbers, police contact with Black and Brown people in Britain's major

cities led to multiplying stories of police killings. From the mid-1980s at the latest, a slew of family-centred campaigns for justice for those killed in police custody or subject to appalling police neglect became targets.[239]

> From the mid-1980s at the latest, a slew of family-centred campaigns for justice became targets

Usually Black-led, these campaigns were specifically aimed at holding the police to account for violence, racism and neglect, and were a particular operational objective for SDS infiltration. Information on funerals, family protests and political disagreements was gathered by the SDS on at least 18 family justice campaigns, according to an official investigation.[240] Most notoriously, SDS officer Peter Francis was deployed in the mid-1990s into the campaign for justice for murdered Black teenager, Stephen Lawrence, specifically tasked with finding dirt to discredit the murder case's key witness, Duwayne Brooks.[241]

A decade after the end of the Cold War, the discourse of subversion began to sound anachronistic. Whilst political monitoring and infiltration remained, responsibility for its management increasingly shifted towards the police. 'Domestic extremism', a new rubric linked to the 'War on Terror' discourse, was conjured into existence by this expanding police apparatus. At the centre of political policing during the first decade of the twenty-first century lay a new unit: the National Public Order Intelligence Unit (NPOIU).

> SDS officer Peter Francis was deployed in the mid-1990s into the campaign for justice for murdered Black teenager, Stephen Lawrence

## Case study: the long-road to a National Public Order Intelligence Unit

In 1999, the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) established the NPOIU, a new nation-wide, Home Office-funded squad with a mandate for long-term undercover infiltration of political groups from Earth First to the Cardiff Anarchist Network.

The NPOIU's lineage, whilst connected, is slightly different to the SDS's. Although both had public order maintenance duties, the latter emerged out of the period of high political unrest of the 1960s, more concerned with old-school anti-subversion and counter-revolution. The former, however, was designed primarily to deal with public disorder – it was one of a long-running set of moves towards a national political public order intelligence system. Documents retrieved from the ACPO archive in the Hull History Centre provide insight into the long road to the establishment of the NPOIU.

The centralisation, coordination and nationalisation of political intelligence-gathering has traditionally intensified in response to heightened political struggle. As early as 1917, the Chief Constable of Sheffield police, Major Hall-Dalwood, submitted a paper entitled 'Suggested Scheme for the Formation of a National Intelligence Service', writing:

> *The present need of a highly organised system to deal scientifically and swiftly with undermining movements, whether affecting naval, military or industrial activities, is apparent to all close observers, and more particularly to those in executive authority … Whichever country possesses the machinery to effectively counter the moves of these maleficent agencies will be the one to most quickly recover from the effects of the War and to gain* **commercial stability and national supremacy** *[emphasis mine].*[242]

Again, what Quinlan called Britain's two 'guiding principles of administration', capitalist profitability and imperial might – this time rendered as 'commercial stability and national supremacy' – combined to demand an expanded national intelligence service. Later on in the century, the 1968 Grosvenor Square demonstrations and the numerous miners' strikes during the first half of the 1970s sparked new national innovations in policing, coordinated by ACPO. The 'flying pickets' of 1972, in particular, where striking miners travelled to support hard pickets outside other workplaces, threw the police into disarray. With over 40 separate police jurisdictions, cross-force coordination against national political movements and strikes became paramount.

As the Metropolitan Police's Deputy Assistant Commissioner stated at an ACPO conference in 1975:

> *During this period several different tactics were introduced by the strikers such as mass picketing, the picketing of premises not directly involved in the dispute and 'flying pickets'. As a result of these tactics it became necessary for the Home Office to strengthen the scheme for organising mutual aid between police forces on a widespread scale, with special reference to instances of industrial unrest.*[243]

The urban riots of 1981 extended these processes. In 1986, Chief Constable of Humberside Police, D Hall, stated in an internal ACPO report, 'New strategies and new tactics had to be devised ... the need for flexibility and adaptation was a strong feature of national contingency plans. The street disorders of 1981 were the catalyst for a new approach to policing disorder'.[244]

After the defeat of the 1984/1985 Miners' Strike, ACPO instituted a 'Review of the NUM Dispute'. The Review recommended the establishment of a 'National Intelligence Office' (NIO) which 'should encompass a permanent facility for monitoring' 'major outbreaks of disruptive and criminal activity'.[245] Included in the NIO's proposed purview were 'animal rights activities', 'the activities of anarchist groups', '"Peace Convoy" and other similar group activity', and 'matters concerning public disorder, racial tension and industrial unrest'.

Britain's two 'guiding principles of administration', capitalist profitability and imperial might combined to demand an expanded national intelligence service

Whilst it seems the planned NIO did not come to fruition at the time, the NPOIU later operationalised many of the ACPO recommendations that came out of the Miners' Strike. The unit must be seen as a manifestation of this ACPO-led attempt to develop national and regional cross-force intelligence sharing to combat demonstrations, strikes and mass public disorder, a system which was integrated into the wider political policing apparatus.[246]

# Conclusion

A shadow loomed over the history of twentieth century British politics: the shadow of the security services. Its umbra was long, engulfing all threats to dominant political and social morality, from the Legitimation League to the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign. Groups as small as the Women's Liberation Front – a dozen-strong Maoist reading group – to those as large as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament – a mass movement of hundreds of thousands – were ensnared by this high policing apparatus, in a 'systematic attempt to preserve the distribution of power' in Britain.[247]

## The SDS and NPOIU undercover squads were just the sharpest edge of a much larger armoury of political policing

Rather than aberrations or rogue units, the SDS and NPOIU undercover squads were just the sharpest edge of a much larger armoury of political policing which pre- and post-dated their existence. The reason they could continue for so long – 40 years, in the case of the SDS – was precisely because their existence was unexceptional to the state servants who knew of it. The *raison d'etre* of Special Branch, under which the SDS operated, was to surveil and keep tabs on political organisations, beginning with the Irish independence movement. Women fighting for the right to vote; Indians struggling against British colonialism; students campaigning against the Vietnam War; citizens concerned with the mass slaughter of animals; workers battling for improved wages and conditions; individuals fearful of nuclear holocaust: all were subject to the state's glare throughout the twentieth century.

This hidden history reveals the role of coercion, deception and force in managing the perpetuation of liberal capitalism. The freedoms accorded to the political sphere are sharply delimited – those secretly declared outside of acceptable bounds are liable to strict state monitoring and even counter-operations. This quotidian cacophony of repression orders the liberal polity. It possibly changes the course of history.

What would have occurred had the post-First World War strike-wave been allowed to unfold untrammelled? What would Britain's treatment of non-human animals look like had the animal liberation movement remained untouched? Would the life-ruining stigma attached to children born out of wedlock have been lifted sooner if Special Branch had not crushed the Legitimation League? How much more rapidly would women have won the vote if the suffragettes had not been under intensive monitoring? Will the world one day pay the price for the state's attempts to break CND and other anti-nuclear campaigns?

## This hidden history reveals the role of coercion, deception and force in managing the perpetuation of liberal capitalism

Such counterfactuals cannot be answered. What must be certain, however, is that Britain – and its former colonies – has suffered an incalculable loss of social progress as a result of this political policing apparatus. This, it seems, is a fundamental issue at the heart of the undercover policing scandal: the union struggles lost, the campaigns scuppered, the unquantifiable and unknown historical absences engendered by the cops and spooks who carried out their duties with banal dedication and efficiency.

The companion paper, *Spycops in context: Counter-subversion, deep dissent and the logic of political policing*, provides more in-depth analysis of how political policing has functioned to eliminate fundamental dissent against the status quo in Britain. See **www.crimeandjustice.org.uk**.

# Notes

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2   *The Black Door: Spies, Secret intelligence and British Prime Ministers,* London: William Collins, p.3.

3   Lewis, P. and Evans, R. (June 24, 2013), 'Trauma of spy's girlfriend: "like being raped by the state"', www.theguardian.com/uk/2013/jun/24/undercover-police-spy-girlfriend-child (accessed on September 17. 2018).

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5   Lewis, P. and Evans, R. (October 27, 2011), 'Met chief says officers' use of fake identities in court was not illegal', www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/oct/27/met-police-activists-fake-identities (accessed on September 17, 2018).

6   Examples: Gillard, M. and Lubbers, E. (May 7, 2018), 'Undercover police "had sex with political targets"', www.thetimes.co.uk/article/undercover-police-had-sex-with-political-targets-6jx9gp5fq (accessed on 13 September, 2018); Greenwood, C. (24 July, 2014), 'Secret police unit ran for 40 years without top officers knowing: Rogue squad gathered intelligence on 18 justice campaigns including Stephen Lawrence' www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2704877/Secret-police-unit-ran-40-years-without-officers-knowing-Rogue-squad-gathered-intelligence-18-justice-campaigns-including-Stephen-Lawrence.html (accessed on 13 September 2018); Hutcheon, P. (11 January, 2017), 'Police Inspectorate to probe undercover operations by "rogue" units and sex spy officers', www.heraldscotland.com/news/15014402.Police_Inspectorate_to_probe_undercover_operations_by__rogue__units_and_sex_spy_officers/ (accessed on 13 September, 2018).

7   Evening Standard (7 March, 2014), 'Tony Hall and the way ahead for the BBC; The BBC is one of our greatest national treasures: it has to stay sharp', Nexis.com (accessed on 24 August 2018).

8   Woodman, C. (3 December 2017), 'The great undercover policing cover-up', www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/resources/great-undercover-policing-cover (accessed on 13 September 2018).

9   The victims of spying have attempted to make a similar argument to the one made in the two papers in this series, but have thus far achieved little purchase in the mainstream.

10  Brodeur, J. P. (1983), 'High policing and low policing: remarks about the policing of political activities', Social problems, 30(5), p.507.

11  Whilst SDS officers were deployed to Northern Ireland, this paper does not address the history of the territory. On officers operating overseas, see for example: Oltermann, P. (11 June, 2016), 'Germany asks UK to widen undercover policing inquiry', www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jun/11/germany-asks-uk-to-widen-undercover-policing-inquiry-mark-kennedy (accessed on 13 September 2018).

12  Walton, C. (2013), *Empire of Secrets: British Intelligence, The Cold War and the Twilight of Empire,* London: Harper Press, p.xxvii.

13  'Subversion' is also used to describe the activities of anti-colonial resistance in British territories, a topic touched upon in the second paper, *Spycops in context: Counter-subversion, deep dissent and the logic of political policing.*

14  Grierson, J. (2 March 2018), 'MI5 agents can commit crime in UK, government reveals' www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/02/mi5-agents-are-allowed-to-commit-in-uk-government-reveals (accessed on 13 September 2018).

15  Evans, R. (27 September, 2005), 'Documents show how Special Branch infiltrated Anti-Apartheid Movement', www.theguardian.com/politics/2005/sep/27/uk.freedomofinformation (accessed on 13 September 2018.

16  20/20 Vision (1985), MI5's Official Secrets, Channel 4, www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRuAzSDhZXk (accessed on 13 September 2018).

17  Walton, *Empire of Secrets,* p.24.

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20  K. D. Ewing and C. A. Gearty (2000), *The Struggle For Civil Liberties: Political Freedom and the Rule of Law in Britain, 1914-45,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.100.

21  Aldrich and Cormac, *The Black Door,* p. 271.

22  Moran, C. (2013), *Classified: Secrecy and the State in Modern Britain,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.3.

23  Andrew, C. (2004), 'Intelligence, International Relations and "Undertheorisation"', *Intelligence & National Security,* 19(2), p.172.

24  Aldrich and Cormac, *The Black Door,* p.250.

25  Ibid, p.366.

26  Ibid, p.446.

27  Porter, B. (1987), *The Origins of the Vigilant State: The London Metropolitan Police Special Branch before the First World War,* London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, p.67.

28  Ibid, p.xi.

29  Butterworth, A. (2010), *The World That Never Was: A True Story of Dreamers, Schemers, Anarchists and Secret Agents,* London: The Bodley Head.

30    Porter, B. (19 November, 2009), 'Other People's Mail', *London Review of Books,* 31(22), pp.15-17.

31    Anderson, D. (2015), 'Guilty Secrets: Deceit, Denial and the Discovery of Kenya's "Migrated Archive"', *History Workshop Journal,* 80, pp. 142–60; Cobain, I. (2016), *The History Thieves: Secret, Lies and the Shaping of a Modern Nation,* London: Portobello Books, pp.101-135.

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33    Evening Standard (25 March, 2014), 'MPs to quiz three Met chiefs on "shredding of corruption files"', Nexis.com, (accessed on 25 July, 2018); The Times (9 February, 2017), 'Met investigated over shredding of sensitive files', Nexis.com (accessed on 25 July, 2018).

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38    Pearce, R. (17 October 2002), www.documentcloud.org/documents/3104872-True-Spies-Letter-2002.html#document/p1/a317218 (accessed on 13 September 2018).

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The Centre for Crime and Justice Studies is an independent educational charity that advances public understanding of crime, criminal justice and social harm. Through partnership and coalition-building, advocacy and research, we work to inspire social justice solutions to the problems society faces, so that many responses that criminalise and punish are no longer required.