

The Secret Twenties: British Intelligence, The Russians, and The Jazz Age

Timothy Phillips (Granta, 2017), 375 pp., illustrations and photos.

Reviewed by J. R. Seeger

Picture this scenario: A previous government recognized a security threat from the Russians, but chose to minimize its response to the warnings of the intelligence and security services. This government, while no friend of the Russians, still saw no good reason to be as openly hostile as had its previous administrations. A few years later, when the putative current administration comes into power, its leadership completely dismisses the Russian threat and is privately hostile to the intelligence services themselves. The administration's leader is so disinterested in the threat that he refuses to take detailed briefings. Another election occurs, and the new government decides to accept the recommendations of the intelligence and security services. Meanwhile, in a period of limited resources, the leaders of the intelligence and security services compete with each other for primacy in addressing the threat.

While this might sound like a contemporary discussion, it's actually a description of the complex set of problems faced by two Tory governments and one Labor government in the United Kingdom during the 1920s. In a well written book by Timothy Phillips, the reader is exposed to the challenges intelligence services faced in their efforts to convince elected leaders that the Russians (more accurately, the Bolsheviks) were conducting both espionage and subversion inside the United Kingdom. The book also reveals the resource commitment the British Security Service (BSS) and the British Metropolitan Police Special Branch levied against the Bolshevik intelligence infrastructure in the 1920s.

The specific details of Bolshevik and, eventually, Soviet intelligence operations in the West have been covered in great detail by a number of books over the past 20 years. After the fall of the Soviet Union and, most especially, after the publication of KGB archival and declassified Venona material, there have been multiple books published on the Soviet efforts to undermine Western governments almost immediately after the Brest-Litovsk Treaty ushered in peace with the German Empire. The

Bolshevik leadership created the "Communist International" (COMINTERN) to expand the successes of the Russian Revolution to both Western Europe and Central Asia. At the same time, the newly established government in Moscow created the first security organization, the "Extraordinary Commission," (CHEKA) which was responsible for destroying counter-revolutionary organizations and collecting intelligence. The CHEKA was eventually replaced in 1922 by a more formal intelligence and security service, the Joint State Political Directorate (OGPU). The revolutionaries in Moscow understood that their survival was dependent upon subverting their enemies and expanding the roles of their political allies in the West. The CHEKA/OGPU and the COMINTERN were conducting recruitment operations in the United Kingdom by 1918, and by the 1920s were using the Communist Party of the United Kingdom (CPUK) and the Soviet Trade Commission as their primary headquarters for these efforts.

The difference between Phillips' book and recent books on the history of the British Security Service such as Christopher Andrew's *Defend the Realm* (Knopf, 2009) is that Phillips is more interested in capturing personal vignettes from both sides of this game of cat-and-mouse, and he is very interested in the complex relationships between the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS or MI6), the British Security Service (BSS or MI5), and the Metropolitan Police Special Branch. His primary source material comes from the UK National Archives at Kew where he found detailed, declassified reporting from the BSS and Special Branch covering the entire decade of the 1920s. The material included tactical reporting of surveillance operations, "mail cover" campaigns (letter opening and tracking), and agent reporting. He also found memoranda between service chiefs, Whitehall, and No. 10 Downing Street covering strategic discussions on the Russian threat. Phillips is far more interested in the tactical side of the equation and his chapters are filled with both successes and failures in the United Kingdom that easily could parallel the plot lines of John Buchan or Eric

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Ambler. At one point, Phillips covers in great detail an investigation of a COMINTERN agent traveling throughout the United Kingdom attempting to foment revolution among unions and the CPUK. This agent decided to pick the unimaginative alias of “Mr. Brown.” It is perhaps more than a coincidence that the sinister figure in Agatha Christie’s 1930 novel *The Secret Adversary* operates under the same alias. Unfortunately, Phillips either did not know of the story or simply could not make the connection.

Phillips reiterates two points multiple times in the book. First, the British intelligence and security apparatus were well aware of Soviet efforts through the COMINTERN and the CHEKA to undermine the United Kingdom. Second, UK elected officials were at best disinterested in the threat and, at least during the Labor government, dismissive of the threat. Phillips writes:

. . . Britain’s spies were limited in what they could achieve on their own: the real levers of change tended to be in the hands of the elected government or senior departmental officials. So, a major part of British Intelligence’s job was to brief the government and advise civil servants and politicians about how best to respond to hostile threats. It is clear that Special Branch, MI5, and SIS all briefed government officials and ministers frequently in the 1920s, arguing typically that the threat level in the country was too high . . . Frustratingly for British intelligence chiefs, however, their words of advice often fell on deaf ears or otherwise led to no discernible action. (130)

This frustration was especially the case after January 1924 when the Labor Party took charge of Parliament and Ramsey Macdonald became the prime minister. The intelligence services had hard evidence that the COMINTERN and CPUK were working to infiltrate the Labor Party with their own loyalists. Rightly or wrongly, the party was viewed by the intelligence and security services as “. . . a kind of Trojan Horse—surreptitiously bringing a radical ideology into the country. . . .” (171) Ramsay Macdonald did not help in reducing these concerns during his first meeting with the chief of Special Branch and received a dressing-down from the prime minister at his first meeting on internal security. Macdonald refused to discuss or use the Special Branch material. Phillips continues,

News of the Labor leader’s treatment of Childs quickly did the rounds at Whitehall. Some who heard of it doubtless just rolled their eyes, but others felt the discourtesy contrasted starkly with Labour’s renewed determination to extend the hand of friendship to Moscow. (172)

As a result, the intelligence and security chiefs decided not to brief the Labor prime minister on their successes in decoding the Soviet cable traffic that demonstrated, in detail, the level of COMINTERN subversion in the UK.

Phillips is a very good writer, and he knows how to keep the reader in suspense. His research is excellent and he weaves the multiple strands of Soviet espionage and subversion into a single plot line that helps the reader understand the complex nature of the time. If there is a single criticism, it has to be that Phillips periodically chooses to editorialize about the actions of the various security services. He questions why Special Branch and BSS/MI5 would worry about Soviet efforts to gain access to well connected, high status individuals in London when they had no direct position in the government. An intelligence officer reading these parts of the book understands full well the Soviets were attempting to build an access agent and/or support agent network for future espionage operations. It would make sense for the security services to be watching with concern. In his concluding chapter, Phillips argues that much of this effort bordered on irrationality and was due more to moralist views of the members of the intelligence services than true efforts to ferret out Soviet spies. Any professional intelligence officer would argue that was not the case.

In sum, Phillips’ book provides excellent insight into the tactics, techniques, and procedures of both the British security apparatus and the nascent Soviet apparatus in the 1920s. The details he offers underscore his commitment to primary source research. Equally important, Phillips is an excellent storyteller, so the book is a pleasure to read. If the book resonates today for an entirely different reason as we face new challenges from Russia and China, it also provides useful commentary on how the security and intelligence apparatus in a democracy should—and should not—deal with a complex story of political warfare, subversion and espionage.



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