

Literary Spying

British Writers and MI5 Surveillance 1930-1960

James Smith

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Smith's book is an immensely valuable preliminary examination of the British secret state's surveillance of 'the left-wing writers and artists' of George Orwell's generation. As the author makes clear, the context was very different from the United States. In Britain surveillance of the arts and artists was not informed by any US-style Red Scare. In Britain, he argues, 'MI5's activity was much more circumspect and rarely resulted in direct forms of censorship', let alone any 'explosive arrests'. MI5, unlike the FBI, did not have a Book Review Section, examining content. There were no British Dashiell Hammetts or Howard Fast imprisoned for a political stand. Nevertheless, despite the absence of any Red Scare, extensive surveillance still took place. Smith discusses MI5 policy with regard to the Communist Party in the mid-1930s:

'...all aspects of the policy of the CPGB were being "carefully followed up", while routine checks on correspondence were maintained on selected district officers, important members and those involved in the covert organisations of the Party. But attention was also paid right down to the ground level. While extra attention was given to Party leaders or those who were secret members, a blanket of detailed surveillance was mandated for anyone involved in the Party: "As far as possible all details, including place of employment, are being obtained concerning all Party members"...Of course, the files maintained on actual Party members were only the tip of the iceberg.'

Inevitably, writers and artists on the left came under scrutiny. Smith looks in detail at the surveillance of the Auden Circle, at Ewan MacColl, Joan Littlewood and the Theatre Workshop, and at Arthur Koestler and George Orwell. He has also written elsewhere (*Literature and History* 2010) about the surveillance of Douglas Jefferies and the left-wing literary magazine, *Storm*, a contribution that would have fitted nicely into this volume. With regard to the Auden Circle, Auden himself seems to have attracted little attention from the secret state because although 'he was widely championed as the poetic leader of the left', in practice, he was reluctant to involve himself in 'the types of ground-level activism' that other members of the Circle embraced. MI5, it seems, did not regard poetry as particularly threatening and only really noticed poets when they engaged in more conventional activism! Even Auden's visit to Republican Spain seems to have gone unnoticed by MI5, although as Smith notes there might well be an SIS file. Interest in Auden did, however, explode into life in June 1951 at the time of the Guy Burgess defection. One of the last things Burgess did before disappearing was try to contact Auden, something that excited considerable activity on the part of MI5.

Smith has a very interesting discussion of another member of the Auden Circle, Stephen Spender, who attracted a lot more attention. He examines his post-war involvement with the Congress for Cultural Freedom. Special Branch, who were in the grip of 'anti-Communist paranoia', were actually investigating the Congress to discover whether or not it was a Communist front! As for Spender's involvement, he provides a convincing argument in favour of Spender knowing that *Encounter* was funded by the CIA. He had, after all, worked for the Political Warfare Executive during the war and was certainly not the naïve *litterateur*, taken advantage of by Cold Warriors, that he presented himself as. Spender was, in fact, 'well integrated with the British Cold War propaganda effort'.

Which brings us to MacColl, Littlewood and the Theatre Workshop. The released Theatre Workshop file, covering the years from 1951 to 1960, has some 250 pages. MI5 kept

newspaper reviews of Theatre Workshop productions on file, indeed the file contains 'over 100 separate clippings – making the file now, in its own right, a considerable archive concerning the reception of Theatre Workshop'. As for MacColl, in the 1930s, Special Branch seem to regard him as a serious threat; but MI5 were much more relaxed, with Roger Hollis recommending that he could be 'left to his plays'.

What of Koestler and Orwell? An MI5 officer assessed Koestler as 'one third genius, one third blackguard and one third lunatic', which seems pretty fair. His trajectory from Comintern agent to Cold Warrior is usefully documented, right up until the time that he became too hawkish for his new employers. Most controversial, of course, is George Orwell, whose integrity has been seriously called into question since revelations concerning his relationship with the covert Information Research Department. Smith quotes the historian Christopher Hill on how Orwell was always 'two-faced' and seemed to have 'something fishy' about him. He considers the validity of this judgement. According to Smith, in the 1930s, surveillance of Orwell 'was at times paranoid but, from a security standpoint, sporadic and largely peripheral'. During the War, Special Branch, 'inevitably paranoid' according to Smith, described him as having 'advanced communist views', as attending 'communist meetings' and as dressing 'in a bohemian fashion both at his office and in his leisure hours'. MI5 took a more relaxed view, with W. Ogilvie responding to the Special Branch report with the observation that Orwell

'has been a bit of an anarchist in his day and in touch with extremist elements. But he has lately thrown in his lot with Victor Gollancz who as you probably know has severed all connection with the Communist Party. Blair undoubtedly (has) strong Left Wing views but he is a long way from orthodox Communism'.

As Ogilvie noted, it was evident from Orwell's recent writings (this was before *Animal Farm* was published) 'that he does not hold with the Communist Party nor they with him'.

Post-war, of course, Orwell became involved with the secret state. Smith quite correctly condemns Orwell's

relationship with the Information Research Department (IRD) and his handing over of a list of Party members, sympathisers and fellow travellers as a 'gross miscalculation'. He is, however, less successful in explaining this miscalculation. Obviously, Orwell's anti-Stalinism was a crucial factor, but in the post-War period the nature of that anti-Stalinism changed. Whereas in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Orwell had been intent on combating Communist influence within the Left, after the War he became mistakenly convinced that the Soviet Union was an aggressive great power set on further conquests and that in these circumstances the West was 'a lesser evil' that he was prepared to help fight the Russians. This was the same stance that he had taken with regard to Nazi Germany. Whereas in *Animal Farm*, the Soviet Union is shown as being as bad as the West, by *Nineteen Eighty Four*, the totalitarian danger has become overwhelming.

This was not the only factor though. Orwell was a strong supporter of the Labour government right up until his death. He was very critical of it for not being radical enough, arguing on one occasion that a United Socialist States of Europe was the only thing worth fighting for, but he believed it was the best that was possible at the time. It was this government that had set up the IRD to counter Communist propaganda and influence and there seems little doubt that as far as Orwell was concerned, he was assisting a Labour government initiative. It is these two interrelated factors that together explain Orwell's miscalculation: his acceptance of the Cold War exaggeration of the 'Russian threat' and his illusions in the Labour government's foreign policy.

In his defence, it is worth remembering that the same Christopher Hill who considered Orwell as always having been 'fishy' was at this time a public apologist for Stalinism, even publishing an article in the CP's *Modern Quarterly* in 1953, celebrating the great man's virtues as a historian! One suspects that those Russian historians who fell victim to the purges would have found Orwell's more forgivable than Hill's. Hill only finally turned against Stalin when the Soviet regime repudiated him in 1956.

Interestingly enough, although this falls outside Smith's remit, Orwell was also approached by the International Relief and Rescue Committee, which in its current incarnation has kindly provided gainful employment for David Miliband. He was approached early in 1946 by Francis Henson, a 'Lovestoneite', working for the Committee, who assured him that the organisation was 'very definitely a non-Stalinist organisation', indeed that it was 'anti-Stalinist to the extent that the people they assist are largely Trotskyists etc'. He missed the clue that the Committee, in his words, seemed to 'have considerable funds at their disposal'. This initiative seems to have been stillborn, but it certainly shows Orwell's potential vulnerability to secret state manipulation at this time.

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Interestingly, MI5 did, as Smith reveals, work with the British Board of Film Censors, 'arranging joint film viewings...allowing them to judge the content of recent propaganda films and coordinate with the BBFC ways of managing any films deemed to pose a particular risk'. Given this interest in the cinema, Ken Loach's MI5 file is, one suspects, pretty thick!

Peter Davison, ed, *The Complete Works of George Orwell: Smothered Under Journalism*, London 1998, pp 154-155. The Lovestoneites were, of course, supporters of Nikolai Bukharin

and followers of Jay Lovestone, expelled from the American Communist Party in 1928. In the post-war period they were to become US Intelligence assets in the effort to combat Communist influence in the British and European labour movements.