

The Black Door

Spies, Secret Intelligence and British Prime Ministers

Richard Aldrich and Rory Cormac

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This new book by two respected academics has a lot to tell us about how Britain is run. We are told, for example, that at a CBI dinner in December 1971, the Labour Party leader, Harold Wilson, boasted to the assembled businessmen of how, when in office, he had MI5 keep left-wing leaders of the trade union movement under surveillance, 'tapped or bugged'. Indeed, during the 1966 Seamen's Strike Wilson had received MI5 briefings on the dispute twice a day. According to Martin Furnival Jones, MI5's Director, no previous Prime Minister had ever shown 'such enthusiasm for regular up-to-the-minute reports during an industrial dispute'. Wilson was particularly pleased that the Communist Party headquarters was 'comprehensively bugged'. And he actively encouraged right-wing union leaders to collaborate with MI5. One of the leading figures in the GMWU, Sir Harry Crane, 'was deeply involved in this' and regularly passed information from MI5 onto the Labour Party's national agent and witch-hunter in chief, Sarah Barker. This relationship 'between right-wingers in the Labour Party and MI5 was held close, and nothing was written down'.

Wilson was also an enthusiast for covert operations. He continued the Tories' secret wars in Yemen and Indonesia, told MI6 to assassinate Idi Amin (they refused) and gave the United States considerable covert assistance in Vietnam. That Wilson kept Britain out of the Vietnam War is one of the myths most cherished by Labour supporters. The reality is somewhat different. He wanted to send a token force to fight alongside the US but was effectively prevented from doing this by the scale of extra-parliamentary opposition to his diplomatic support for the Americans and the strength of the Labour Left in the Commons at the time. Nevertheless, the Americans were given every assistance short of 'boots on the ground'. As Aldrich and Cormac reveal, GCHQ provided the Americans with

'volumes of signals intelligence' to help their war effort and the Americans were allowed to operate their 'largest CIA station in the region' out of Hong Kong. MI6 agents in the British Embassy in Hanoi provided intelligence reports on the effect of US bombing that were passed on to Washington. All this took place 'below the radar of British public opinion'.

However, according to Aldrich and Cormac the extent of the British role in the 1965 destruction of the Left in Indonesia that brought Suharto to power and saw over half a million people massacred in circumstances that make ISIS look like humanitarians, remains 'a mystery'. Some would say a very convenient mystery. And in Yemen, Britain, the Saudis and the Israelis provided military assistance to rebels who were guilty of much the same kind of atrocities as ISIS but conveniently did not post them on-line.

Despite his collaboration with the British secret state, Wilson was himself the victim of various smears, plots and coup proposals in which MI5 officers were intimately involved. Wilson was convinced that the South African secret service, BOSS, was also involved. He was right: they were allowed to operate in Britain without any interference at this time because, as one of their (unnamed) agents later revealed, they had a film of MPs taking part in orgies and 'a full dossier on a top-level sex scandal that "would make the Christine Keeler business look trivial"'. On one occasion, Labour MPs complained to Callaghan about MI5 spying on the anti-Apartheid movement and were told that it wasn't the anti-Apartheid movement they were keeping an eye on but BOSS!

What of the Heath government? Heath had the TGWU leader, Jack Jones, made a target with his phones bugged and his mail opened. The leader of the NUM, Joe Gormley, was, we now know, a 'Special Branch informant' through the 1970s. The normal procedure at this time, when an employer approached MI5 or Special Branch for help against militants, was to pass them on to the private, business-financed blacklisting organisation, the Economic League. The Ford Motor Company, however, as a condition of opening its Halewood plant, insisted that Special Branch should vet the workforce,

blacklisting union activists. Heath agreed. More firms demanded help from Special Branch and Massey Ferguson, for example, were given 'a list of people to "watch out for"'. The British government was directly involved in the operation of blacklists. At one point during the class battles of these years, Heath actually insisted to MI5 that some of the more dangerous militants had to be 'done'. These revelations are dynamite and need to be urgently investigated by the Commons Intelligence Select Committee. Only kidding of course. The Commons Intelligence Select Committee is really just a parliamentary spittoon into which the intelligence agencies occasionally feel obliged to gob.

Under Thatcher there was the dramatic rise of private intelligence agencies run by various of her admirers, Brian Crozier and the like, that operated alongside MI5. CND was apparently a particular target of these 'privateers'. But what of the war her government waged against the miners? This is not explored at all in *The Black Door* and yet it involved a greater degree of secret state involvement in breaking a strike than ever before. And alongside this there was the role of her privateers in helping set up the scab Union of Democratic Mineworkers. Perhaps the official material is not available, but not to have any discussion of the great miners' strike at all is a serious shortcoming. The very absence of material, if this was indeed the case, is tremendously significant and deserved discussion. This was, after all, the decisive engagement that shifted the balance of class forces and made everything that has followed possible.

The Black Door inevitably has considerable discussion of Blair's Wars. This is comparatively well-trodden ground. Of more interest is the account of Cameron's war in Libya and attempted war on Syria. Both MI6 and the Defence Chiefs advised against intervention against Gaddafi, but Cameron went ahead anyway. While the pretext for intervention was, as always, humanitarian, the real object was regime change. MI6 and SAS 'advisers' helped train the rebels and supplied them with weapons and 'a thousand sets of body armour'. The British intended to send Gaddafi off into exile in Equatorial

Guinea and had no intention of letting him appear before any international court where he might reveal 'his links to MI6'. His death solved the problem.

As for Syria, Aldrich and Cormac reveal that many within both the CIA and MI6 did not believe that the sarin attack on Ghoutta was the work of the Assad regime. It had too much to lose by provoking the Americans. The pretext for war was false, something that was still a sensitive issue after Iraq. Instead there was a strong suspicion that it was the work of the Turkish-backed al-Nusra front, intending to fix the blame on Assad and thereby provoke a US attack on his regime. The US had ready 'a "shock and awe" campaign led by a fleet of B-52s', to which Britain would have contributed a few planes and some cruise missiles, but 'a ferocious and unresolved debate' within the CIA and other US agencies over who was responsible, led to the attack being cancelled. Not the debate and vote in the House of Commons, but disagreements within the US intelligence apparatus.

What of Mossad and British intelligence? We are told in a throwaway sentence that Israel's 'unruly secret service' has 'periodically kidnapped and murdered people in London'. And that is it.

After reading this book we not only know more than we did, but also how much more we need to know and unfortunately how much we are likely to never know....

John Newsinger

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A new edition of his British Counterinsurgency
has recently been published and is reviewed
in this issue of Lobster.*