

## **. . . and then two come along**

JOHN STONEHOUSE, MY FATHER

*The True Story of the Runaway MP*

Julia Stonehouse

London: Icon, 2021, £16.99, h/b

Stonehouse

*Cabinet Minister, Fraudster, Spy*

Julian Hayes

London: Robinson, 2021, £16.99, h/b

### **Robin Ramsay**

**W**ell here's a thing: two books, using much of the same material – centrally a file on Stonehouse held by the former Czech intelligence service (Státní Bezpečnost, State Security, generally referred to as the StB) which come to opposing conclusions. Actually even 'using much of the same material' can't be stated with certainty, because Hayes describes things in the file which Stonehouse does not.

Stonehouse works her way through the 1000-plus pages of the StB file on her late father and tries to show that Joseph Frolik and other Czech spooks in London were simply exaggerating – or inventing – agents and espionage activities to claim expenses they hadn't incurred. In her reading of the documents, the StB officers in London ate their way round the fine dining rooms of London having 'meetings' with 'informants' and 'agents', one of whom was Stonehouse.

The Hayes book takes a different tack. It accepts the StB file at face value and reports that it

'contains an abundance of documents in Stonehouse's verified handwriting, including letters, envelopes and a five-page report providing detailed information on members of the African National Congress. In addition are scores of typed letters, reports and minutes of committee and *cabinet meetings*, for a example a detailed description of a Labour shadow cabinet meeting in 1963 concerning the issue of nuclear disarmament and

another on the Monckton Commission.’ (p. 28 emphasis added)

*Cabinet meetings?* I spoke to Mr Hayes and this is just a piece of unclear writing. He didn’t mean *government* cabinet meetings, which are official secrets, he meant Labour shadow cabinet meetings, which are not.

There are no sources in the Hayes book. In an email a member of his publisher’s staff described it to me as ‘narrative non-fiction’. In other words it is merely undocumented assertions. Some of which are striking. For example on p. 9 he describes the late Donald Chesworth as a Czech agent. If so, he is not worthy of mention in Christopher Andrew’s *The Defence of the Realm*, as close as we have to an official history of MI5.<sup>1</sup> Presumably the author found Chesworth in the StB file on Stonehouse and takes it as gospel. Hayes also describes the late Ernest Fernyhough MP as another Czech agent. This claim was actually run in the *Daily Mail*, after the Andrew book was published, based on StB files.<sup>2</sup> Fernyhough’s family complained to the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO). In the IPSO report on the complaint is this:

‘The complainant, the grandson of Mr Fernyhough, said that it was inaccurate to describe his grandfather as having “spied for Czechoslovakia”. He said that following the article’s publication, he wrote to the head of the Czech Security Services archive, who said that she “refused” (sic) the allegation that Mr Fernyhough spied for the Czech Foreign Intelligence Service; she said that in her opinion, Mr Fernyhough was unaware that he was dealing with intelligence officers, and did not really ever say anything important or confidential.’<sup>3</sup>

And that is the central issue. Yes, there were Czech intelligence officers sniffing round the Labour Party, under cover as diplomats. There were also Soviet officers, ditto, and American intelligence officers, called Labor Attachés, doing the same thing. Until fairly recently MPs weren’t paid very much and a ‘foreign diplomat’ offering to buy lunch in Westminster would find many takers. Further, while John Stonehouse understood the nature of the Soviet regime, chunks of

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<sup>1</sup> Chesworth has a very striking CV – a lifetime of socially-aware political work, including being the Warden of Toynbee Hall. See <<https://tinyurl.com/yswk33ny>> or <<https://www.qmul.ac.uk/library/archives/news/cataloguing-begins-on-the-donald-chesworth-collection.html>>.

After he had to quit politics, John Profumo dedicated himself to charitable work with Toynbee Hall (much of it being while Donald Chesworth was Warden). See <<https://www.toynbeehall.org.uk/the-profumo-connection/>>.

<sup>2</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/5aywzu5w>> or <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7094953/Key-aide-Prime-Minister-Harold-Wilson-spied-Czechoslovakia.html>>

<sup>3</sup> <<https://www.ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements/ruling/?id=06223-19>>

the British labour movement in the 50s and 60s did not. There was still a misplaced degree of sympathy for 'fellow socialists' – odd though this may seem now when the nature of Stalinism has been so thoroughly exposed. All of which led Labour MPs to talk to, eat lunch with and provide documents to Czech 'diplomats'. One of the them was John Stonehouse, who had a town in his constituency twinned with one in Czechoslovakia.<sup>4</sup> And for the Czech spooks in London, seeking to justify their overseas postings and the expenses incurred, such conversations with Labour Party officials and MPs were presented to their supervisors back home as intelligence-gathering and some of those with whom they were talking described as 'agents'.

Stonehouse was an interesting figure: an anti-communist, anti-imperialist member of the Labour and Co-operative Party. Julia Stonehouse refers, in passing, to an article her father wrote which was published in a 1959 collection, *Gangrene*.<sup>5</sup> She discovered the article by reading the StB file on Stonehouse. I have the book on my shelves and it's pretty tough stuff for the period, about the brutality of the British authorities in Kenya towards suspected Mau Mau detainees: beatings, torture, death. Stonehouse went to Rhodesia shortly after, spoke in favour of African nationalism, and was deported.

The Czech StB defector, Joseph Frolik (who never met, let alone 'ran' Stonehouse) named him as one of the StB's agents to the CIA in 1969/70 when he defected. Frolik also hinted at Stonehouse – without naming him – later in his book, *The Frolik Defection* (1975). This material is well-known but it has not been reworked for a while that I recall and Ms Stonehouse does a competent job with it. Particularly, she shows the way the whispers from Frolik via the CIA were used by a section of the Tory right and some British spooks in the great psy-ops against the Labour governments of the 1970s. En route she attacks Professor Christopher Andrew for rehashing Stonehouse-as-Czech-agent in his *The Defence of the Realm*, showing that he did a poor job handling the file: like Hayes he took it all at face value. Ms Stonehouse points out that there are no documents in the StB file from her father after he became a member of the cabinet. Whatever the 'intelligence' was he gave to the StB officers under diplomatic cover – and it looks like piffle – he had no access to official secrets. As soon as he had such access he cut the StB people off. The fact that the StB officers were griping about receiving the cold shoulder from Stonehouse is actually recorded in the files

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<sup>4</sup> On the town twinning movement see <<https://tinyurl.com/yjsk9p32>> or <<https://www.euractiv.com/section/languages-culture/news/town-twinings-the-biggest-peace-movement-in-the-world/>>.

<sup>5</sup> London: Calder Books, 1959

The second source of Stonehouse's problems was involvement with Bangladesh, which until 1971 was called East Pakistan. He tried to create a bank to channel funds from British Bangladeshis – Bengalis – to Bangladesh to help build the newly-born state. However, an article appeared in the *Sunday Times* in 1972 alleging that there was something dodgy about Stonehouse's British Bangladesh Trust Limited (BBT). (I haven't read the article.) This was taken seriously in part because one of its co-authors, Anthony Mascarenhas, had become famous the year before by documenting – again in the *Sunday Times* – the massive slaughter being committed in East Pakistan by the Pakistani army. Mascarenhas' article on Stonehouse triggered various official inquiries into the BBT, none of which led to prosecutions, as Ms Stonehouse points out. She claims that her father was informed that Mascarenhas was some sort of spy, working against him. For this there is no evidence that I have seen. However an obituary of Mascarenhas reported that, while born in Goa, he took Indian nationality five years after his famous scoop about the Pakistan Army genocide in East Pakistan. So it is just possible that he was working for Indian intelligence. Nonetheless, to the whispers on the Tory right that Stonehouse was a traitor, working for the Soviet bloc, was added the whisper that he was involved in some dodgy finances and Harold Wilson dropped him from the cabinet when took office in February 1974.

Author Hayes is the son of a man who was one of Stonehouse's lawyers and a Stonehouse nephew. He presents a detailed account of the financial hanky-panky Stonehouse engaged in trying to salvage his British Bangladesh Trust Limited, after the Mascarenhas article in the *Sunday Times*.

All this was acutely stressful and Stonehouse took to dosing himself with two of the period's crude, heavy duty antidepressants, Mogadon and Mandrax. It is these medications, Ms Stonehouse believes, which scrambled her father's brain and led to his failed attempt to fake his death on the beach in Miami, disappear, and start again in Australia with a new identity.

The third major theme in the daughter's book is the behaviour of the newspapers. Ms Stonehouse documents in enormous detail their endless speculation and fabrications – of which she was one of the victims. If you wanted to make a case for press regulation the evidence is here, in spades.

All of which amounts to what? Not that much, oddly enough. I think Ms Stonehouse does show that her father was not an StB agent, that this charge was specious. Hayes, on the other hand, shows that Stonehouse did engage in various frauds, or borderline frauds, trying to salvage his still-born bank. And with the exception of the *Guardian* and the *Observer*, according to Ms Stonehouse, the British press of the period was appalling.

One minor PS. A detailed summary of the Hayes book, by Hayes himself, appeared in the *Daily Mail*.<sup>6</sup> In that there is a misreading or over reading of one of the bits of evidence in his own book. Hayes writes in the *Mail*:

'Readily agreeing to share information on political affairs, he drew the line only at providing anything concerning the military. For this, Stonehouse said, he'd require a minimum of £400 a year.

The trap had been sprung. Kolon [The StB code name for Stonehouse] was now officially a Czech agent . . . .'

This isn't quite accurate. The £400 p.a. figure did apparently arise during conversations between Stonehouse and a Czech intelligence officer – as reported by the Czech – but not explicitly as Stonehouse's price. Rather, it was Stonehouse's estimate of what he would need to pursue his political ambitions within the Labour Party. (Hayes p. 27) Stonehouse may have been hinting that this was the fee he expected from the Czechs. If so, this was very small beer – less than half the average annual wage then – and makes a striking contrast with Will Owen MP who was receiving £500 a month from the Czechs at this time<sup>7</sup> and feeding them chickenfeed. But as Hayes reports it, Stonehouse didn't actually explicitly say it was his price.

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<sup>6</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/4zy4j4rm>> or <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9796639/The-story-John-Stonehouse-told-great-nephew.html>>

<sup>7</sup> Hayes p. 33