

# Secret Services, 1918-1939



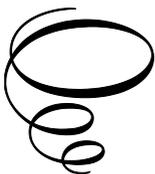
# Secret Services, 1918-1939:

*Their Development in Britain,  
Germany, and Russia*

By

Andrew Sangster

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Dedicated to my wife Carol who must feel like a widow  
to the Archives and the Past



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## PREFACE

The initial impetus behind this study of the Russian, German and British intelligence agencies was to try and discover how soon they became aware of the impending 1939-45 conflict. It led to some curious results, but as the research continued it also became apparent that these interwar years were important, because they were the years which formed the modern intelligence system ready for the next global war, and helped shape the intelligence services during the Cold War and to this day, and their shapes and functions stemmed from the work of the 1920s and 1930s when hard lessons were learnt. The study also demanded that the work of the secret police had to be involved because although they were often but not always a separate organisation, they were frequently used by the intelligence services.

Another theme emerged as the study was underway, namely the lack of similarity between the three selected national systems. In a matter of comparing the three national organisations it was immediately clear that although there were common features between and the Soviet and Nazi systems, they were two distinctive bodies and both very remote from the British system; it became more a matter of contrast than comparison. This had much to do with the national governments under which they operated. Often their objectives were similar, but the methods and morality of each national organisation diverged in vast and significant ways; it could be argued from the text that the Soviet and Nazi systems had some common features, but they were diverse, and both very different from the British services. This aspect therefore demanded brief incursions into the politics of the three countries studied, one communist, one fascist, and the last democratic. Although other countries intelligence agencies are mentioned in passing, these three were selected because of their sheer prominence during this period. This is not a nationalistic history but sought to be as objective as possible on the scant information available.

### **Reader's Note**

Throughout this book there are a bewildering number of abbreviations which are explained as they occur, but to assist the reader there is an abbreviations page. However, there are three unfamiliar technical words

which need to be understood throughout the text; Humint which is an indicator of intelligence gained from human intervention such as agents, diplomats and so forth. Sigint stands for information and intelligence gained from signals, and Comint relates to communications intelligence which is basically a form of Sigint. One other is GC&CS which is British and stands for Government Code and Cipher School. The book is basically about the interwar years, but out of sheer necessity and the need for clarity there are references to the years during which the First and Second World Wars were fought.

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION



*The Modern SIS Building on South Bank of the Thames*

Many general histories have been written about the police work of the Nazi German Gestapo, the SD, fewer about the Soviet Russian NKVD, and even less about the nature of intelligence work, including the British agencies. Finding the critical information has not been easy, and at times it was looking for crumbs dropped from a high table. There are a few books written by authoritative experts which are long intense studies, and there are many best sellers, memoirs and fiction, whose authority can sometimes be questionable. Most general history books make only passing references, and often their details are skimpy because of the clandestine nature of this subject. The world of the secret services remains in many ways secretive because even material from the distant past has been deliberately destroyed or simply lost. The archives can be equally difficult to penetrate. The British SIS (MI6), which reported to the Foreign Office, produced the world-famous Ultra system which was highly secret during the war years and remained so for a long time afterwards. It was nearly thirty years before its now well-known existence became public.

There are times in the life of the secret intelligence world when matters must be locked away, and the material evidence destroyed never to surface

again. The reasons are self-evidently diverse, ranging from the safety of the agents involved, to the methods which had been deployed, to cover up embarrassments, deceit, killings, clever deceptions, and unpleasant manipulations. This is especially true of the last eighty years of the twentieth century with World War Two followed by the Cold War. The French historian Henri Michel wrote of the years 1939-1945 that “Europe became a prison, until such time as it would be a graveyard,” and this led directly into the ramifications of the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> The 1939-1945 war was a time of sheer barbarity, massacres, torture, imprisonment, which postwar was epitomised by the new legal terms of Genocide and Crimes against Humanity; the single word Holocaust for many summarises the era. The problem with secret intelligence work was that it was often instigated by governments, or they were aware of what had happened, whether it was known officially or by rumour, and this could have embarrassing long term ramifications.

There are many awkward situations which are often best put aside out of political interest, not least those times when some past actions would be deemed as immoral or illegal. There are other reasons such as when the work of the secret intelligence agencies was ignored to the detriment of the involved government. The French service, known as the Deuxième Bureau in 1939 “seems to have given fair warning to the French General Staff [that is of German intentions]...emphasised that hostilities might begin with a sudden attack...articles by General Guderian, the German expert on tanks warfare, had been translated into French,” were basically ignored and the consequences were utterly disastrous.<sup>2</sup> The senior Abwehr officer Hans Oster informed his Dutch counterpart, the Dutch military attaché in Berlin Colonel Sas, of the precise time of the intended invasion yet the attack still came as a surprise. Such revelations can be embarrassing in national histories.

It was sometimes the case that secret intelligence depended too much on individuals who were far distanced from the control offices and often isolated from direct command. Decisions often had to be made on the spot, and while some were outstandingly successful others were failures and embarrassing; this book will conclude with such a situation. It is not the case that the nature of an agent’s task attracted the same sort of person; even a brief survey will indicate that secret agents (often called illegals) varied, but there were some eccentrics, some gung-ho types, some making the most of the moment for reasons other than duty such as money, sex, reputation and power. The secret intelligence agency and its government often had to live in hope and frequently tried to conceal the frequent blunders.

**Chapter One** will explore precisely what intelligence services were and what is meant by secret police. This Chapter will outline what is implied by intelligence sources and why Secret Police are also involved. It will inevitably, throughout the text compare or contrast directly or by inference the agencies of Russia, Germany, and the Britain. This is because the nature of these three countries differed vastly in the patterns and conduct of their respective governments. Britain was an old established democracy, Soviet Russia was communist, but under Stalin it was a dictatorship, and in this period of the interwar years Nazi Germany was rapidly turning fascist. The rulers of these nations (others are mentioned in passing, especially France, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the USA) influenced and often dictated the terms of their intelligence agencies and secret police. It will, during the text be demonstrated that the British system stood poles apart from Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, both in the way they conducted themselves and in their behaviour.

**Chapter Two** will give a brief sketch of the early days of the Soviet police and intelligence agencies, indicating that apart from a six-week gap after the 1917 Revolution, they replaced the old Tsarist system with their own versions of secret police and intelligence gathering. The interwar period through to 1953 was dominated by Stalin who was more intent on exterminating opponents to his regime, mainly at home, but also seeking them out in Paris or the Netherlands, and even in Mexico as with Trotsky's assassination; and these are the ones known about. As with much of Soviet history there are complex moments with sudden changes amongst the important personalities, changes of names, and policies. Like a dark shadow Stalin's paranoia and almost psychiatric suspicion disorder dictated the scene, and especially with his control of the secret intelligence and police powers. The various heads of the Cheka, the GPU, and the NKVD are studied because of the immense power they wielded for their master Stalin. The result of his powerful hold on intelligence and police enabled the infamous purges, reaching a crescendo in the mid to late 1930s, though they never really stopped. The nature of these secret agents will be explored, their work, their cruel behaviour, and the sense of fear they and others all lived under. The chapter on Soviet Russia concludes with a sketch of one agent called Sudoplatov who was a typical product of the Soviet Communist system.

**Chapter Three** studies the emergence of the complex Nazi growth of secret intelligence and police agencies. Very much like Soviet Russia there are many confusing details, and allotment of specific tasks to various departments which frequently overlapped. The famous military agency of the Abwehr dominates the start of this chapter. Some historians see the

Abwehr as efficient until about 1941, others express doubts. It transpires to be a curious history because there were times when the Abwehr appeared to have the upper-hand, but its two leaders, Canaris and Oster and many of their officers were anti-Nazi, they wanted Hitler overthrown, and yet often cooperated with Hitler's aggressive and immoral demands. There are frequent indicators that the Abwehr was riddled with anti-Nazi employees. It was suspected Canaris fed Hitler the wrong information, and Oster was very much involved in the German resistance movement to unseat the dictator.

The Gestapo are studied and for everyone this dreaded name needs little explanation, though at the time it was commonly known by the German people as the *Stapo*. They were involved in both intelligence and police work and began their existence under Göring. They eventually spread their tentacles from Prussia throughout Germany and into occupied Europe, and they were eventually accused by the Nuremberg tribunal of being a criminal organisation. This might have shaken the first Gestapo employees who believed it was their task to seek out the so-called criminals.

The third phase was the development of the Nazi Party SD which was the intelligence agency of the SS under Himmler, assisted by Heydrich. This invidious organisation grew in power and enveloped the Gestapo and later the Abwehr. They were soon so intertwined that the SD and the Gestapo virtually became one body, not least because Himmler encouraged the more influential and reliable Gestapo agents to become members of the SS. The German services had much in common with their Soviet counterparts, but there were some differences in objectives, the Nazis being more racist and the Soviets more political; though both had much in common, and during the Polish occupation these organisations even cooperated.

**Chapter Four** will explore the British agencies which were vastly different because of Britain's democratic government with its long traditions. It has long been regarded that Britain's agency stretched back centuries, but its true origins in the modern sense of being state operated, can be traced back to just before the Great War. Typically, of British history, following the Great War and the financial debts it carried, not only was the army trimmed back, but the intelligence agencies were seriously underfunded and thereby under-resourced in all areas. They tried to run a global network on a mere shoestring, with little assistance from the politicians except for Churchill, who relished this type of work. Most countries after the 1914-18 conflict took time to stabilise, and some went askew as in Germany, but there is no question that Britain had started its decline, and little importance was placed on the work of intelligence. There was the home security known as MI5, and overseas (where the Union Jack did not fly) was MI6 more

appropriately known as the SIS. Both were supported by a small secret police force called the Special Branch (SB). Hampered by lack of money in the interwar years their time was dominated by apprehension of the Bolsheviks, and the British establishment's fear there could be a communist revolution in Britain. The work and problems of the SIS are looked at more closely than that of MI5, not least because it was not until the mid to late 1930s that the SIS realised the main threat against peace was emerging from Nazi Germany.

At this stage, the Americans were merely dabbling in overseas intelligence, and the French intelligence services were diminished from the same lack of funding, and perhaps suffered more domestic political problems than the British. The underfunded SIS was part of the British establishment and relied too often upon amateurs and poorly trained personnel. By 1939 there was some progress mainly due to the head of the SIS, Sinclair, and the self-evident dangers emanating from central Europe.

By the end of World War Two it was evident that the British intelligence agencies rose to the emergency, and despite years of poverty became almost part of British folklore when victory was mentioned. Some claimed the SIS shaved years off the war (especially with Ultra) which is a debatable exaggeration. In 1939, the end of the interwar years there was a major blunder by the SIS which will be explored in the final **Chapter Five**. It epitomised both the British amateur approach and German inanity. The Venlo incident will be explored from the German and British side of events, as typifying the state of play in the intelligence services of the two countries during the interwar years. It was a severe embarrassment from which the British were knocked back somewhat, but then recovered, and the Nazis benefitted but it was not long before their intelligences services declined.

# CHAPTER ONE

## EARLY NECESSARY QUESTIONS



### **What is Intelligence?**

When President Trump just after the Christian festive season of Christmas 2019 ordered that a drone should kill a leading Iranian military commander, he was utilising intelligence sources in tracking the man's exact whereabouts, before the precise spot was selected to annihilate him and others in his company with a drone attack. The entire world waited with anticipation, and at the time of writing still does, trying to foresee the ramifications of this clandestine action. That such intelligence was available is today taken for granted, but just over a hundred years ago using hot-air balloons to spot the general placement of guns was regarded as a major advance in information gathering.

As a general overview intelligence was and is about accumulating information about other countries, even friendly ones. In war it becomes an urgent matter of finding the enemy's strategies, tactics, intentions, resources, deployments, and all their developments technological, economic, political, and even their general social trends and attitudes. It often meant acquiring volumes of useless information, trying to sort out the jumble for the few

valuable pearls, and then experts working out whether it was a deception or whether it was valid and worth pursuing.

It has often been claimed that intelligence work wins wars, but a well led and strong army or fleet which had been badly served by intelligence can win a battle against a weaker side, which has been armed with good intelligence. Where and how the gathered intelligence is used is the critical point. From 1914 the value of intelligence grew in importance, always because of the demands of war, but even in peace there is economic and political intelligence and espionage. It has proved to be the case that war escalates human activity in many areas of medicine, science, technological and other developments. "During 1913, for example, perhaps a hundred people in the world worked fulltime in code-breaking or radio interception; by 1918 these numbers approached 10,000."<sup>3</sup> During the Second World War German intelligence initially tended to be somewhat better than the Allies, but this changed rapidly for a variety of reasons, not least the desperate situation faced by the Allies, and the scent of victory giving the Nazi Germans a sense of over-confidence. The nature of intelligence and espionage helped shape the war in many ways, but it was basically economic power and demographic factors amongst other reasons which assured the Allied victory; espionage played an important part, significant in places, but only a part in the final victory.

The first signs of developing modern intelligence gathering in the early twentieth century often involved operational deception, the use of agents (Humint), data processing systems, traffic analysis (Sigint), listening into prisoners' private conversations, especially senior officers, and communications interception (Comint). During World War Two the SIS department known as "Y" eavesdropped on POWs, and SIS MI19 recorded no "fewer than 64,427 conversations between captured German generals."<sup>4</sup> MI19 was a section of the British Directorate of Military Intelligence and part of the War Office. It was responsible for obtaining information for POWs and was originally created in 1940 as MI9a a subsection of MI9. MI9 was tasked with looking to European resistance networks to assist downed Allied airmen.\* All underlining the complexity of specialist departments with confusing titles which is a characteristic of all secret agencies; it was and is part of their confusing clandestine nature. The Soviet and Nazi abbreviations are prolific. The methods deployed by intelligence agencies were endless and have increased since. As noted above the second stage was always trying to fathom the integrity and then the importance of the

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\* An interesting book on MI9 was written by Foot M R D and Langley J M, *MI9 Escape and Evasion 1939-1945* (London: Future Publications, 1980)

information. It was soon realised during this period of the interwar years that an opposing country could use the same methods, and by sending signals which were intended to manipulate and confuse became a specialist study and essential for survival.

It was from these intelligence sources that Stalin knew that Japan was not going to attack Russia, but German intelligence misread the Soviet strength and resources, mainly due to racism which regarded others as ineffectual. The Germans were over-estimated in both wars, especially by the French, which underlined the importance not just of the gathering of information, but its interpretation by the backroom boys. It soon transpired that collecting information was only the first part of the task, there then followed the necessary collation between fraud and honesty, and then selecting the critical parts, and finally how to utilise them. The nature and “the quality of the intelligence services changed as they switched from competitions of power-politics to those of war.”<sup>5</sup> Knowing what a neighbour is doing in peace time is one thing, but when that neighbour becomes an enemy the situation rapidly changes. Penetrating embassies for codebooks and listening into gossip would become difficult and dangerous because a new alertness and determination is always created by conflict and war.

However, there is little doubt that during World War Two aerial intelligence reconnaissance helped shaped victories both in defence and attack. The use of radar, traffic and target analysis all helped the very individual battles which took place in the skies. It has been argued that Germany led the way in aerial reconnaissance, but as in many other matters regarding intelligence the Allies rapidly caught up and overtook the Axis powers. During 1939 it was probably the case that the Germans led in matters of signals and security, and their Enigma Cipher machine was a very clever if not a brilliant device. Symptomatic of poor intelligence work the Germans underestimated their enemy, and with the help of the Poles and the growth of Bletchley Park under Churchill’s insistence, the Ultra source of information became of essential value.\*

The British and Americans made sure they put as many brains and mathematical geniuses to work as soon as possible; it was a matter of urgency meeting the demands of a total war. Many of the British successes a sea could be related to intelligence work, and in the early part of the war the same could said of the German B-Dienst who were astute in the wireless war. The German Navy was often aware of the Royal Navy’s movements.

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\* Ultra was one of the war’s greatest secrets not only during the war but afterwards, and it was not until the 1970s that it started to come to light.

When the famous convoy PQ17 was virtually destroyed because the Admiral of the Fleet, Sir Dudley Pound ordered it to scatter, it appeared that he failed to heed his own intelligence sources, which indicated that the silence on the airwaves and lack of general traffic seemed to imply the battleship *Tirpitz* was not at sea. The U-boat war, as mentioned, was won by improving technology (and a lack of this development on the German side) and strategies, but there is no doubt that Ultra saved millions of tons of shipping and numberless lives.

It was intelligence information and connivance which enabled the Allies to make amphibious landings, often by surprise. The British managed to convince Hitler that they were landing elsewhere than Sicily in their Operation Husky, only Field Marshal Kesselring was not fooled.\* There was a degree of surprise at Salerno and Anzio even though the Arabs seemed to know where the embarking troops were heading. The Normandy D-Day was the greatest and most dangerous surprise for the Germans, because the Allies used intelligence, deception, and every tool in the espionage book to encourage the Germans to predict the landings would be elsewhere.

During the years 1939-1941 the German forces seemed to have the upper hand, especially Rommel in North Africa. Rommel always had the reputation of seeming to know all the British plans; one of the problems was not Rommel's magical gifts, but a US Military attaché in Cairo, a Colonel Bonner Frank Fellers, who was sending constant reports back to General George Marshall in Washington. These were comprehensive reports including locations, casualties, intentions, and plans; what he did not realise was that the US diplomatic code he was using had long been broken and accessed by the Germans. Until Fellers was removed in July 1942 his information was unbelievably valuable to Rommel. This was an accident and not the work of a traitor, but just as catastrophic and an intelligence failure. Colonel Fellers was the military attaché in the American Embassy in Egypt, and his task was to report to his base everything the British were planning, which the British were happy to communicate, granting him full access. He used what was called the *Black Code* which had been stolen by the Italians and decrypted by the Germans. His information gave detailed reports about troop deployments and intentions. This included convoy movements, matters concerning Malta, and every possible form of information, which led to immediate German responses making them well prepared for the British strategies and tactics; this cost many lives of British

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\* A well-known ruse by the British who used a dead body carefully swept ashore on the Iberian Peninsula to fool the Germans as to their plans. Two good books on this are: Montague Ewen, *The Man Who Never Was* (London: Naval Institute Press, 2001) and Macintyre, *Operation Mincemeat* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010)

and Free Frenchmen. The Ultra sources indicated there was a leak, and Fellers came under suspicion, but it was not until 1942 this was confirmed when an Australian troop overran a German intelligence unit, and Fellers was identified. The world of subversion, spies, and secret intelligence was as prone to accidents and mishaps as the front-line military forces. As a matter of mere curiosity, the Abwehr had operated a spy ring in Egypt, and they used Daphne du Maurier's novel *Rebecca* as their cipher key.

In the late 1930s Sinclair had worked on increasing the strength of Sigint, but in 1941 Britain put a massive effort into re-organising its signal intelligence, and although the secret agencies of the Allies were never entirely open with one another, they cooperated better during the Second World War than other times, out of sheer necessity. If the Allies struggled, then Germany and Russia suffered from insufficient attention given to intelligence by Stalin and Hitler. Both these men were tyrants and were military micromanagers with their highly professional military commanders scared to contradict the self-perceived genius of their respective dictators. They were both poor strategists, and Hitler rarely mentioned signal intelligence and relied upon his intuition, and his bizarre belief that providence looked after him; Stalin at times was incompetent. It was only after Stalingrad that Soviet intelligence, security, and deception improved. The more desperate the German situation became, the more they trusted double agents who were controlled by the enemy, or those giving information for safety or entrepreneurial reasons.

The work of espionage and intelligence never won the war, but it was an important servant, and would have served the Russians and Germans better had they not been led by egotistical and power-loving dictators who believed they knew better. The intelligence world was a matter of finding what the other side was planning or thinking, and then hindering their efforts by deception. It was and remains a vastly secretive organisation using any available resource, be it blackmail, killing, deception which explains its secretive nature and frequent controversies.

Although only mentioned in passing by newspapers and politicians the Secret intelligence Services continue in their work today with the increased advances in technology and especially cyberspace. Occasionally they still make the headlines as when the origin of the WMD (weapons of mass destruction) were raised worldwide prior to the American and British invasion of Iraq, and the poisoning of Russians by Russians in Salisbury, Wiltshire; but generally, their existence is taken for granted.

## What are Secret Police?

This book explores both intelligence agencies *and* Secret police because there are many self-evident connections. Over the last few years British newspapers have often written about policemen who have gone “undercover” to find out what some annoying organisation is planning. They currently have a counter-terrorism guide which includes groups such as Extinction Rebellion (regarding climatic change) and Greenpeace, and on January 18<sup>th</sup> 2020 the Guardian media reported that the twenty-four police guide was distributed to teachers and medical staff as part of anti-extremism briefing last year. The executive director of Greenpeace, John Sauven claimed there was “nothing extremist about people from all walks of life taking peaceful, non-violent action to stop climate chaos and ecological collapse.” The nature of secret police will always be a contentious problem and reflect a society’s issues. The populist newspapers showed interest over recent years when it was later revealed that a policeman disguised as one of the agitators had affairs with females “belonging to the other side.” This is in the broad sense of the term a secret policeman; they still exist. Infiltrating a criminal gang, or people plotting an act of terrorism is clandestine work by state servants. The British non-uniformed officers (CID) are not secret because they must, even in their civilian dress, show the public their identity cards. Secret police are unusual in a modern Liberal Democracy of today, but they exist, and policemen and women often go undercover, and there is no doubt, though never published except in novels and television dramas, that MI5 use the same techniques to thwart terrorism.

There is also the well-known Special Branch in Britain which dates to 1883 where each force had its own contingent with the Metropolitan having the largest. As recently as 2006 they all merged to form the Counter Terrorism Command (SO15) which, as always, maintained contact with the MI5 domestic Security Service. They can carry the designation of detective, but they are not part of normal criminal police work. They are used to protect important figures and are stationed at ports and airports under the Terrorism Act of 2000. They have been associated with the secret intelligence agencies almost since their inception, when they were used mainly to disclose those Communists believed to be working with Comintern (Communist International), set up in early Soviet Russia to encourage communism across the globe. Primarily their task was and is to seek out enemies of the State in Britain, meaning enemies of the British form of democracy and to defend against attack.

Secret police in some parts of Europe had a different set of objectives. As will be explored in the text, Tsarist Russia had secret police to protect

the Tsar and thereby the State, but mainly guarding against internal opposition. The Bolsheviks within six weeks of their revolution established their own secret police (Cheka and later the GPU) which over the next hundred years changed titles and grew many specialised departments. The well-known NKVD (later the better-known KGB) were uniformed but had their secret components at home and abroad. It was very much the same in Nazi Germany with Himmler's SS who had their own SD intelligence and security branch, and eventually absorbed the slightly older Gestapo and eventually the military intelligence known as the Abwehr. In these two totalitarian countries secret police were used to find enemies of the dictators and their regimes. They differed from the democratic systems because they were mainly political police. They were huge organisations compared with the British Special Branch and differed in many ways. They were the repressive organs of the dictators, often carrying out their own purges on suspects, interrogating them, and imprisoning them or sending them to labour camps and executing many without judicial permission. In Soviet Russia they had the Troika system, and in Nazi Germany "Special Treatment," both of which meant torture nearly always followed by execution. In Soviet Russia they defended Stalin who soon appeared like a modern aberration of Genghis Khan, and in a similar fashion Germany, which Alan Bullock once described as a "gangster state." They often acted as judge, jury and executioner and created a sense of sheer terror. They had their own departments which will be sketched under the chapters on Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany. It was a confusing and constantly changing picture, and it was made more complex by the warped lines between genuine intelligence services, and the repression of perceived opposition within their own societies. The British Special Branch is a form of secret police but bears little comparison with the developments in Russia and Germany. However, because these "secret police" also took part in intelligence work they cannot be ignored in this exploration.

### **The Decades in Question: 1918-1940**

The first issue to be addressed is why the period of 1918-1940 as a period of exploration was selected. The interwar years had been originally chosen for a reason which then developed into several strands of thought and historical analysis. Most countries had a tradition of spies, informers, and various ways of discovering information, it started to be recognised as critical during the Great War, and thereafter developed in different ways in various countries. The Germans and the Russians virtually had to start from scratch, and the British service was under-nourished by the state and

considered by some as rather amateur. All three major countries developed along different lines or with varying objectives with intelligence and secret police. The Second World War developed some of their national agencies better than others, with Germany in 1945 having to start again. The growth of intelligence services, and even secret police continues to the present day, and in many ways the years 1918 to 1940 became the birth period for these activities. This was the time when intelligence work took serious root as a state sponsored activity, played a vital role in the Great War, and with the Cold War following on the heels of the Second War has since developed into a major player on the world stage. The people involved in the 1920s and 1930s would not recognise the modern services with the technological advances, however, they started the process during this period, but they were all vastly different one from the other; it is not a study of comparative likenesses, but quite the opposite, the contrasts between these three countries were vast which this exploration will try and unravel.

This book was originally conceived to understand the question of the nature of intelligence and secret police work in the interbellum years 1918-1940, because as these two decades unfolded, it was becoming more self-evident that the European continent was suffering from the trauma of the Great War, was in turmoil, and the likelihood of another major war was slowly looming for the more perceptive of the day. The first question had been in this writer's mind was how far the secret agencies understood or misread the situation in a Europe which was showing signs of unravelling.

The once great empire of the Russian Tsars was now a Bolshevik Communist state but run by a dictator with a few subservient cohorts, threatening to spread its gospel of Communism across the globe. Italy had experienced the rise of a form of fascism following Benito Mussolini's 1922 "March on Rome," which gave rise to the National Fascist Party (PNF) taking control. This took place in October and when the Prime Minister Luigi Facta wanted to oppose this takeover, he was overruled by the King Victor Emmanuel III who promptly appointed Mussolini as Prime Minister. At first the Western democracies, especially Britain and France believed they could work with Mussolini, but it soon became clear that Mussolini felt closer to the major force on his northern border, relating to the rise of Hitler, especially after 1933 when the German dictator started to cement his regime into a powerful political edifice. The Nazis were seen by many in the West as objectionable (though they had some admirers) but it was not until the late 1930s that they were recognised by some as an international threat. This sense of European insecurity was not helped by the rise of Franco, another dictator, who following the bitter Spanish Civil War tended to show allegiance to the Italian and German dictators who had given him military

assistance. This gave Europe a sense of being dangerously unsettled with the lurking fear of the industrial and brutal war of 1914-18 forever lurking like a sinister memory in the corporate mind. There were quasi-dictatorships in Eastern Europe and the Western democracy of France suffered from political instability, with constant changes of government often known as the government of “musical chairs.” Britain was now financially weak, and its army had been trimmed back and acting as a global police force in the colonies. Politically the major Conservative Party faced a Left-wing opposition which was vastly different from the traditional Liberal opposition, and the Labour Party was deeply and wrongly suspected by the establishment as being a form of communism.

It was an unpredictable time, but only a few started to see that the unsettled nature of the European balance of power could lead to another major conflict, which gathered in momentum as the 1930s developed. The initial question raised in this writer’s mind was how the major secret services handled or perceived this situation, including the famous British services. The control of events was in the hands of the politicians, democratic, communist, or dictatorial autocrats, but they needed to know what was happening in other lands, and the machinations of potential national opponents. Did the politicians learn from their intelligence agencies, were they ignored, were the secret services appropriately equipped, or were they obsessed with other matters?

It is impossible to cheat at the game of chess unless one has inside information about the opponent’s opening moves, his propensity to use gambits or take risks, and his strategy, general tactics, and endurance capability. It was the same for national governments to try and discover the critical information of potential opponents. However, even a chess player whose tactics and strategy have been penetrated can still win the game because he is stronger. This was equally true in war, that although the intelligence may be good the battle is won or lost at the hands of the generals and admirals during the conflict. Intelligence plays its part, but it is only a part. It has been claimed many times that the codebreakers shortened the war by x-number of years which could be argued to be a gigantic overstatement. F. H. Hinsley, who was a leading analyst at Bletchley Park claimed that Ultra saved the Allies some three to four years of the war, as well as considerable expenditure of resources and lives.<sup>6</sup> In his argument he tended to concentrate on Ultra and the Battle of the Atlantic, where there was a degree of truth in the rerouting of convoys, but there were other major factors of technological developments, but it raises a question that cannot be answered with certainty. Intelligence is not a form of power, but a means to how power is utilised in war.

On reading the official histories of the British MI5 and MI6 and the tomes on the German Gestapo, Abwehr and SD, as well as the KGB the subject almost became overwhelming in its complexity. It was not just a matter of understanding the nature of the various agencies, but their policies and objectives; they all differed in a vast way. The challenge became one of finding the gist of these services and reducing it to a short and hopefully readable book.

The very nature of Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany clearly indicated that they used their secret forces, be they the police (as with the British Special Branch), home security (such as MI5) or overseas intelligence (such as MI6, which will always be addressed by its proper title of SIS) in very different ways. It was tempting to claim they had little in common. The answer was outlined by the well-known writer and thinker Hannah Arendt who wrote that all totalitarian regimes rely on secret police to instil a fear, to discover crimes and arrest people as enemies of the State.<sup>7</sup> This was the work of the British MI5, but there was a vast difference in the way they conducted themselves and their policies. The British MI5 officers were certainly a major tool used to discover crimes against the State and to arrest those involved, but it has never been associated with a sense of public fear, which was characteristic of the German and Soviet secret forces; if anything the British MI5 tended, as it still does, to have public support. Compared to what was happening in Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany comparatively little attention is therefore paid to the British home security.

The very nature of secret work means that most of its machinations are kept from public scrutiny, from newspapers and any form of public media. In the activities of secret intelligence and secret police work anything can happen, normality of behaviour, motives, investigations could never be taken at face value, it was and remains a clandestine world of lies, blackmail, false documents, bribes, and often violence, and these were regular daily features for those involved. The national archives only hold what they are permitted, and frequently with a long-term ban on disclosure. As the chapter on the SIS will indicate it was often considered best to keep even some politicians in the dark, for the fear that they utilised the material for political ends or simply blundered; this had happened many times especially in France, but in Britain as well. In addition to this problem there are of course conflicting views, hidden agendas, traitors, and national reasons for silence. Occasionally the cat is let out of the bag by ex-agents who have retired in the forms of memoirs and novels, but too often their reliability can be dubious. Peter Wright's book *Spy Catcher* was banned in Britain but published in Australia, whereas the agent Payne Best when writing on the *Venlo* incident first sought permission from Menzies the then

head of SIS. Both books in their day made for highly popular reading. In short, as noted above, many volumes by scholars on this subject have been written, so this book is simply a guide to the main features of these hidden and sometime not so hidden secret machinations in the major nations between the wars.

## CHAPTER TWO

### SOVIET INTELLIGENCE AND POLICING



*The Lubyanka and its Basement*

#### **Early Days**

If the British Secret Service, known as the SIS, once known as MIIC and known by many as MI6, coupled with MI5 and SB is confusing to the general reader, it is much more perplexing with the German and Soviet Russian equivalents. The Tsar had his secret police known as the Okhrana, and nothing changed after the Bolshevik Revolution, as in 1917 the Bolshevik secret service known as the Cheka and the VeCheka (Extraordinary

Commission for Combatting Revolution and Sabotage) came into being. During 1922 the GPU, a revamped Cheka, came into existence based within the NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs), first known as the OGPU which was the Unified State Political Administration. In 1934 GUGB and NKVD were the key components, and later formed the well-known KGB, which was the People's Commissariat for State Security. The changes were constant and continued to be so; today it is the FSB, the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation. For a long time, despite the changing of names many secret agents and police knew themselves as Chekists, and their pay day on the 20<sup>th</sup> of the month was known as Chekist pay day. As in Britain the work of different agencies such as the SIS, MI5 and the SB overlapped, it was more so the case in Germany and confusingly so in Soviet Russia. In the footnote below is a broadly sketched outline of the broad developmental pattern.\*

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\* The **Cheka and VeCheka** (Extraordinary Commission for Combatting Counter-Revolution and Sabotage) came into being in December 1917 and was the first of a succession of Soviet secret police and came under the leadership of Dzerzhinsky. In 1918 the line was added to its title to counter "Profiteering and Corruption." As the Gestapo often wore long leather overcoats so the Chekists commonly dressed in black leather. The Cheka was dissolved after the war which followed the Revolution and in 1922 became the GPU.

The **GPU** (All Union State Political Administration and United State Political Directorate) was the secret police, and its official title was OGPU and Dzerzhinsky remained the first director. It was renamed GPU in 1924. GPU's powers increased in 1926 and their powers became as great if not greater than the Cheka. It was the GPU who planned and established the Gulag system. The GPU was reincorporated into the newly revamped **NKVD** in July 1934, and it was the Main Directorate of State Security known by most as the later **KGB**, which was the direct successor of the preceding agencies such as the Cheka, NKGB and NKVD.

**INO** (Inostrannyi Otdel) was established in 1920, whose purpose was to infiltrate and discover necessary information from abroad.

The **NKVD** the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs was the interior ministry of the Soviet Union and was established in 1917 and was meant to conduct regular police work, overseeing prisons and labour camps. In 1930 it was disbanded for a brief time and its functions placed elsewhere, but it was reinstated in 1934 as an all-union ministry. At the same time, the GPU the secret police were placed under the NKVD.

The **GUGB** which had been the Main Directorate of State Security was probably the Soviet state's most important security body and existed between July 1934 and February 1941, and it involved both intelligence service and secret police. The **GRU** was the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces; operated intelligence services for military and was independent of the NKVD.

The Romanovs had ruled Russia since 1613, and Tsar Nicholas II was the last of this royal line. It has long been believed that Tsarist Russia had the best foreign intelligence before the outbreak of World War One. In St Petersburg there existed the *cabinet noir* where the codebreakers proved efficient, decrypting most material put before them; they remained secret about their Sigint work unlike France where it had become a political in-house fighting game. The Germans were somewhat deficient in this area, but as they rapidly improved the Russian system deteriorated with Russian failure to coordinate foreign and military intelligence. It also transpired that the *cabinet noir* found its German traffic information somewhat diminished which should have raised a few question marks.

Tsar Nicholas II, as with many of his predecessors, was noted above all for his repression of any form of political party, especially the developing Trade Unions. His secret police known as the Okhrana tended to be purely domestic, and his military formed a powerful and brutal defence against anyone who challenged his authority, which included the growing industrial strikes by the impoverished and underpaid workers. The Okhrana had once arrested Stalin and rearrested him in 1913 and packed him off to a comfortable exile. The use of the secret police service to keep the people repressed and the leader in power was not changed by the Bolshevik Revolution, and its power increased with the emergence of Stalin. The Communist leaders, as with the Tsars faced the same difficulty with the sheer vastness of Russia and its empire, with frequent internal resentment by those who hoped for a better future. In order to maintain some semblance of authoritarian control it was considered essential to have secret political police, but control over such an immense territory was often patchy if not virtually impossible. It demanded ruthless control, and on December 7<sup>th</sup> Sovnarkom formed the Extraordinary Commission (or Cheka) to eliminate opposition to the October revolution.\* The Cheka was founded on the 20<sup>th</sup> December 1917 just six weeks after the Russian revolution, and it became a major pivotal organ for the one-party state. The Cheka was to be the forerunner of the OGPU, (more widely known by the title GPU) in 1922, placed within the administration of the NKVD, but as mentioned the term Cheka and Chekist remained popular terminology amongst its ranks, but unpopular for many others. The OGPU became more like a praetorium guard for Stalin, ensuring his train had enough provisions during starvation times and even looking for good dachas for him.<sup>8</sup>

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\* **Sovnarkom** was the Council of People's Commissars; a government institution founded soon after the October Revolution of 1917, it evolved to become the government of USSR and the premier of this council was Head of Government.

The Cheka in Lenin's world was only regarded as a temporary necessity, but he "little dreamed that it would rapidly become both the biggest political police force and the largest foreign intelligence service in the world."<sup>9</sup> It started life at Bolshaya Lubyanka 11, and later moved to number Two which was later to be the HQ of the KGB, a title more widely known in the Western world. The modern equivalent is the FSB and is still in the Lubyanka; curiously as these notes were being compiled the BBC news announced that there was a shooting of an FSB officer who was killed on the doorstep of that building, (19<sup>th</sup> December 2019). The Cheka was a child of the revolution, and as one Russian historian wrote: "for twenty years the child of the revolution grew, matured, and under the never-resting tutelage of the Gensek [shortened Russian form of General Secretary, the post achieved by Stalin after the Eleventh Party Congress in April 1922] developed full blown into the hired assassin of its mother."<sup>10</sup> As early as 1921 the troika system was announced which was a three-man committee empowered to judge and execute on the spot; this accelerated system of judge, jury and executioner almost amounted to a form of state anarchy, and reflected the worst possible side of a police state.

The original Cheka was to be used as a weapon against counterrevolutionaries, who it was feared would somehow manage to topple the Revolution. In its original form it was very different from what it later became, namely brutalised; "the original measures approved by Sovnarkom to combat counter-revolution were non-violent; 'seizure of property, resettlements, deprivation of ration cards, publications of lists of enemies of the people, etc.' The Cheka's main weapon, however, rapidly became terror."<sup>11</sup> Its origins had been politically straightforward to counter the opponents of the Revolution, but "the Cheka began to persecute all dissenters openly, anyone who dared to discuss facts, history, or philosophy in terms other than those dictated by the barracks."<sup>12</sup> They infiltrated Menshevik groups and Social Democrats to find the so-called mischief makers. Later Stalin would use all his secret police to rid the state, or rather himself of all such problems.

The way they operated followed a common pattern, also used by the Tsar's Okhrana, who relied not just on informants, but on agents who penetrated the perceived opposition. Such secret agents would appear in the group not only as sympathetic adherents, but prepared to act, thereby accumulating confidence in their integrity. These agents then reported back with the critical details and the targeted personalities; a supreme act of betrayal, which was a common method used by many secret police services. It will become apparent through this sketch of the Russian services that a vast amount of time was dedicated to finding and eliminating enemies of