

Orwell and the spooks

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As Fleet Street celebrates the 60th anniversary of the publication of George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – with its extraordinary depiction of a Big Brother, 'surveillance society' – it is interesting to consider Orwell's murky relationship with the spooks.

Just before Christmas 1936 Orwell set off to fight for the Republican side in the Spanish civil war. By that time, he had published *Down and Out in Paris and London*, *Burmese Days*, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and the *Road to Wigan Pier* – but he was still a relatively minor novelist, journalist and essayist, with a growing reputation in leftist circles. Yet in Spain he was closely watched – not only by a Communist secret agent but by a double agent working for both the British secret service, MI5, and the Nazi Vichy regime. Why?

Orwell's biographer Gordon Bowker relates how communist David Crook was given a crash course in surveillance techniques by Ramon Mercader (who later ingratiated himself with Leon Trotsky in Mexico before killing him with an ice pick) and then used his job as war reporter for the *News Chronicle* to spy on Orwell and his Independent Labour Party comrades in the Trotskyist militia, POUM.

Crook took his orders from the Soviet espionage agency, then known as the NKVD and later renamed the KGB, according to Bowker. He insinuated himself into the ILP office in Barcelona and soon had the freedom of the office. During lunch breaks, he would steal files and have them photographed in the Russian embassy. Details of his activities are held in the KGB archives, although Orwell's KGB file is still under wraps. Among his reports was an observation that he was '95 per cent certain' that Eileen Blair, who married Orwell in 1936, was having an affair with George Kopp, another ILP member. Crook had been instructed by the Soviets to seek out the existence of affairs, as such information could enable the communists to blackmail vulnerable targets.

Crook's reports on Orwell were normally passed on to Hugh O'Donnell who was working directly for Moscow and whose codename was, incredibly, O'Brien. As Bowker comments: 'It seems unlikely that Orwell ever knew that Crook was spying on him, or that his contact worked under that name, but the fact that the character in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* who first wins the confidence of Winston Smith and then betrays him, is given the name O'Brien must be one of the strangest coincidences in literature.'

Orwell's closest comrade a double agent

Adding to the mysteries are the recent revelations that George Kopp, previously thought to be Orwell's closest comrade on the Spanish frontlines, was in fact spying on him. Kopp actually helped save Orwell's life after he was shot in the neck by a sniper in May 1937. And Kopp himself is generally reported to have been later captured by the communists and tortured – supposedly on trumped up charges. Winston Smith's torture by rats in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is said to have been based on Kopp's prison experiences in Spain. And yet papers discovered by a Belgium researcher suggest that Kopp was working for both the Vichy Deuxième Bureau (secret service) and MI5 in a case being run by Anthony Blunt. Just to complicate matters still further, Blunt himself was acting as a Soviet spy. Perhaps all this explains why Kopp survived his torture while so many of Orwell's other POUM comrades were executed by either Franco's fascists or by soldiers of the pro-Moscow communist party.

From the outbreak of the Second World War until 1942, Orwell's wife, Eileen O'Shaughnessy worked in the Censorship Department in Whitehall. Most biographers of Orwell mention this *en passant*, suggesting that she mainly took on the job so that she could be near her sister in law, Gwen, in Greenwich. But is it not a rather strange job (which included drawing information from letters and storing it in files) for the wife of a man so committed to freedom of expression? Clearly she would have gone through security clearance to secure the job – just as Orwell did for his post in the Eastern Service of the BBC. As Bowker comments: 'He was duly appointed 'subject to the approval of "The College", the powerful BBC committee overseen by the secret service.'

Was Orwell's reporting assignment in 1945 the cover for an intelligence mission?

Perhaps most interesting is Orwell's assignment to the continent probably on an intelligence mission – though under the cover as a reporter for the *Observer* and *Manchester Evening News* – during the dying days of the Second World War in 1945. Its origins lie in the extraordinary relationship that Orwell developed with the millionaire *Observer* journalist, David Astor, whose father owned the newspaper and who was to be its celebrated editor from 1948 to 1975. Astor served during the early war years with the covert Special Operation Executive (SOE) and thereafter maintained close links with intelligence. In 1943, Orwell had been denied clearance to travel as a war correspondent to Africa: now he was given the all-clear though his health was far worse. Orwell's biographer Bernard Crick comments: 'He was dressed in the officer's uniform of a war correspondent, carried his typewriter and a single large suitcase. This time the requirement of an army medical seems to have been overlooked or waived.'

Stephen Dorril, in his exhaustive history of MI6, reports that in 1944 Astor was transferred to a unit liaising between SOE and the resistance in France, helping the French underground in London spread the word to groups

throughout Europe. While in Paris, perhaps inspired by Astor, Orwell attended the first conference of the Committee for European Federation, bringing together resistance groups from around Europe. The French novelist and editor of *Combat*, Albert Camus, was amongst those present. Astor, later in an interview with the author in December 1999, just before he died, was adamant that Orwell had no intelligence links and Peter Davison, editor of Orwell's twenty volume collected works, commented: 'I doubt if Orwell would be involved with intelligence – but that by no means says he wasn't.'

Intriguingly, most of the men Orwell met in Paris were linked in some way with the intelligence services. One of them was Malcolm Muggeridge, who introduced him to the novelist P.G. Wodehouse. Muggeridge had been assigned to keep watch on Wodehouse, who was suspected of having Nazi sympathies following his broadcast during the summer of 1941 from Berlin for the American CBS network. Orwell had written an article in defence of Wodehouse in February 1945 just before leaving for France (though it was not published until July 1945 in the *Windmill* magazine) and may have wanted simply to express his admiration for the creator of Jeeves and Bertie Wooster.

Malcolm Muggeridge (1903-1990) began his journalistic career as Moscow correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian* and during the Second World War served in the British Secret Intelligence Services in Brussels, Lourenco Marques in Portuguese East Africa and Paris. Later he worked closely with the CIA-funded Congress for Cultural Freedom and *Encounter* magazine. During the late 1940s he was the *Daily Telegraph's* Washington correspondent and became its deputy editor before a four-year stint (1953-7) as editor of the satirical journal *Punch*.

Orwell also met in Paris the philosopher (and fellow old Etonian) A.J. 'Freddie' Ayer, who was in Paris for the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) who were particularly concerned about the danger of a communist coup. Another writer Orwell saw was Ernest Hemingway whom he had previously met in Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War. The American novelist, who was serving as a war correspondent and staying at the Paris Ritz, had close links with members of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS, the forerunner of the CIA) and his son, Jack, was member of the OSS. Carlos Baker's account of the meeting in his biography of Hemingway, based on a letter he wrote to the critic Harvey Breit on 16 April 1952, only adds to the mystery: 'Orwell looked nervous and worried. He said he feared that the Communists were out to kill him and asked Hemingway for the loan of a pistol. Ernest lent him the .32 Colt that Paul Willerts had given him in June. Orwell departed like a pale ghost.' Most evenings in Paris, Orwell dined with Harold Acton, whom he had known vaguely at Eton and who was working as a press censor for SHAEF (the Supreme headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force).

Orwell's possible links with the security service (MI5) have been explored in detail by W.J. West. West reports a 'retired CIA officer in Washington' asserting that Orwell worked for MI5 and suggests that he could have developed contacts with Maxwell Knight, head of MI5's Department B5(b) counter-subversion unit and a former pupil of Orwell's prep school, St

Cyprian's in Eastbourne. Yet Anthony Masters makes no reference to Orwell in his biography of Knight.

Orwell and that controversial 'little list of subversives'

Speculation about Orwell's links with the secret services intensified after Michael Sheldon reported in 1991 his biography of Orwell that he had drawn up a 'little list' of 36 people, briefly (and somewhat crudely) identifying their politics, religious affiliations, sexual preferences and possible Communist sympathies. Orwell's original list contained 105 names. Intriguingly, the British government still refuses to open up the notebook to public view. The 'known' suspects include Labour MPs, the future Poet Laureate, Cecil Day-Lewis, authors J. B. Priestley and John Steinbeck, journalist Richard Crossman, actors Michael Redgrave, Charlie Chaplin and Paul Robeson, actor and director Orson Welles, and the historians A. J. P. Taylor and Isaac Deutscher.

Orwell supplied the list to his friend, the sister-in-law of the author Arthur Koestler, Celia Kirwan (née Paget) in 1949 when she was working for the secret state's propaganda unit, the Information Research Department (IRD), recently established by the Labour government. However, John Newsinger notes: 'It is most unlikely that Orwell realised the real nature of IRD at the time.' Kirwan denied that the list ever reached the Foreign Office. Scott Lucas, in his critical Orwell biography, however, is unforgiving: 'Far from being a one-off indiscretion, Orwell's list is the culmination of his response to the left from the 1930s onwards. Not only could he not co-operate with many fellow writers and activists, not only did he denigrate them publicly and privately, but he maintained a watch on them as possible subversives.'

Whatever one's views on Orwell, does not all this throw up a completely new perspective on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*? For here is one of the most famous warnings about the emergence of a ruthless, totalitarian state, dominated by its secret service – written by a man who probably had close links with the spooks. But then Orwell was a very witty man – and a master of irony.