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Victor Madeira, Britannia and the Bear:
The Anglo-Russian Intelligence War, 1917-1929

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BOOK REVIEW


It has long been a rule of thumb in the scholarly publishing world that a thesis is normally not a book and cannot become one without significant revision. Related to this proposition is a longstanding gag about scholarly books.

‘They are a great bargain’, the Joker says, ‘even if highly priced’.
‘How is that?’ asks a perplexed interlocutor.
‘Because you get two books for the price of one’, the Joker replies: ‘there is one in the main text and another one in the endnotes’.

If you are looking for an exciting, fast-paced narrative of espionage and counter-espionage in early Anglo-Soviet relations, this is not your book. On the other hand, if you want the two-books-for-one bargain, with the possibility of acquainting yourself with a vast array of mostly British, but also a spicing of Soviet, archival sources, you should read this volume, especially the endnotes and bibliography. The index is just as impressive at 32 pages. The length of the annotated endnotes is equal to 30 per cent of the 190 pages of main text. There are diggers and skimmers in the historical profession; clearly Victor Madeira is a digger.

The present book is not the author’s first entry into the history of Soviet agents and British counter-agents. Madeira obtained early notoriety when he asserted that the Daily Herald journalist William Norman Ewer was a paid Soviet agent during the 1920s, running espionage networks in Britain and France.¹ This kind of post facto, post mortem indictment became fashionable in the triumphalist atmosphere generated by the collapse and dismemberment of the USSR. The French air minister, Pierre Cot, and the American journalist I.F. Stone, for example, have been the targets of similar accusations. In the case of Ewer, Madeira’s indictment prompted a full-fledged rebuttal from British historians John Callaghan and Kevin Morgan.²

I do not propose to take sides in this particular controversy (or the others) though in Britannia and the Bear, Madeira makes the assumption at the outset that Ewer was a Soviet agent (pp.39–40). This may strike the reader as a dubious opening

proposition, given the controversy surrounding it. Ewer was, *inter alia*, a British communist, which was no secret, who travelled to Moscow, also not a secret, and provided information about British politics to the Soviet Commissariat for Foreign Affairs (NKID). There is even a report by him in English, undated but June 1923, in the NKID files, marked ‘completely secret’. It’s hard to say why Ewer’s report was so classified for it is a journalist’s assessment of British politics which he could have published in abbreviated form in the *Daily Herald*. Perhaps he did. The Deputy Commissar for Foreign Affairs, M.M. Litvinov, did not think much of Ewer’s information. ‘Most unreliable’, Litvinov remarked, corrupted by disinformation or ‘very weak, unreliable connections’. In general, Litvinov did not like using paid informants because they were too expensive and self-serving, often delivered the wrong message, and were not good at protecting secrets.

Although unnoticed by Madeira, in 1929 Ewer acted as a go-between for the new minority Labour government in the matter of re-establishing diplomatic relations with the USSR, ruptured in 1927. The Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, the Foreign Secretary Arthur Henderson, and Hugh Dalton, the Parliamentary Undersecretary in the Foreign Office, all knew about and approved of Ewer’s involvement. Did SIS or MI5 object because Ewer was a Soviet ‘agent’? If so, such objections did not deter the Labour government.

The NKID distributed funds in Britain and especially in France, by the way, in order to buy sympathy for better relations with Moscow. Litvinov often thought it was a waste of a hard-earned foreign exchange. Given the poor state of Soviet relations with Britain and France during the inter-war years, Litvinov appears to have had a point. He approved the expenditures, nevertheless, in spite of being tight-fisted with the NKID’s special funds. Relations with the west could worsen, argued some of his colleagues, if we do not pay. As Madeira notes, MI5 kept a close eye cocked on Soviet activities in Britain, or on what seemed to be Soviet activities, for it cast a wide net. There were ‘phone checks’ or taps, intercepted mail, often about family issues or the household cats and not about espionage at all. Of course the real accomplishment was the breaking of foreign diplomatic codes by the Government Code & Cipher School which was able to read the encrypted diplomatic telegrams to and from embassies in London, friend and foe alike. Obviously present day abuses in the United States are nothing new.

In Madeira’s book there is fascinating information about the British Intelligence services and some of their leaders. Alas, if you chose to read each annotated endnote, you could barely advance more than a paragraph or two in the text before having to stop again to consult the back pages. Organization of the book is meandering and not just from text to endnotes and back again. Chapters are sometimes only in


5See the correspondence in National Archives of the UK (TNA), Foreign Office (FO) 800 280.
passing about their purported subject matter. Mutinies, for example, in the British armed forces, the 1921 Anglo-Soviet trade agreement, Prime Minister David Lloyd George’s 1922 resignation, or the 1926 miners’ and general strike get short shrift in a welter of details on other matters, interesting though they sometimes are. Madeira regales us with pages of information that morphs from one subject to another. The author has a veritable wealth of research material from which to draw, especially from the KV (MI5) series at the National Archives. Thinking each bit essential, Madeira works hard to get it all into his text or endnotes somewhere.

This welter of facts and gossip about agents and spooks is overlain with a soupçon of western-like moral superiority over the defunct USSR and present day Russia to which is added a gratuitous distaste for Russian president Vladimir V. Putin. It’s a tragedy that Russia struggles in vain to be like and integrate with the west, even though, as Madeira points out, the hubris-burdened United States missed an opportunity to lead the Russians onto the right path. No surprise that Putin is a silovik, a corrupt, conniving, lawless abuser of power (pp.1–3, 190).

The author cannot help occasionally moralizing. The failed miners’ and general strike, he writes, ‘brought on the collective realisation [that] nobody benefitted from divisive confrontational tactics. Moderation was more productive’ (p.150). It certainly was for British pit owners, not so much for British miners. Still, the author underscores the strength of anticommunism in the British elite. He refers to the “first” Cold War to underline his point (pp.1, 3). I have called it the ‘early Cold War’. Madeira’s critics call it the ‘Long Cold War’. Litvinov opined that it was the ‘silent conflict’. Whichever moniker you like, it started in 1917, not after 1945; the Grand Alliance was a mere interregnum, and a fragile one at that.

Tory ideologues thought the Labour Party and unionists were all a potential menace to their privileged positions in society. Between a Bolsh and a trade unionist it was hard to tell the difference. According to ‘Die-Hard’ Winston Churchill, the Socialist was a Bolsh in sheep’s clothing (pp.131–2). It was of course all a question of perspective. If you asked, for example, Commissar for Foreign Affairs, G.V. Chicherin, what he thought about British socialists, he would have contemptuously responded that they were all dupes of the governing elite.

One thing for certain is that Anglo-Soviet relations were bad during the interwar years. The Tories, especially the ‘Die-Hards’, were itching for a fight and pushed for the rupture of diplomatic relations in 1927. Many Bolsheviks, though not all, were willing to challenge the British, especially in China. These tensions were a great motivator for spooks on both sides of the front lines. Madeira provides us with fascinating details of the struggle waged by the British intelligence services against the presumed Bolshie foe. The story would make a great narrative, if only Madeira had chosen to write it.

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