

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03082-4 - British Writers and MI5 Surveillance, 1930–1960

James Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## CHAPTER I

*Intellectual and Intelligence Contexts, 1930–1960*

‘The thirties was the decade in which young writers became involved in politics. The politics of this generation were almost exclusively those of the left’.<sup>1</sup> So Stephen Spender recalled in *The Thirties and After*, neatly distilling the legend of this moment in twentieth-century literary culture. Of course, Spender’s claim was an oversimplification, and like all attempts to define a movement or period the exact politics and membership of such a supposed ‘thirties generation’ has been subject to extensive critical debate.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, once many of the myths of an exclusively Auden-dominated, uniformly ‘red’ decade are stripped away, some distinct patterns can still be perceived. Over the course of the decade, a range of important new left-wing writers, intellectual networks, and cultural associations emerged in Britain. Such developments were spurred by a turbulent socio-political climate and the consequent far-reaching re-evaluations about the form and function of art. Capitalism and liberal democracy seemed to be entering a period of unprecedented crisis, as seen in upheavals such as the General Strike of 1926, the stock market crash of 1929, and the subsequent Great Depression that marred the decade with mass unemployment, collapsing industries, and government instability. In response to this crisis, new ideologies and political systems competed to take liberal capitalism’s place. On the one hand, this era had witnessed socialism rising as a political force on the international stage, with the consolidation of the Soviet Union as a recognised state and the foundation of communist parties across Europe (with mass parties in countries such as France, Italy and Germany, and a much smaller party in the United Kingdom), as well as other progressive and centre-left socialist parties in Britain such as the Labour Party (which in 1929 had won a new high of 287 seats in the Commons) and the Independent Labour Party (ILP) (which sponsored many Labour MPs and, when disaffiliating from the Labour party in 1932, provided a significant further left-socialist voice in the political spectrum). On the other hand, the decade would see a

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03082-4 - British Writers and MI5 Surveillance, 1930–1960

James Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

rapid growth in the strength of fascism abroad, starkly illustrated by the rise of Mussolini in Italy and the Nazi seizure of power in Germany. The domestic support for Oswald Mosley and his blackshirts indicated that Britain, too, was facing its own local far-right threat, and marches and pitched brawls in London brought home the fact that the unsettled political climate could very quickly spawn conflict and bloodshed.

In the wake of such turmoil, the emerging culture of this decade was marked by new preoccupations – or, as expressed in the first issue of the journal *Cambridge Left*, ‘The motives for writing ... have changed’, with ‘the forcible intrusion of social issues’, meaning that authors ‘who are left in their politics have to face certain problems as writers of prose or verse’.<sup>3</sup> Many of the young British writers would be influenced by, but react against, the previous wave of high modernism and instead would seek new literary idioms which could assimilate and express these urgent social issues, a position explained by Michael Roberts in the oft-quoted preface to *New Signatures*, in which he remarked that new poetry included in the book had ‘turned to propaganda’. Equally, however, he saw this as a potential salvation of the art form at the time: ‘It is propaganda for a theory of life which may release the poet’s energies for the writing of pure poetry’.<sup>4</sup> More broadly, serious debates about the appropriate form and method for committed art would echo across the left-wing cultural landscape, with denunciations of the bourgeois avant-garde and demands for new political art hanging in the intellectual air. Although direct adherence to the new Soviet-sponsored aesthetic of socialist realism amongst British writers was negligible, dimmer echoes of these concerns nonetheless continued to resonate throughout British culture at large. Some editors (unsuccessfully) encouraged their authors to take up the socialist realist line,<sup>5</sup> but more broadly there existed a climate in which social reportage and observation became a literary preoccupation, whether seen in the published accounts of Orwell and Isherwood or in the growth of agit-prop performed in the streets.<sup>6</sup>

This was a period that saw new associations and networks forged to facilitate these artistic aims. A distinct wave of publications emerged and made no secret about declaring their political positions. The magazine *Storm*, subtitled ‘Stories of the Struggle’, described itself as a proletarian ‘magazine of revolutionary fiction’ that would offer a ‘virile and progressive counter-blast’ to the prevalent bourgeois ‘stunt-writing’. *Left Review* was published by the British Section of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers and edited over its lifetime by leading Communist Party authors such as Tom Wintringham, Randall Swingler,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03082-4 - British Writers and MI5 Surveillance, 1930–1960

James Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Intellectual and Intelligence Contexts*

3

Alick West, and Edgell Rickword. Still other crucial publications with less overt affiliations, such as *New Signatures*, *New Country*, *New Verse*, and *New Writing*, nonetheless inextricably linked their literary manifestos to a commitment to progress and the left. Michael Roberts, for instance, announced in *New Country* that all the writers in the volume ‘obviously agree’ that ‘fighting against’ the present system was the ‘only ... way of life for us’, and John Lehmann declared that while *New Writing* was ‘first and foremost interested in literature’ and ‘independent of any political party’, its openness only went so far: It still did ‘not intend to open its pages to writers of reactionary or Fascist sentiments’.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond these specific literary magazines, the decade would see a remarkable growth in wider organisations aimed at nurturing a left-wing culture. The Left Book Club, founded in 1936 and run by Victor Gollancz, John Strachey, and Harold Laski, could boast more than 50,000 members by the end of the decade, encouraging hundreds of Left Book discussion groups, theatre groups and sporting activities.<sup>8</sup> Left-wing film societies such as Kino would finally break the back of the censorship system that had restricted the content in film, organising showings and tours that would be watched by upwards of 200,000 (particularly working-class) people a year in Britain.<sup>9</sup> The Workers’ Theatre Movement encouraged the growth of agit-prop and street performance; branches formed across the country and offshoots such as Unity Theatre were established. And there were many others: The ‘cultural atmosphere was saturated with Progressive Writers’ congresses, experimental theatres, committees for peace and against Fascism, societies for cultural relations with the USSR, Russian films and avant-garde magazines’.<sup>10</sup>

Beyond these specifically cultural venues, however, a range of important authors also sought to fuse their intellectual beliefs with a concrete political affiliation and consequently aligned under the banner of the Communist Party in the 1930s, believing it provided the strongest means by which to combat social inequality at home and the threat of fascism abroad. Cecil Day-Lewis, Stephen Spender, Edward Upward, Randall Swingler, Hugh MacDiarmid, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Ewan MacColl, and Edgell Rickword were just some of the most notable recruits to the British Communist Party at this time – a high rate of literary representation, considering that the Party could only command minuscule support amongst the population of Britain at large. Many others, while not joining the Party, still positioned themselves as sympathisers, becoming what David Caute called the generation of fellow-travellers – those in the intelligentsia who, while not Party members or inclined towards domestic

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03082-4 - British Writers and MI5 Surveillance, 1930–1960

James Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

political revolution, nonetheless became supporters of the USSR and enamoured with a (vastly sanitised) view of its great historical experiment. Auden, never a communist, still wrote poems such as ‘A Communist to Others’ and penned *The Dance of Death*, which featured Marx as a character announcing the liquidation of the bourgeois dancer. Orwell, despite his later attacks on the fellow-travelling left, was still happy enough to announce himself to be a communist by ‘sympathy’ when offered the prospect of paid journalistic work for a secret Party organ.<sup>11</sup> Non-Party authors such as H. G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, and Nancy Cunard travelled to the Soviet Union to see this new system in action firsthand and, more broadly, utopian meditations on ‘revolution’ became, as Hynes discussed, one of the fashionable preoccupations of new British poetry at this time.<sup>12</sup> And many others, more ambivalent or hostile to communism, still found themselves in direct cooperation with the comrades upon the rise of the Popular Front of anti-fascist action, ranging from leftist authors and activists such as Storm Jameson and Rebecca West to high Tories such as the Duchess of Atholl – a fierce public critic of the Soviet Union who nonetheless became one of the highest-profile campaigners against non-intervention and appeasement during the Popular Front era.

This period encompassed unique moments in which the paths of intellectual theory and practical struggle seemed to suddenly coalesce, as the civil war emerged in Spain between the left-wing Republican government and a reactionary military rebellion. With their own government refusing intervention, thousands of private British citizens volunteered to fight for the cause of the Spanish Republic and anti-fascism, amongst which Britain’s intelligentsia made up a notable proportion, leading to an (admittedly exaggerated) description of the Spanish Civil War as the ‘Poets’ War’, or, in Auden’s more violent terminology in ‘Spain’, a conflict in which poets exploded ‘like bombs’. Many of the British authors who took up the cause paid a high price: Ralph Fox, Christopher Caudwell, Julian Bell, and John Cornford were killed during the conflict, while others, such as Orwell and the *Left Review* editor Wintringham, were seriously wounded. Many other British authors who did not enlist for front-line service still made the journey over to support the Republican side as they could, whether to drive an ambulance (as Julian Bell did) or serve as witnesses and reporters (as Cunard, Spender, Auden, Warner, and Ackland, amongst others, did). And then there were those who helped by rallying the home front of opinion and support, whether in the ‘Aid for Spain’ activist campaigns that sought to raise supplies and involved authors as diverse as J. B. Priestley, E. M. Forster, V. S. Pritchett, Rose

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03082-4 - British Writers and MI5 Surveillance, 1930–1960

James Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Intellectual and Intelligence Contexts*

5

Macaulay, Harold Nicolson, Storm Jameson, Rosamond Lehmann, T. F. Powys, Rebecca West, H. G. Wells, and Graham Greene,<sup>13</sup> or literary publications such as *Poems for Spain* edited by Lehmann and Spender. Finally, the situation in Spain seemed to offer the authors nowhere to hide and no fence to sit on, as the statements issued by the editors of the seminal pamphlet *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War* made plain, confidently asserting that ‘it is clear to many of us throughout the whole world that now, as certainly never before, we are determined or compelled, to take sides’. A wave of writers responded with their unequivocal support: ‘With all my anger and love’, one respondent, the poet Brian Howard, declared, ‘I am for the People of Republican Spain’. While key high modernists of the previous era such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound equivocated in their responses, published opinion overwhelmingly sided with the Republican cause.<sup>14</sup>

But if the activism engendered by the conflict in Spain provided the defining political moments for writers of this generation, it was also possibly the high-tide mark of this political climate. Owing to the chaos and disorder of the Spanish conflict, as well as the bloody manoeuvres of the Soviet and fascist powers supporting their proxies in the war, many of these writers returned home disquieted by the reality of what they had witnessed – most publicly as documented by Orwell in *Homage to Catalonia*, but the conflict also affected others such as Auden, who made little public comment about his trip but recorded privately that he was disturbed by the events he had seen. Other disturbing facts began to flow: the reports about the brutal purges and show trials in the USSR, the sudden about-face of the Nazi–Soviet pact, the demands for the local Communist Parties to follow the Comintern line, the Soviet invasion of Finland, and the call for communist non-participation in the British war effort against Hitler. With this rapid fading of the mirage of Soviet communism, many writers who had been amongst the most prominent supporters on the left started to drift away from their political positions. Most famously, Auden and Isherwood set sail for America and renounced the ‘low dishonest decade’, Day-Lewis retreated to a cottage and did not return the Party’s calls, and Spender, who had fallen out with the Party after only a few weeks, now wanted nothing further to do with it.

It was not only the Auden circle’s wholesale retreat from politics that characterised the shifting landscape of this time: Many others, while remaining on the left, would no longer see the Communist Party as a credible vehicle and, indeed, found their eyes (belatedly) opening to the fact that the Communist International was a vehicle for advancing

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03082-4 - British Writers and MI5 Surveillance, 1930–1960

James Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Stalinist interests and the Soviet Union was a totalitarian state far from the emerging socialist utopia that had previously been dreamed. Tom Wintringham was expelled from the Party after a dispute about his lover and became highly critical of the Party's position on the Second World War; students such as the young Raymond Williams joined the Officer Training Corps and quietly let their Party membership lapse when they went off to fight; and even the General Secretary of the CPGB, Harry Pollitt, was briefly expelled after supporting British involvement in the war.<sup>15</sup> Soon, this distancing opened up into full-scale recantations or denunciations. Koestler published *Darkness at Noon* and Orwell *Homage to Catalonia*, and Victor Gollancz and the Left Book Club also broke with the Party and published *Betrayal of the Left*. While the Party would receive renewed public support in Britain after the involvement of the Soviet Union in the war in 1941 (reaching a peak of membership and electoral success in the 1945 election), its allure amongst this generation of writers and artists had irreversibly waned. As the Cold War frosted over, many of these previously sympathetic writers turned into the Soviet Union's harshest critics, notably seen in publications such as Douglas Hyde's *I Believed*; the contributions by Spender, Koestler, and others to Richard Crossman's seminal collection *The God That Failed*; and later in the activity of the Congress for Cultural Freedom – an organisation which tried to rally intellectual opinion in the 'Non-Communist Left' (and was significantly funded and organised by the CIA and British Information Research Department).<sup>16</sup> What little remained of its draw was almost totally severed with the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, the year that Edgell Rickword and Randall Swingler (amongst others) finally made their break, and the New Left coalesced in Britain as the emerging focal point for left-wing intellectuals.

## WRITERS AND SPIES

If these authors and artists of the 1930s felt compelled to take sides against the Establishment and align themselves with both the artistic and political avant-garde, they were also at times aware that such an alignment had brought them into a new and murky sphere, as their activities and associations rendered them subjects of interest in the world of intelligence and secret policing. The early poetry of Auden, Day-Lewis, and Spender abounds with references to spies and espionage – to the extent that the image of the spy has been described as one of Auden's obsessions – and indeed the allure of this world was clearly evident.<sup>17</sup> In a poem addressed

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03082-4 - British Writers and MI5 Surveillance, 1930–1960

James Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Intellectual and Intelligence Contexts*

7

to Isherwood, Auden recalled that, earlier in life, their ‘hopes were set still on the spies’ career’, while in *Vienna* Spender spoke of how those who were ‘sensitive to new contours’ risked being ‘shot as spies’. Although Day-Lewis’s *The Magnetic Mountain* grouped ‘bullies and spies’ together as those who provoked ‘the spark of indignation’, his mystery-writing alter ego, Nicholas Blake, still used the possibility of undercover infiltration of secret fascist organisations as the subject for espionage thrillers such as *The Smiler with the Knife*.

But while the world of the spy may have been an apt topic for generating mystery and excitement, many authors became conscious that these interactions were not limited to a purely imaginative affair. Although Orwell, in *Inside the Whale*, sternly reprimanded naive British writers for not having any concept of what secret police were actually like, many were indeed far more aware than Orwell allowed. Nancy Cunard wrote an irate letter to the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police demanding an explanation for why she was being monitored by Special Branch officers.<sup>18</sup> Ralph Fox complained to the General Post Office about ‘the continuous and exasperating irregularity ... of my letters’ and the strange fact that weeks could go by without his getting anything in the first post (the delay, as he no doubt suspected, was caused by their being intercepted).<sup>19</sup> The novelist Ralph Bates, when arriving at the British port of Newhaven, found the manuscripts he was carrying with him closely searched by Special Branch, the police going so far as to send MI5 a list of the chapter headings in his unpublished manuscript and noting that ‘Spain is mentioned’ in the story.<sup>20</sup> Orwell, while in Paris, feared deportation for being ‘under suspicion’ after a ‘detective had seen me come out of the office of a Communist weekly paper’.<sup>21</sup> Valentine Ackland and Sylvia Townsend Warner correctly speculated, in their letters to one another, that secret police might be monitoring their correspondence with Tom Wintringham.<sup>22</sup> John Lehmann remarked on the ‘many strange figures’ that he met in anti-fascist activist causes, including ‘mysterious agents of the Comintern’,<sup>23</sup> and he was apparently targeted for recruitment as a Soviet agent while he was in Vienna.<sup>24</sup> In *Goodbye to Berlin*, Isherwood recorded the communist cafes that served as a ‘fascinating little world of intrigue and counter-intrigue’, where ‘everybody suspect[ed] everybody’ and an associate could be ‘a Nazi agent, or a police spy, or in the pay of the French Government’.<sup>25</sup> Spender was asked by *The Daily Worker* to journey to civil-war Spain (ostensibly as a reporter) to obtain information on a missing Soviet ship – a task that Spender later downplayed, but one which could just as easily have gotten him arrested by Franco’s forces for



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03082-4 - British Writers and MI5 Surveillance, 1930–1960

James Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

being an undercover Soviet agent (which, for all purposes, was what he had naively stumbled into being, as it was the Soviet embassy that really wanted the information).<sup>26</sup> Other writers had closer calls in Spain: Arthur Koestler, while working undercover as a Comintern agent, endured many months in prison and the threat of execution after his arrest by Franco's forces, and Orwell was famously forced to leave the country in haste after members of the POUM were accused of being Trotskyist spies.

## AN ANATOMY OF THE BRITISH SECRET STATE

If policing and intelligence agencies were therefore on the minds of many of the writers of this era, what were these authors actually faced with? While many authors speculated about the manoeuvring of spies, for those outside the system it was almost impossible to perceive anything more than the hazy outline of the state security–intelligence apparatus that monitored subversion and extremism in British society – not only because such agencies formed the most carefully concealed arm of the British government, but also because they underwent significant changes during the rapidly shifting political and social climate of the early twentieth century, to the extent that within the intelligence community itself there was considerable confusion as to responsibility and lines of command.<sup>27</sup>

Britain had long possessed a variety of essentially ad hoc intelligence services, but it was at the beginning of the twentieth century that the permanent government intelligence departments – many of which persist to the present day – began to take shape. Two of the major services, MI5 and SIS, had their genesis in the Secret Service Bureau, founded in 1909 to investigate and combat the wave of German espionage feared to be engulfing Britain at that time. To tackle this threat, a secret subcommittee of the Committee of Imperial Defence had appointed Mansfield Cumming and Vernon Kell (who had been officers in the navy and army, respectively) to establish a new intelligence bureau, their charter being both to 'serve as a screen' between the official British government and 'foreign spies' seeking to sell information and to 'send agents to various parts of Great Britain and keep touch ... with a view to ascertaining the nature and scope of the espionage that is being carried out by foreign agents'.<sup>28</sup> It was also envisaged that besides the directing intelligence officers drawn from the military this Bureau would control a small group of detectives to carry out its surveillance investigations. Such a mixture of roles within a single agency quickly proved unworkable, and the Bureau was formally split in 1910. Kell's section became responsible for domestic



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03082-4 - British Writers and MI5 Surveillance, 1930–1960

James Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Intellectual and Intelligence Contexts*

9

military intelligence and Cumming's section was tasked with gathering information abroad, establishing the separation between MI5 and SIS that persists to this day.

In the first decade of its operation, MI5's activity was almost wholly focused on investigating the threats posed by Germany. Despite the widespread reports crossing police desks, the cases of German military espionage in Edwardian England proved almost always to be false leads, in most cases fictions conjured up by spy novelists and populist newspapers to increase sales and publicity. MI5 claimed more success during the First World War (such as the arrest of the entire German network of twenty-two agents as soon as war was declared, and the arrest of sixty-five agents during the war),<sup>29</sup> although it has also convincingly been argued that many of these successes were actually fabrications, and the balance between the success of MI5 and the incompetence of German espionage is also difficult to judge.<sup>30</sup> Whatever the case, by the later stages of the First World War MI5 was developing an increasing interest in the activities of the political left. Growing concern was given to 'counter-subversion' surveillance of anti-war parties such as the ILP, as well as other pacifist and anti-conscription groups.<sup>31</sup> With the Russian Revolution of 1917, followed by the founding of the Third Communist International (the Comintern) in 1919 and the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920, suddenly the British intelligence community faced a new and more lasting target, the fear of which would inextricably shape the reaction of the British government towards left-wing culture for most of the twentieth century.

MI5's major ally in policing this domestic subversion was the Metropolitan Police Special Branch, the 'secret service' policing division. MI5 heavily depended upon Special Branch for its investigations but would also often come into conflict with this separate policing agency over security assessments and divisions of jurisdiction. Unlike other detectives in the Criminal Investigation Department, Special Branch had been formed in 1883 to deal specifically with 'special' or political crimes. Initially this concerned the Fenian dynamite attacks that had occurred in London and confounded extant methods of policing, but its role was soon expanded. Special Branch had what has been described as four important distinguishing features that separated it from other sections of the Metropolitan Police: maximum confidentiality, a national reach, a specific mandate for observing political radicals and terrorists, and autonomy gained from answering to the Home Secretary rather than to the Metropolitan Police Commissioner.<sup>32</sup> By the 1920s, Special Branch had grown, and its remit was broadened to include policing a wider variety of

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03082-4 - British Writers and MI5 Surveillance, 1930–1960

James Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

political activities and protest movements. Special Branch officers were posted to ports to monitor arrivals to the country, developed links with overseas police services, investigated breaches of the Official Secrets Act, and conducted surveillance on a wide variety of political groups under the catch-all category of ‘extremist’, such as international anarchism, communism, nationalist movements, and the suffragettes. Unlike officers of the intelligence services, Special Branch officers were still police officers and could thus perform functions such as executing search warrants and deploying the power of arrest, and these functions, combined with the large number of officers routinely attending political meetings to report on attendance and activity, ensured that Special Branch was closely involved in many aspects of MI5’s investigations and that its reports made up a significant portion of many MI5 files.

Within this close relationship, however, certain tensions and rivalries emerged. For one, intelligence and policing officers often had divergent views of what constituted political extremism or subversion, and Special Branch opened files equally on ‘atheists, unemployed marchers, mutinous members of the merchant navy, pacifists or policemen who had received adverse reports’.<sup>33</sup> This also resulted in Special Branch officers’ watching an implausibly wide variety of intellectuals and other cultural groups regarded as being suspect, and thus the drinking habits of magazine editors, the activity of amateur societies screening Soviet films, and the contents of the rubbish bins of Ralph Fox were all factors that would feature in reports.<sup>34</sup> This broad-brush reporting and interpretation of threats on many occasions clashed with the more mandarin perceptions of MI5 officers and, as will be seen in later chapters of this book, left-wing authors were a type of ‘extremist’ that Special Branch had particular trouble categorising.

A second tension emerged over the question of which agency should have precedence. Initially, Special Branch won the political tussle and was put in charge of most aspects of monitoring domestic subversion, but in 1931 MI5 won the overall battle for the threat of subversion and espionage to be regarded as an intelligence, rather than policing, matter – and for SIS to only operate away from British shores. As a consequence MI5, with Vernon Kell still at its head, was upgraded from being a section of the War Office (despite the persistence of the ‘Military Intelligence’ moniker) and placed in direct liaison with a far broader section of Whitehall. MI5 acquired the counter-subversion section of Scotland Yard and also the ‘M’ (agent-running) section led by Maxwell Knight (which had previously operated under SIS), giving it