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**Treason, Treachery and Pro-Nazi Activities by the
British Ruling Classes During World War Two**

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TREASON, TREACHERY AND PRO-NAZI ACTIVITIES
BY THE BRITISH RULING CLASSES
DURING WORLD WAR TWO.

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ABSTRACT

How deeply did sympathy for German fascism run in the British establishment in World War Two; and to what extent were pro-Hitler members of the British political and military ruling classes willing to betray their country to the Nazi regime and its Axis allies ? Drawing on primary source material contained in previously-classified MI5 and Government files, this paper adduces evidence that, contrary to the conventional history of a country united in opposition to Hitler, right-wing British MPs, Peers and senior figures in the military clandestinely worked – individually and collectively – to hasten a German victory, and to supplant the elected British Government with a pro-Nazi puppet regime. The activities of this ‘Fifth Column’ included espionage, sabotage, unlawful private attempts to broker peace deals between Germany and Britain, sending military and political intelligence to Berlin, and plans to launch armed fascist *coups d’état* on London’s streets.

The Security Service files containing this evidence were withheld from public scrutiny for more than half a century; they were gradually released to the UK National Archives between 2000 and 2017. Together with de-classified files from other departments, they also reveal the eagerness of successive British Governments to protect the leading political, military and society figures who betrayed their country. But beyond these are other files – identified in the de-classified MI5 dossiers – which have not been released to the National Archives. They relate to yet more aristocrats, MPs and military officers who worked on behalf of Germany during the war.

This paper questions whether their suppression indicates a continuing determination to conceal the scale of pro-Nazi fascist sympathisers in positions of power during World War Two.

Keywords: Nazism, fascism, World War Two, Britain, traitors, MI5, Fifth Column

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Introduction

The accepted history of World War Two dismisses the idea of a Fifth Column of disloyal or treacherous British citizens as either press-driven scaremongering or a diversionary tactic by the Security Service, MI5, to justify an unquestionably shameful period in which thousands of “enemy aliens” – Italian and German nationals, many of whom were Jewish refugees from Nazi persecution - were interned *en masse*.

Historians and legal scholars have argued – in the words of the late Professor A.W.B. Simpson, one of the foremost authorities on internment without trial – that the Fifth Column was a “myth” and that those who believed in it during the Second World War were “credulous”.² Richard Thurlow, the veteran academic chronicler of British fascism, went further; his 1999 paper for OUP’s *20th Century History* series asserted that “the supposed existence of the Fifth Column became a means by which MI5 came to justify its growth, existence and importance”.³

Even the two authorised ‘biographies’ of MI5 have adopted this version of events. The first, published by Her Majesty’s Stationery Office (the British Government’s own press) in 1994, dismissed the threat of domestic ‘enemies within’ as “a panic”⁴; the second – Professor Christopher Andrew’s 2009 exhaustive history of the Security Service from its inception to the present day - pronounced that:

² Simpson, Prof. A.W.B. *Rhetoric, Reality, and Regulation 18B* (1988) & *The Judges and the Vigilant State* (1989). Both available at The Denning Law Journal.

³ Thurlow, Richard. *The Evolution of the Mythical British Fifth Column*. Twentieth Century History, Vol.10 No.4, pp.477-498. Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁴ Hinsley, F.H., and Simkins, C.A.G. Chapter 3 – *The Fifth Column Panic*. *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, pp. 47-64. HMSO, 1994

“None of the reports sent to MI5 led to the discovery of any real Fifth Column or the detection of a single enemy alien.”⁵

And yet, official British government documents, originated by MI5, the Home Office and the Treasury Solicitors’ department, tell a very different story. These files, released piecemeal and in a remarkably haphazard manner to the UK National Archives over the years between 2000 and 2017, show that between 1939 and 1945 more than seventy British men and women were convicted – mostly in secret trials – of working to help Nazi Germany win the war. They carried out espionage, gave British military and political secrets to Berlin, committed sabotage on military and sensitive civilian infrastructure, and stockpiled weapons to be used in support of German troops once they landed on English shores. Four of these traitors were sentenced to death - two were executed - whilst most of the remainder received severe prison sentences.

In the same period, hundreds of other British fascists were interned without trial under Defence Regulation 18b, the wartime emergency legislation which bestowed on the Home Secretary the power to detain indefinitely citizens whose activities, affiliations or loyalties rendered them a threat to the security of the Realm. His determinations were guided by police and Security Service investigations, which unearthed detailed evidence that the suspects were spying for, or working on behalf of, Germany.

⁵ Andrew, Christopher. Defence of the Realm: the Authorised History of MI5, p224. Allen Lane, 2009

Whilst the majority these men and women belonged to one or more fascist organisations – beyond Oswald Moseley’s British Union was a loose network of less prominent and occasionally feuding groups, including the Link, the National Socialist League, the Imperial Fascist League and the Nordic League – for the most part they acted as lone wolves or within small, localized networks. To that degree, the conventional narrative – that there was no *organised* Fifth Column of pro-Nazi traitors – is sustainable.

However, the de-classification of intelligence files – notably the KV2 and KV4 series of historic MI5 dossiers - has revealed that from 1939-1941 the Security Service penetrated and uncovered three detailed and apparently well-organised conspiracies by more clandestine British fascist groups. These involved espionage, spreading Nazi propaganda, illicit contact with Third Reich officials and, ultimately, plans for violent *coups d'état* which aimed to replace the British government with a ‘Quisling’ administration as soon as German forces landed in Britain. According to reports from undercover agents whom MI5 placed inside these organisations, each was willing to use violence and had begun to gather weapons and ammunition to ensure the success of their favoured ‘armed revolution’.

There are two notable features of the plots detailed in the de-classified files. The first is that each reached its zenith during the nation’s “darkest hour” - the weeks in the late spring and early summer of 1940 when Britain was bracing itself for invasion; the second is that the leaders - and much of the membership – of these groups belonged to the country’s traditional ruling classes: Parliament, the aristocracy and the military.

Together, they indicate that, far from being mythical, the Fifth Column was both real and a significant threat.

Origins of The Fifth Column

On October 5, 1936 a new phrase entered the English lexicon via the columns of the *Daily Express* – then, with a circulation of 2.25 million, the largest selling daily newspaper in the world. William Forrest, a 34-year-old Scottish journalist, was covering the Spanish Civil War from the Republican side (he was, himself, a card-carrying Communist Party member) and filed a sympathetic report on its struggle to resist the forces of the ‘Nationalist’ (in reality, Fascist) forces led by Francisco Franco.

“Insurgent general Franco has said that in addition to his four columns in the field he has a column in Madrid How strong is this fifth column ? No one knows. But its numbers must run to many thousands. Insurgent spies – they are everywhere – agents provocateur, rumour mongers, grumblers in the food queues; all these are members of that fifth column.”⁶

A fortnight after Forrest’s story, the *New York Times* picked up the phrase, reporting on a radio broadcast by Nationalist General Emilio Mola in which he boasted of the efficacy of his fascist ‘fifth column’ inside the beleaguered Republican capital⁷.

⁶ Franco’s Secret Army Scares Madrid: Hundreds Arrested. *Daily Express*, 5 October 1936.

⁷ William P. Carney: Madrid Rounds Up Suspected Rebels. *New York Times*, 16 October 1936.

Then, in October 1938, Ernest Hemmingway boosted its recognition, by publishing a play written from inside Madrid as the Nationalist forces laid siege. “*The Fifth Column*”⁸ received poor notices from critics, but the phrase attained global currency as shorthand for the dangers of the hidden ‘armies’ of pro-fascist spies saboteurs and traitors who were ready and willing to assist Hitler and his dreams of European domination.

It was not, however, until May 9 1940, when *Aufmarschanweisung No. 4, Fall Gelb* [“Deployment Instruction No. 4, Case Yellow”] was put into operation by the German High Command, that fears of the Fifth Column turned into a public panic in Britain.

The Fifth Column Scare

The *blitzkrieg* advance of Hitler’s troops into the Low Countries, and the rapid fall of Luxemburg, Holland and then Belgium, with an attack on France clearly imminent, forced the British government to confront the very real prospect of invasion; and with it the question of the loyalty (or otherwise) of domestic fascists.

On May 15, the day after the Dutch army surrendered, Winston Churchill’s War Cabinet received a report from Sir Nevile Bland, Britain’s most senior diplomat in Holland. Bland had crossed the North Sea on a Royal Navy warship, narrowly escaping several attacks by the *Luftwaffe*.

⁸ Ernest Hemmingway: *The Fifth Column and The First Forty-Nine Stories*. Scribner, 1938

In the comfort of the International Sportsman's Club on Mayfair's Upper Grosvenor Street, he hand-wrote a 1,000 word account of how the Netherlands had been taken: he headed this, unequivocally, "Fifth Column Menace".

The German parachute troops who attacked and captured Rotterdam and the Hague were, Bland asserted, "boys of 16 to 18, completely sodden with Hitler's ideas, and with nothing else in their minds but to cause as much death and destruction as they could before being killed themselves." The explanation for the astonishing success of such youthful forces was that they were aided by local pro-Nazi sympathisers and sleeper agents, who had given the invaders information about the disposition of the Royal Dutch Army as well as a list of key officials who were "to be shot on sight".

Some members of this Fifth Column were German (or German-origin) domestic staff, working in the houses of Dutch Government ministers – and, Bland claimed, Britain faced exactly the same problem.

"Every German or Austrian servant, however superficially charming and devoted, is a real and grave menace ...I have not the least doubt that when the signal is given, as it will scarcely fail to be when Hitler so decides, there will be satellites of the monster all over the country who will at once embark on widespread sabotage and attacks on civilians and the military indiscriminately. We cannot afford to take this risk. All Germans and Austrians, at least, ought to be interned immediately."⁹

⁹ Sir Nevile Bland: *Fifth Column Menace*. [in] National Archives file FO 371/25189.

Bland's report has been widely mocked in recent years – dismissed by academic critics of Britain's wartime internment policy as the paranoia of an old Etonian who "like many who employ domestic servants, nourished a deep fear of their treachery."¹⁰ The truth is a little more nuanced. Some of Bland's claims were, unquestionably, wrong: the role of German parachute forces in defeating Holland was much less crucial than he reported, and his warnings about the threat posed by "the paltriest kitchen maid" were overstated. They were not, however, without foundation in fact: lengthy investigations by MI5 had uncovered clear evidence that the *Abwehr* had deliberately placed agents inside some of Britain's leading homes. Josephine 'My' Erikson¹¹, a cook working inside aristocratic houses in London, and Margaret Newitt¹², who at the behest of Berlin ran an employment agency for German servants in the capital, provided support for German spies and information to their intelligence masters. Exaggerated, or not, the threat itself existed.

In the fevered atmosphere of early summer, newspapers fanned the flames of public anxiety. An editorial in the *Sunday Times* captured the prevailing mood.

"When the nation is at last bracing itself to meet the requirements of total war, it is entitled to insist that no measure for its security shall be omitted by the government. In particular, it requires the most effective protection against Fifth Column activities. This is not an unrelated problem, because one of the chief purposes for which Fifth Columns exist is sabotage in all its forms.

¹⁰ Prof. A.W. Brian Simpson: *In The Highest Degree Odious*, p.107. Clarendon Press, 1992.

¹¹ *Josephine 'My' Erikson*. National Archives files KV 2/535-539; de-classified 30 October 2001

¹² *Margaret Elizabeth Newitt, née Winter*. National Archives files KV 2/836-837; de-classified 26 August 2010.

“Espionage also is particularly important where the making of war material is concerned ... Public opinion is restive – and reasonably so – against the apparent apathy of the Home Office in this matter. The lessons of Norway and Holland stand written in letters of blood for all to read. There is no sign that [Home Secretary] Sir John Anderson’s officials have read them. They have done far too little, and done it with a strange air of reluctance. Everywhere there is an uneasy feeling that people are at large who ought to be interned. ... Defence against the Fifth Column is, in the first instance, a Home Office problem. Let that department see to it in time. There will be no mercy for it if it lets us down.”¹³

By the time this editorial appeared, the Home Office had, in fact, been prodded into reluctant action. At the start of the crisis, on May 11, the Security Service had sought approval for the arrest and detention of 500 leading BUF officials, but the Home Office refused even to consider such a large-scale abrogation of traditional British liberties.

On May 21 the dispute came to a head at a summit between the warring parties: the diary of Guy Liddell, then deputy director MI5’s Counter-Espionage Division, contains a revealing account of the argument.

¹³ *Sunday Times*: 9 June 1940.

“Anderson began by saying that he found it difficult to believe that members of the British Union of Fascists would assist the enemy. He ... said that he needed to be reasonably convinced that the BUF might assist the enemy and that unless he could get such evidence he thought it would be a mistake to imprison Mosley and his supporters, who would be extremely bitter after the war when democracy would be going through its severest trials. I longed to say that if somebody did not get a move on there would be no democracy, no England and no Empire, and that this was almost a matter of days ...

“Either he is an extremely calm and cool-headed person or he has not the least idea of the present situation. The possibility of a serious invasion of this country would seem to be no more than a vague suggestion in Anderson’s mind.”¹⁴

The following day, Anderson reported back to the War Cabinet, telling the assembled politicians and civil servants that MI5 believed more than a quarter of BUF members would be “willing if ordered to go to any lengths on behalf of Germany”; shortly afterwards, on May 30, the BUF was banned and its senior officers were interned. Anderson could not, however, resist adding a *caveat* in his statement to the Cabinet that there was “no concrete evidence” to back up MI5’s claims.¹⁵

¹⁴ Guy Liddell: diary entry, 21 May 1940. Guy Liddell Diaries, Vol.2. National Archives file KV 4/185; de-classified 1 November 2002.

¹⁵ War Cabinet Minutes, 22 May, 1940. National Archives file CAB 65/7

In this the Home Secretary was mistaken – at least in part. By then the Security Service had uncovered three separate, if overlapping, treasonous conspiracies by well-connected British fascist groups. If none was the BUF itself, the leaders of each plot had been closely involved with Moseley, before concluding that he could not be trusted to put loyalty to Berlin above his duty to Britain.

The Kensington Conspiracy

In May 1939, Captain Archibald Maule Ramsay, Conservative Member of Parliament for Peebles and Southern Midlothian, anti-Semite and fervent fascist, formed a new and secretive organisation: The Right Club. According to a letter sent on Ramsay's behalf by his son:

“The aim of the Club is to co-ordinate the activities of all the patriotic bodies which are striving to free this country from the Jewish domination in the financial, political, philosophical and cultural sphere. The organisations in question are such as the following: British Union, Nordic League, National Socialist League, Imperial Fascists, The Link, Liberty Restoration League and a few others.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Letter from George Ramsay to Col. Thompson, 20 July 1939. *Archibald Maule Ramsay MP*. National Archives file KV 2/677; de-classified 30 October 2001

Suitable candidates were invited to send applications to Ramsay, care of his office in the House of Commons. He then assigned the new members, according to his perception of their descending levels of social status or ability, into a series of ‘classes’: Wardens, Stewards, Yeomen, Keepers and Freemen. Membership costs ran from a £25 joining fee, with a further £10, 10 shillings annual subscription¹⁷, for the most senior class (Wardens), to 2 shillings and sixpence or the lowest (Freemen). Once accepted, each member was sworn to secrecy and issued with a specially-manufactured badge: an eagle killing a snake and bearing the initials “P.J.” – universal British fascist shorthand for “Perish Judah”.

Initially The Right Club’s activities were limited to the printing of thousands of “sticky backs” – self-adhesive labels to be fixed to “lamp posts, Church boards, bus stops [and] phone kiosks”¹⁸ – which denounced the looming conflict with Germany as “a Jew’s war”. However, this was not the true purpose of the newly-minted organisation. Undercover MI5 and Special Branch agents who infiltrated meetings of Right Club’s ‘Inner Circle’ at Ramsay’s home in Onslow Square, Kensington, reported that he was instructing senior members to prepare for an imminent fascist revolution; this was to be brought about by a military *coup d’état*.

¹⁷ Allowing for inflation, the most expensive joining fee equates to around £1,100 today

¹⁸ *Archibald Maule Ramsay MP*. National Archives file KV 2/677; de-classified 30 October 2001

The idea of a *coup d'état*, to be led by a coalition of British fascist groups, had been under consideration within the wider British fascist movement in the weeks immediately after war was declared. A Special Branch intelligence memo from early November 1939 reported a gathering, held at Oswald Mosley's Pimlico home and also attended by Admiral Sir Barry Domvile of The Link, veteran anti-Semite Aubrey Lees (representing the Nordic League,) and Gerard Vernon Wallop, Viscount Lymington, who was flying the flag for aristocratic Nazi fellow-travellers.

“For some days before, Mosley had been hinting to his intimates that the BUF would become the focal point of a vast secret revolutionary organization. In addition, it has been noted that since September, many of the pro-German and extreme anti-Semitic elements have inclined to the view that the BUF should be utilized to further their ends ... It is understood that Mosley did most of the talking and that a vague agreement on collaboration but nothing concrete was arrived at.”¹⁹

Ramsay's own (subsequent) account of the *coup* discussions with the BUF suggested that they were more “concrete” than Special Branch believed. According to this version, “long before the outbreak of war” Mosley had asked Ramsay to throw in his lot with the Party and “had promised Scotland ... as the area for which he would be responsible” ... ‘Mosley said, we have nothing in Scotland. I wish you would take it over’.”²⁰

¹⁹ Special Branch report, 9 November 1939. *Admiral Sir Barry Domvile*. National Archives file KV 2/834; de-classified 1 May 2002.

²⁰ *Report of the Advisory Committee on Capt. Archibald Ramsay*, 18 July 1940. *Archibald Maule Ramsay*. National Archives file KV 2/677; de-classified 30 October 2001.

Mosley, however, had blotted his fascist copybook by reining in the naked anti-Semitism of the early BUF era. Archibald Ramsay's aim in establishing the Right Club was to unify the movement in time for the *coup*, while simultaneously marginalising Mosley. On September 23, MI5 undercover agent Marjorie Amor (assigned the codename M/Y) had a "personal interview" with Ramsay in which she broached the subject of the coming uprising.

"In the course of conversation M/Y asked Captain Ramsay whether in the event of a Right Wing revolution breaking out in this country the Right Club members would be asked to follow Sir Oswald Mosley. His reply was 'Certainly not: before such a situation arises I shall be in touch with all the members and you will then be told who is to be your leader.'²¹

This fascist uprising would not, according to MI5's reports of what Ramsay told Amor, happen spontaneously: rather, it would immediately follow the arrival of Hitler's troops in Britain.

²¹ *Weekly Summary of Report by Agent "M/Y". Archibald Maule Ramsay.* National Archives file KV 2/677; de-classified 30 October 2001.

“It is not that Ramsay anticipates successful revolution independent of German action. Ramsay has said to M/Y words to the effect that he expected Hitler would take the continent of Europe and leave Britain as a protectorate with Ramsay as a ruler. Mrs. Ramsay is more modest. She anticipates that Jock will only be Commissioner of Scotland.”²²

Ramsay was also clear that he expected – and indeed looked forward to – the prospect of violence, telling a meeting of trusted Right Club members: “Personally, I should welcome a civil war with shots fired in the streets.”²³

Another member of The Right Club’s Inner Circle echoed this call to arms. In January 1940 MI5 received a report from one of its informants about incendiary speech given by General John ‘Boney’ Fuller, one of Britain’s most decorated army officers who had previously denounced Jews as “the cancer of Europe”²⁴, lionised Hitler as “that realistic idealist who has awakened the common sense of the British people by setting out to create a new Germany”²⁵, and had been employed as an unofficial military advisor to the *Wehrmacht*.²⁶

²² MI5 Memorandum, (undated). *Anna Wolkoff*. National Archives file KV 2/841; de-classified 1 May 2002

²³ Report of Agent “M/Y”, 3 May 1940. *Archibald Maule Ramsay*. National Archives file KV 2/677; de-classified 30 October 2001.

²⁴ Maj. Gen. J.F.C. Fuller: *The Cancer of Europe. Fascist Quarterly* Vol.2, Iss.1, pp.65-81, London, 1935

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Fuller was also a personally-invited guest at the military parade through Berlin to celebrate Hitler’s 50th birthday in April 1939.

“We know the present system of Government is rotten to the core ... What we want is a bloody revolution and I am ready to start one right away.”²⁷

In anticipation of the *coup*, Ramsay infiltrated Right Club informants into the police, MI5, the Ministry of Economic Warfare, the Air Ministry censorship branch, Churchill’s War Cabinet²⁸, and – most alarmingly – inside the top-secret code-breaking facility, then working on the Enigma decryption.²⁹

The Right Club’s plans for a *coup d’état* were interrupted in May 1940 by the arrest of Ramsay’s ‘Chief of Staff’, Anna Wolkoff, an ardent anti-Semite and passionate admirer of Germany’s Führer, who had declared (according to an MI5 undercover report reports) “Hitler is a God ... He is of this century and it would be wonderful if he could govern Britain.”³⁰ On November 8, Wolkoff and Tyler Kent, a clerk at the US Embassy, were convicted in a closed Official Secrets Act trial at the Old Bailey of stealing top-secret military and government documents, and of sending these to Berlin; Wolkoff was jailed for 10 years, Kent for seven.³¹

²⁷ *Admiral Sir Barry Domvile*. National Archives file KV 2/836; de-classified 1 May 2002.

²⁸ This was Francis Hemming, a member of the War Cabinet Secretariat. He subsequently admitted to his superiors that he was friendly with Right Club members – but was not, apparently, removed from his position.

²⁹ In June 1940 MI5 raided the London flat of The Right Club’s Muriel White, who was ““employed by S.I.S. [MI6] in a confidential capacity in their code and cypher department.””²⁹ They discovered that she had already been sent to work at Bletchley Park. *File note by Maxwell Knight, MI5, 28 June, 1940. Anna Wolkoff*. National Archives file KV 2/840; de-classified 1 May 2002

³⁰ Report on Right Club by B5b Branch, MI5, 14 April 1940. Anna Wolkoff. National Archives file KV 2/840; de-classified 1 May 2002

³¹ Secrets Case Ended. *The Times*, 8 November 1940.

The evidence clearly showed that Ramsay and his wife, the Hon. Ismay Lucretia, daughter of Viscount Gormanston, had been deeply involved in Wolkoff's actions, and MI5 formally asked the Director of Public Prosecutions to charge them both³². The request was not granted: instead, Ramsay was interned in Brixton Prison under Defence Regulation 18b. Here, like his fellow fascist detainees, he was allowed regular visits from friends and his wife – left, without explanation, entirely free - who were allowed to bring their loved ones additional supplies of food and even wine.

Ramsay was also permitted to retain his seat in the House of Commons, his annual MP's salary of £600, and to lodge Parliamentary Questions from his prison cell throughout his internment. When he was finally released, in September 1944, he returned to the House as if nothing untoward had happened. "On the whole," he wrote to his fellow fascist Sir Barry Domville, of The Link, about the attitude of his fellow MPs, "they have been very nice to me, and some have gone out of their way to be so"³³.

The kid-glove treatment of Archibald and Ismay Ramsay could – at a push - be explained as traditional deference to the rights of Parliamentarians were it not for the determination of successive British Governments to prevent scrutiny of The Right Club membership.

³² *MI5 memo (undated). Archibald Maule Ramsay.* National Archives file KV 2/677; de-classified 30 October 2001.

³³ Memorandum on Ramsay by Marjorie Roberts, F3 Branch, MI5. 13 July 1945. *Archibald Maule Ramsay.* National Archives file KV 2/679; de-classified 30 October 2001.

Ramsay had inscribed the names of members in a large leather ledger known as ‘The Red Book’. MI5 discovered this in Tyler Kent’s apartment on the morning of his arrest – Ramsay had given it to the American for safekeeping - and provided copies of its entries to the Home Office.

In the wake of the Kent and Wolkoff convictions, Liberal MP Geoffrey Mander asked the Home Secretary to “publish the list of members of the Right Club in possession of the Home Office”. Home Secretary Herbert Morrison refused on the grounds that to do so was “not in the public interest [and] I do not propose to give any indication of what names there are, or are not, on this list.”³⁴

The Red Book would remain under wraps for more than 50 years³⁵. When its entries were finally opened for public examination, they showed that of the 242 Right Club members listed, 13 were titled aristocrats (of both sexes) and 12 were sitting MPs; there were also three members of European Royal Families and at least five senior officers, serving in the British army. Since MI5’s publicly released files disclose no evidence of any subsequent investigations into The Right Club, much less its involvement in the *coup* plot, the aim of keeping its membership secret appears to have been to protect the reputations of those who belonged to it.

³⁴ *Hansard*, 31 July 1941 Vol. 373 cc1509-10

³⁵ The leather-bound ledger was finally released to the Wiener Library in London, and made available to researchers, in 2000

The Notting Hill Conspiracy

At the same time as the Security Service uncovered Ramsay's conspiracy, British Government files show that MI5 agents also penetrated a second and apparently well-advanced plot for an armed *coup d'état* by "a subversive organisation [intending] to establish an authoritarian system of Government" once German troops landed in Britain. Its operations included "illegal printing, a transport section to convey the members in their various activities, an extensive arrangement of accommodation addresses, and various aliases for leading members of the organization", as well as the acquisition of a substantial armoury of .303 Lee Enfield rifles.³⁶

The self-styled 'Leader' of this organisation was Dr. Leigh Francis Howell Wynne Sackville de Montmorency Vaughan-Henry, a celebrated musicologist and conductor who had held concert performances for the British Royal Family. To the general public Henry was known for his regular appearances on BBC wireless programmes in which he discussed his particular area of expertise: the Welsh Bardic tradition in poetry and song. To the police and to MI5, however, Leigh Vaughan-Henry was better known as a pro-Nazi Fascist and violent anti-Semite. Throughout the 1930s he had been in regular contact with Nazi officials in Germany, had been entertained by Party leaders in Berlin and had made at least one radio broadcast for propaganda chief Josef Goebbels.³⁷

³⁶ Defence Regulation 18B: claim by Dr Leigh Vaughan Henry for damages for wrongful arrest and for breach of statutory duty. National Archives file TS 27/533.

³⁷ Statement of Case against Leigh Vaughan-Henry. 28 November 1940. Defence Regulation 18B: claim by Dr Leigh Vaughan Henry for damages for wrongful arrest and for breach of statutory duty. National Archives file TS 27/533.

He had been a member of (variously) the BUF, the Imperial Fascist League and the Imperial Socialist League, and in April 1940 acquired a criminal record after making a speech to a meeting of the English Nationalist Association (a BUF offshoot). In it he denounced Jews as “a lot of dirty lousy Yids” and “a menace to Britishers”; he then “challenged those of Jewish beliefs or the Jewish race to come up to the platform and resort to force”³⁸. Magistrates at Old Street police Court gave him the choice between a £250 fine³⁹ and three months in prison. Henry paid the fine and was additionally bound over to be of good behaviour for six months; it was an injunction he chose to ignore.

MI5 infiltrated its undercover agents into Henry’s group of British fascists and discovered that it was planning for armed revolution. According to Henry’s deputy, Samuel Darwin-Fox, formerly Professor of English Literature at the University of Freiburg, Switzerland, but better known to the Security Service as “one of the more extreme and unbalanced of Nordic League members”⁴⁰, in early May 1940 the plot was primed and ready. Darwin-Fox told an MI5 agent code-named M/W that:

³⁸ Special Branch Memo by Insp. Arthur Cain, 13 June 1940. Defence Regulation 18B: claim by Dr Leigh Vaughan Henry for damages for wrongful arrest and for breach of statutory duty. National Archives file TS 27/533.

³⁹ Approximately £15,000 today.

⁴⁰ *Cecil Serocold Skeels, member of the Nordic League*. National Archives file HO 45/25746; de-classified 5 August 2005

“Italy would declare war almost immediately, that France would then give in and that Britain would follow before the end of the week. There would be a short civil war, the Government would leave first for Bristol and then for the Colonies, General Ironside would become dictator and after things had settled down Germany could do as she liked with Britain.”⁴¹

The names of Henry and Darwin-Fox’s co-conspirators have never been released, but the reference to General William Edmund Ironside (subsequently ennobled as the 1st Baron Ironside) must have caused alarm. Despite being regularly associated with pro-German fascists - he was the patron of General John Fuller, who was confident enough of his mentor’s support to advise the Link’s Admiral Barry Domvile that “Ironside is with us”⁴² – Ironside was then Chief of the Imperial General Staff and about to be named as Commander-in-Chief of Home Forces⁴³.

In the same month, a second MI5 undercover operative – Agent M/M – reported that Henry had organised his followers along classic revolutionary lines.

⁴¹ *Report by M/W of meeting on May 28 1940, June 2, 1940. National Archives file KV 2/1511, page 67: de-classified 2004*

⁴² Barry Domvile: diary entry for November 12, 1939. *Papers of Admiral Sir Barry Domvile, DOM 56. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.*

⁴³ He was appointed to this role on 27 May, but dismissed less than two months later.

“There are 18 cells already organized. Each cell has 25 members who are responsible for the district in which they live or work. Henry says he has many phone numbers; instructions are to be given to each member who will destroy them when committed to memory. No call is genuine unless ‘Peter Leigh’ is mentioned in the conversation on both sides.⁴⁴”

Henry was reported to be eagerly anticipating the arrival of Hitler’s troops. In late May he summoned 16 cell leaders to a meeting in his elegant Notting Hill home; it was, he told them, to be the last such gathering before the imminent *coup d’état*, and he issued their orders.

“Revolution is to take place after the total loss of the Channel ports and defeat on the Western Front, and an effort is to be made to link up with the enemy in Holland ... The next plan is the [in]filtration of into the C.P. [Communist Party] and chiefly the I.L.P. [Independent Labour Party]. This to be done by Darwin-Fox. Intimidation of certain people by threat, and possible action against their wives and children; bumping off certain people (this to be organized with great care).”⁴⁵

But Henry was also aware that his plot might be discovered before the *coup* was launched. He told his cell leaders that in the event of trouble, plans had been put in place to hide his revolutionaries from the police, and then to smuggle them to safety in the Irish Republic.

⁴⁴ Report filed by M/M, June 7, 1940. John and Anne Beckett. National Archives file KV 2/1511: declassified 2004

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

“Arrangements are being made for the allocation of hide-outs for the women of the party and their children if necessary. These will be reached in 10 minutes and ... the point to go will be imparted to each person, and from there he will be escorted to an unknown destination. A getaway out of London is to be by river, and out of the country to Ireland via S. Wales, a route which has been tried successfully; there is a second route. Two people have already used the first route, one apparently injured a policeman who is now dying.”⁴⁶

The same agent also reported that Henry had obtained a printing press to churn out the revolutionary government’s instructions, which “has been moved and will continue to be moved by a baker in his bread van every few days.” MI5 also discovered that he was forging identity documents, and that he had linked up with experienced Irish terrorists.

“According to information which we obtained from a reliable source, Vaughan-Henry had a large stock of inner pages of passports, and a Foreign Office embossing stamp. He said he could replace the photograph in a passport with that of someone he wanted to smuggle to Ireland, and stitch in blank pages for endorsements. He then sends such persons to a place in South Wales and thence to Ireland. In a period of ten days he has smuggled six persons to Ireland in that way, and members of the IRA have come to England by that route ...

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

“Eventually there will be a legion formed in Ireland (by those who go over by the secret route) who will return to fight when the revolution starts.”⁴⁷

On June 10, five days after German troops invaded France, officers from Special Branch and MI5, arrested Henry at his flat in Stanley Crescent, London W11. They seized the membership records for his organisation – finding, amongst other names, that of Archibald Ramsay⁴⁸ – and discovered a receipt for “£250,000 Lee Enfield [rifles] made 1917, 1920” and “1939 Ammunition 303”⁴⁹.

Lee Enfield .303 bolt-action, magazine-fed rifles were then the standard arms issued to British infantry. The apparent price of £250,000 – equivalent to £15 million today – would have purchased several thousand weapons and significant quantities of ammunition. The receipt also indicated that Henry had agreed to pay the cost of freight on arrival at a UK port.

Henry was detained under regulation 18b and interned for the duration of the war. Given the evidence of his conspiracy, the failure to charge him under the (then) new Treachery Act is puzzling. The detailed statements reported by Agents M/M and M/W provided more than enough to support a prosecution: certainly other, less well-connected British traitors had been convicted on lesser evidence – and, before long two would be sent to the gallows for their crimes.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Memo by Insp. Arthur Cain, Metropolitan Police Special Branch, June 13, 1940. National Archives file TS/27533

⁴⁹ *Leigh Vaughn-Henry: Reasons for Internment*, November 28, 1940. National Archives file TS/27533. Op. cit.

There is no official explanation available for the decision to spare him, since his MI5 file – identified in other documents by the serial number PF 42909, and which ran to three volumes in the Security Service registry – has never been released. We only know of its existence and contents because there are excerpts in an otherwise obscure Treasury Solicitor’s dossier, relating to Henry’s numerous appeals against internment, and in the files on two other British fascists.

Similarly, the documents found in Henry’s flat, which detailed his *coup* plot, and the evidence that MI5 discovered concerning his purchase of firearms, are also missing. Although they are referred to in the Treasury Solicitors’ docket, the papers themselves are absent - making it impossible to assess the breadth of his scheme, or the names of all his co-conspirators. But the surviving records indicate that the plan existed, that it was serious and that it seems to have been well advanced.

The Bedford/Beckett Conspiracy

The third conspiracy, penetrated by MI5 agents and disclosed in de-classified Security Service files, appears to have been the most politically (as opposed to militarily) developed. Like those of Ramsay and Henry, it blossomed during the ‘phoney war’ between September 1939 and May 1940, and similarly reached its apex in the fevered atmosphere of late Spring and early Summer that year. At its head were two prominent public figures, Hastings Russell and the former Independent Labour MP-turned fascist, John Beckett.

In February 1940, Hastings William Sackville Russell was 52 years old and the 4th richest man in Britain. While waiting to come into his inheritance as the 12th Duke of Bedford, he enjoyed the courtesy title Lord Tavistock, a seat in the House of Lords and the considerable privileges which his social status conferred.

Tavistock had been active in politics for much of the 1930s, flirting first with socialism and communism before becoming enamoured of the fascist regimes in Italy and Germany. He had also developed a near obsession with the need to reform international finance: this, according to an MI5 memo, “explains to some extent his sympathy for Hitler who he believes has abolished the capitalist system and imposed something in its place which at least resembles the Duke’s own ideal of how our monetary system ought to be worked.”⁵⁰

This sympathy for Germany and its Führer led Tavistock to support the Austrian *Anschluss* in 1938 and thereafter to throw in his lot with a group of pro-Nazi fascists then coalescing around John Beckett. The noble Lord’s money funded Beckett’s fascist organisations, the British Council for Christian Settlement in Europe and its successor, the British People’s Party – both of which would trouble MI5 during the difficult days of May 1940.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Throughout the first months of the war Bedford wrote regular articles for *The Word* - a monthly journal published by a leading anarchist⁵¹ - as well as the BUF newspaper *Action*. For the latter's January 1940 issue he pronounced it high time that the British people should "wake up to 'the truth about this war and the men who made it'" - a barely-disguised rehash of the fascist slogan that this was a "Jews' War".

Despite the very wide powers of suppression conferred by the 1939 Defence Regulations, the expression of dissenting opinions about the war was not, in itself, an offence. Communicating or consorting with the enemy, however, was unquestionably unlawful. Regulation 18b authorised the Home Secretary to order the arrest of anyone whom he had "reasonable cause to believe" had "hostile associations" or was a member of an organisation which had "associations with persons concerned in the government of, or sympathies with, the system of government of, any Power with which His Majesty is at war."

In February 1940 Tavistock (as he then still was) chose to ignore these prohibitions, and made arrangements to travel to Dublin for a meeting with officials of the German Legation. His aim was to negotiate peace terms between Britain and the Third Reich - a draft agreement of which he and Beckett planned to publish in the pages of the *Daily Express* as a means to 'bounce' the British Government into accepting Hitler's terms.⁵²

⁵¹ Guy Aldred, an anti-war activist and "proponent of anarchist aims". He was imprisoned in 1909 for sedition and again in 1916 as a conscientious objector. *Guy A. Aldred*. National Archives file KV 2/792; de-classified 1 May 2002)

⁵² MI5 note of Special Branch report 29 February, 1940. *John Beckett*. National Archives file KV 2 1508; de-classified 30 March 2004

MI5 got wind of the scheme through informants it had inserted inside the British Council for Christian Settlement in Europe. The Security Service was in no doubt about the illegality of what both men planned. As an (undated) memo noted:

“Beckett is fully aware that these negotiations have rendered himself ... and the Marquis of Tavistock liable to proceedings for treasonable activities, and Beckett is most anxious that if there is to be a martyr, the martyr should be the Marquis of Tavistock and not himself, in fact he has already prepared for a big press campaign over ‘Tavistock’s martyrdom’⁵³.

However, MI5 appears – at that point – to have been kept somewhat in the dark by its masters in Whitehall; it did not know that Tavistock’s mission had been given semi-official sanction, nor that some of the most senior figures in government were turning a blind eye to treason. Since the outbreak of war anyone – aristocrat or commoner - seeking to travel outside Britain’s borders needed an official exit permit, stamped by the Foreign Office and which stated the purpose of the journey. There is no indication in Tavistock’s suspiciously heavily-weeded MI5 files that he applied for, or was granted, any such authorisation – although he and the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, were clearly in frank correspondence; in a letter Tavistock wrote in January 1940, he asked Halifax to remember “that even in our boyhood the German Jew was a byword for all that was objectionable”⁵⁴. And a subsequent internal Security Service memo suggests that the Foreign Secretary was aware of the Dublin trip before it happened.

⁵³ *John Beckett*. National Archives file KV 2 1508; de-classified 30 March 2004

⁵⁴ Hastings Russell, Lord Tavistock: “*The Fate of a Peace Effort*”, BCCSE, March 1940

“Through some means, which has not been ascertained, he [Tavistock] obtained from some German source, almost certainly through the German Embassy in Dublin, what he conceived to be the peace terms which Hitler was prepared to accept ... Lord Halifax refused to give any assurance that the matter would be followed up; and the Duke, after some correspondence, asked if there would be any objection to his going to Dublin to visit the German Legation and to ask for such proofs of authenticity as Lord Halifax might consider necessary to establish the position. Lord Halifax informed the Duke that he could not prevent him going to Dublin if he wished to do so but that there could be no question of him being entrusted with any mission. On receipt of this information the Duke proceeded to Dublin.”⁵⁵

Halifax’ claim that he was powerless to prevent Tavistock going to meet and negotiate with officials of a country with which Britain was at war was nonsense. Not only did the Foreign Secretary have complete authority to block the exit visa, but even attempting to make contact with Nazi officials in Eire was a serious criminal offence: the following year, two Dundee youths would be jailed for three months each for trying – unsuccessfully - to telephone the German Legation in Dublin as a prank.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Memo by Edward Blanshard Stamp, 5 December 1941. *The Duke of Bedford*, National Archives file KV 2/793; de-classified 1 May 2002.

⁵⁶ On 24 June, 1941, Robert Webster Ireland and Gordon Archer (21 and 17 years old respectively) pleaded guilty to “attempting to communicate with persons at the German legation in Dublin” making a single attempt at telephoning the German Legation in Dublin. Perth Sheriff’s Court heard that they made the call “as a prank”; nonetheless Sheriff Valentine jailed both young men and pronounced that “an attempt by any persons to put themselves in communications with the enemies of this country must be sternly repressed”. *Perthshire Advertiser*, 25 June, 1941.

There is no official record of the terms which Tavistock brought back from Dublin. The copy originally included in his own file is missing, and German diplomats subsequently disowned them; however a report by one of MI5's undercover agents indicates that for the price of Hitler stepping aside "to a nominal post in the government of the Third Reich", an acknowledgment of "mistakes" in the handling of "the Semitic problem" and withdrawal from Poland and Czechoslovakia, Germany would halt its plans for invading Britain.⁵⁷

Tavistock's adventure was raised in the House of Commons on March 4. Two senior backbench MPs – one Conservative, one Labour – demanded an assurance from the Home Secretary that the Government would prevent any future private peace missions by well-connected Nazi fellow-travellers, and – unusually – condemned the Peer by name for illegal "communications with enemy agents"⁵⁸. For reasons he would not disclose, the Home Secretary demurred and dissembled.

Tavistock himself was unrepentant. Five days after being named and shamed in the Commons, he wrote to one of his accusers, Brigadier-General Edward Spears MP, to justify his actions and, for good measure, to defend both Hitler and Germany's "exceedingly reasonable" demands for territory.

⁵⁷ *Report by Agent "M/D"*, 27 February 1940. *John Beckett*. National Archives file KV 2 1508; declassified 30 March 2004

⁵⁸ *Hansard*: House of Commons, 4 March 1940, vol. 358 cc2-42

“Even if Hitler were all that you believe him to be, by reason of lack of imagination, when Hitler has made speeches both before and after the war, chance after chance has been missed of putting him in a most awkward position ... I do not know precisely on what grounds you consider this war to be justified. Although the exaction of vengeance on behalf of the Jews is not yet one of our acknowledged war aims, it may be that you think that war is justified by reason of the atrocities which, it is claimed, have been committed inside Germany.”⁵⁹

Other, lesser mortals had been – and continued to be - interned under Regulation 18b for expressing such naked pro-German sympathies, but Tavistock’s lineage and privilege appears to have been crucial in insulating him from detention. In the months to come the Home Office would display a remarkable eagerness to prevent his name from being discussed in other cases heard by the Appeals Committee on internment, and the best the Security Service could achieve was his name being placed on the secret list of those to be detained if, or when, Germany invaded Britain. It gave a stark explanation for this:

“In the event of the Duke falling into the hands of the enemy he would be likely to be set up as a *Gauleiter* or the head of a puppet British Government.”⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Letter from Lord Tavistock to Brigadier-General Edward Spears MP, 9 March 1940. *The Duke of Bedford*, National Archives file KV 2/793; de-classified 1 May 2002.

⁶⁰ Summary of case against Hastings William Sackville Russell, 12th Duke of Bedford, 7 December 1941. *The Duke of Bedford*, National Archives file KV 2/793; de-classified 1 May 2002.

But there was an additional impediment to taking action over Tavistock's trip to Dublin: his was not the only informal peace mission to which the Foreign Office turned a blind eye.

James Lonsdale Bryans was a 46-year-old a self-described author (though he had no British publishing history to support the claim). He was, however, impeccably upper-class: he counted Eton and Balliol as his *alma maters* and cited Brooks – the haunt of aristocratic politicians for more than a century – as his London Club. He was a vehemently anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi fascist, and believed that it was Germany's right to rule Europe, leaving Britain free rein throughout the rest of the world.

Between September 1939 and the end of February 1940, Bryans embarked on two attempts to communicate directly with the Führer and to bring back to London peace terms acceptable to the Third Reich; both were backed financially by two notable aristocratic fascists, Lord Brockett and the Duke of Buccleugh.⁶¹ On both occasions – despite a growing file inside MI5's registry which showed him to be known for “views sympathetic to Hitler” - he secured exit permits allowing him to travel to Mussolini's Italy. The second trip, in particular, was specifically authorised at the highest levels of the Foreign Office. According to a Security Service report:

⁶¹ Walter John Montagu Douglas Scott, Eighth Duke of Buccleugh, was Lord Steward of the Royal Household, brother-in-law of the King's younger brother, Prince Henry, Duke of Gloucester. Despite an official ban, he and Arthur Nall-Cain, 2nd Baron Brockett, were Hitler's personal guests at his 50th birthday celebrations and military parade in April 1939

“A second exit permit was granted to him on the 8th January for the purpose of proceeding to Rome ... This permit was granted at the request of Mr. C.G.S. Stevenson, Private Secretary to Lord Halifax, who requested that all possible facilities should be granted to Bryans. When Bryans visited the Passport Office he informed [the officials] that it might be assumed he was undertaking some special work for the Foreign Office.”⁶²

In reality, Bryans’ travels had a rather different purpose: he was – according to a letter he had sent to a German publishing company – attempting to gain “an audience with the Führer”, who, he said, was “a man ... of faith and genius”.⁶³ His contact and go-between was a Danish *Abwehr* agent, Ole Erik Andersen; according to a report of MI5’s subsequent interrogation of Andersen⁶⁴:

“Bryans told him about his contacts with Lord Halifax, and he impressed upon him that actually all his travels were at the request of this gentleman ... The interrogation boils down to the following: A person, now at large, can impress upon neutrals, who apparently believe him, that, with the help of wealthy friends and on commission for the Foreign Secretary of State, he is going to propose to Hitler that England should between them divide Europe.”⁶⁵

⁶² Report on James Lonsdale Bryans by Edward Blanshard Stamp, 27 March, 1941. *James Lonsdale Bryans*. National Archives file KV 2/2839; de-classified 30 August 2008.

⁶³ Letter from Oswald Harker, Deputy Director-General, MI5, to Sir Alexander Cadogan, Permanent Under Secretary for Foreign Affairs, 13 December 1940. *James Lonsdale Bryans*. National Archives file KV 2/2839; de-classified 30 August 2008.

⁶⁴ Andersen was pulled off a Portugal-bound boat on the orders of MI6 in December 1940. He was found to be carrying letters, given to him by Bryans, from Lord Brockett and the Duke of Buccleuch.

⁶⁵ Report of interrogation of Ole Erik Andersen Dec 17 1940. *James Lonsdale Bryans*. National Archives file KV 2/2839; de-classified 30 August 2008.

Bryans was, as MI5 noted, very clearly guilty of a serious offence – and one which had sent other, less privileged men to prison. But the Foreign Secretary’s support evidently saved his skin. An MI5 lawyer noted in Bryans’ now-bulging file:

“I should very much like to see Mr. Lonsdale Bryans detained but the position is very delicate and it is I think certain that if he were detained he would peach on the Foreign Office and his story would be all over the country.”⁶⁶

James Lonsdale Bryans, like his sponsors, Lord Brockett and the Duke of Buccleugh – and the equally-traitorous Lord Tavistock – never spent a single day in prison. Although MI5 argued for the internment, if not prosecution, of aristocratic traitors, their wealth, status and connections in government protected them from the laws applied to less elevated British fascists. This leniency led, in Tavistock’s case, to him financing John Beckett’s plans for a *coup d’état*.

John Beckett had been on a remarkable political journey. After service in World War One he joined the Independent Labour Party – an organisation to the left of the official Labour Party – serving on Hackney Council before being elected to Parliament, first as the member for Gateshead, then, in 1929, for the south London seat of Peckham.

⁶⁶ Memo by Edward Blanshard Stamp, 14 March 1941. *James Lonsdale Bryans*. National Archives file KV 2/2839; de-classified 30 August 2008.

A year later Beckett earned notoriety when he became the first MP in the history of Parliament to seize the House of Commons ceremonial mace during an ill-tempered debate. Parliamentary staff wrestled it from him; he was ‘named’ by the Speaker for “disorderly conduct” and briefly suspended.⁶⁷

In 1931 he lost his seat and – notionally at least – retired from public life. He used the time to travel both geographically and politically, enthusiastically touring Mussolini’s Italy and subsequently joining the British Union of Fascists. It appointed him Director of Publications, a post which put him in the editor’s chair of both the organisation’s publications, *Action* and *The Blackshirt*; according to an MI5 memo he was provided with “a budget of £210 per week⁶⁸ to maintain BUF periodicals.”

In December 1936 Beckett acquired a criminal record and a fine for creating a disturbance outside Buckingham Palace during the abdication crisis of King Edward VIII. Five months later Beckett and his closest colleague, the BUF’s Director of Propaganda William Joyce – soon to be notorious as the renegade Nazi propaganda broadcaster, Lord Haw Haw - were sacked by Moseley, and set up the National Socialist League. Beckett’s unpublished autobiography, obtained by MI5, shows that he had, by then, adopted revolutionary fascism as a creed.

“The great dividing gulf between the Right and the Left is the difference between the believer in political democracy and the revolutionary. I have always been the latter, and that is probably why ... I made a natural transition to the principles of Fascism, which is revolutionary but not democratic.

⁶⁷ *Hansard*. House of Commons debate 17, July, 1930.

⁶⁸ Equivalent to £10,000 in 2019

“I believe that the only road to power is through the ballot box, but that once in power, a revolutionary dictatorship should be imposed, and every weapon used to ensure remaining in power until the task is accomplished.”⁶⁹

After William Joyce fled to Berlin, Beckett set up a new organisation, The British Council Against European Commitments (later renamed the British Council for Christian Settlement in Europe) – in reality “a front organisation for every fascist, neo-fascist and anti-Semite in London”, according to his son.⁷⁰ This was rapidly subsumed into the British People’s Party, funded by Lord Tavistock and led by Beckett and Captain Robert Gordon-Canning, formerly the BUF’s Director of Overseas Policy (and who had been best man at Mosley’s 1936 wedding to Diana Mitford - an event which had taken place in the unusual surroundings of Joseph Goebbels’ drawing room).

Robert Gordon-Canning was rich and extremely well connected. Like Beckett he had served with distinction in World War One, winning the Military Cross for “conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty”, but in the interwar years he became an illicit arms dealer and developed a deep respect for the Third Reich, enjoying two personal interviews with Hitler, whom he described as “a person who has, I think, achieved very great things for the German people in many ways”.

⁶⁹ File Note by Maxwell Knight’s B5b Branch, 29 February 1940. *John and Anne Beckett*. National Archives file KV 2/1508; de-classified 30 March 2004.

⁷⁰ Francis Beckett: *The Rebel Who Lost His Cause – The Tragedy of John Beckett MP*, p. 156. London House, 1999.

Nor did the Nazi persecution of its domestic opponents necessarily tarnish that admiration; Gordon-Canning subsequently explained that “I am against the concentration camps - unless of the proper class”.⁷¹

According to MI5’s surviving files he acted as an intermediary between British fascists and Nazi officials and, in April 1937, had passed “secret information to Germany and Italy”⁷². The same dossiers included evidence that he had privately promised to help German forces if, or when, they landed in Britain.

The activities of Beckett, Gordon-Canning and Tavistock attracted the attention of MI5, which dispatched a succession of undercover operatives to penetrate BCCSE and feed back intelligence on its leaders. The first of these – from an agent code-named M/B – reported that, according to Beckett, “the British Council for Christian Settlement in Europe, has a membership of 1500 members, 300 in London and 1200 in the provinces”. But more worrying than the rapid growth in membership was the indication that it was in the early stages of planning for an armed fascist uprising.

“Beckett has stated that he is making intensive efforts to obtain contacts in H.M. Forces in order that when the time is ripe there [sic] persons will – to quote Beckett’s actual words – ‘turn their rifles in the right direction’.”⁷³

⁷¹ Robert Gordon Canning: transcript of testimony to the Home Office Advisory Committee, 14 August 1941. *Captain Robert Cecil Gordon Canning*. National Archives files KV 2/877; de-classified 31 October 2002.

⁷² Letter from Home Office Advisory Committee to MI5, October 26, 1940. *Captain Robert Cecil Gordon Canning*. National Archives files KV 2/877; de-classified 31 October 2002.

⁷³ Report of Agent M/B, 13 January 1940. *John and Anne Beckett*. National Archives file KV 2/1508; de-classified 30 March 2004.

Between May 22 and May 24, Beckett, Gordon-Canning and other BCCSE officials were arrested and interned under Defence Regulation 18b; the orders – signed, as required by the Home Secretary, cited their “hostile associations” and pronounced them to be a threat to the safety of the Realm. Unaccountably, alone of the organisation’s leaders Lord Tavistock was not detained, nor even questioned.

That the British Council for Christian Settlement in Europe posed a genuine threat was evidenced by a letter found in the raid on its offices. This highly detailed document – written by Beckett on May 22, 1940 and addressed to Tavistock at his Scottish estate – set out plans to replace the Government with a Quisling cabinet of Nazi sympathisers once German troops conquered Britain.

“I have had a series of conversations with key people who realize the situation and there is a general consensus of opinion that you are the only person around whom we could build an alternative government in time. I cannot say more than this by letter and have probably said too much, but I consider it vitally necessary that you should be here as soon as possible for consultation with various people.”⁷⁴

Beckett went on to list the names of the most senior figures in this proposed “Coalition Government of National Security”. Tavistock was to be Prime Minister, Moseley the Leader of the House and “President of Council”, while Gordon-Canning would be rewarded with the control of all British Dominions.

⁷⁴ John Beckett: Letter to Lord Arnold, 22 May 1940. John and Anne Beckett. National Archives file KV 2/1511; de-classified 30 March 2004.

Beckett reserved for himself the crucial posts of Home Secretary and minister for “National Security”. Other aristocratic names from the fascist movement featured prominently in the roll call of ministers-to-be. Lord Lymington and the Duke of Buccleugh were to take charge of Food and Agriculture and the War Office respectively, while senior Right Club figures were to be given junior ministerial posts.

The most disturbing element, however, was the apparent involvement of two of Britain’s most senior military leaders in Beckett’s plan for a Quisling Government. General John “Boney” Fuller was to be appointed Minister of Defence. Beckett was also expecting Fuller’s long-time friend and sponsor, General Edmund Ironside, to join the *coup*. According to report from MI5’s Agent M/M :

“M/M had a long talk with Beckett shortly before he was detained under 18b order. Beckett discussed General Ironside and said that he knew the General favoured Fascism. Asked how he knew this, Beckett said he had been told so by Gordon-Canning and by a General “who is one of us”. According to Beckett, General Ironside would not come out into the open until the moment comes, but may soon be approached.”⁷⁵

What makes these documents even more remarkable is their complete absence from the official histories of pro-Nazi fascists in Britain. Although Beckett and Gordon-Canning would challenge their detentions in the courts their detailed plans for a Nazi puppet regime were never revealed.

⁷⁵ *Report of Agent M/M*, June 1, 1940. *John and Anne Beckett*. National Archives file KV 2/1511; declassified 30 March 2004.

Further, of the 39 putative puppet government ministers listed – at least half of whom were peers or knights of the realm – 32 were the subject of Security Service attentions, and have PF-series⁷⁶ file numbers handwritten beside their names on MI5's copy of Beckett's list. Yet only four of those files have been released to the UK National Archives.

A Lengthy and Continuing Suppression

The MI5 and Home Office files which have been made public were released to the National Archives more than five decades after the events which they document took place. This delay is inexplicable, and no British Government has ever offered a justification. Even under the original '50 Year Rule' – Whitehall's post-war insistence that the records of its various department should be hidden from view for half a century following their creation – the dossiers should have been turned over to the National Archives before the new millennium. But that waiting period was reduced to 30 years in 1967 and abolished altogether by the Freedom of Information Act in 2000, making the delay even more curious. The sole exemption which might have been used to keep the files under lock and key - that their release might "damage the country's image, national security or foreign relations" - seems hard to justify.

⁷⁶ The PF series of intelligence files was subsequently re-named KV in MI5's post-war nomenclature.

So, too, the multiple redactions in these files. Comparison between the ‘serials sheet’ at the front of each Security Service dossier – essentially a list of all the documents it once contained – shows that many papers have been removed (‘weeded’ in Whitehall jargon) and key sections have frequently been blacked out in many of the surviving pages. Once again, there is neither explanation nor attempted justification for this.

Amongst the crucial documents missing are those which might disclose why so many well-connected traitors and Fifth Columnists were not prosecuted – or even interned – for committing offences for which the less-elevated foot soldiers of British fascism were sent to prison. The issue of Nazi radio broadcasts provides a revealing example of this double standard.

Throughout World War Two a succession of working or middle class men and women received lengthy sentences for publicising the existence and frequency of The New British Broadcasting Station, a ‘black propaganda’ organisation, run by Büro Concordia, a division of Goebbels' misinformation ministry, based in the Charlottenburg district of Berlin⁷⁷; in addition to providing false ‘news’ about the progress of the war, there is some evidence that NBBS was also sending coded messages to German intelligence agents in Britain⁷⁸.

⁷⁷ Underground broadcasting stations: Locations, descriptions and reports, 1940-1945. National Archives file FO 898/52.

⁷⁸ Hinsley and Simkins: British Intelligence in the Second World War, Volume 4, p.67n. HMSO 1990.

Amongst many others, Olive Evelyn Baker, a West Country nurse⁷⁹, and Rex Freeman a London BUF official⁸⁰, were each jailed in July 1940 for five years for distributing postcards advertising NBBS, whilst William Saxon Steer, a professional musician, received a seven year sentence⁸¹. By contrast, the Duke of Bedford and The Link's Admiral Sir Barry Domvile committed identical offences⁸² yet were never taken to court; more blatant still, Archibald Ramsay used his privilege as a MP to publicise NBBS, and to provide its exact frequency, in a speech in the House of Commons⁸³.

Little wonder, then, that in the trial of William Bruce Tomkins, another lowly BUF activist, for merely telling his landlady about NBBS⁸⁴, the judge, Mr Justice Atkinson, drew attention to the disparity of treatment.

“I ought to punish severely anyone who helped to disseminate this poison, but I am not going to punish with severity a humble tool when the real criminals responsible have not been brought to justice.”⁸⁵

⁷⁹ National Archives file KV 6/51; de-classified 27 June 2005

⁸⁰ Defendant: Violet Lillian Freeman and Rex Wilfred Freeman. Charge: Assisting the enemy. National Archives file CRIM1/1202

⁸¹ Defendant: William Saxon-Steer. National Archives file CRIM 1/1203

⁸² In June 1941, a Home Office official noted in Baker's file that “Domvile ... deserves P.S. penal servitude] far more than this woman.” Extract from Home Office file HO 833594, 10 June 1941; *in* Olive Evelyn Baker: National Archives file KV 6/51; de-classified 27 June 2005

⁸³ *Hansard*, 20 March 1940 Vol.358 cc.1970-11970

⁸⁴ “Defendant: William Bruce Tomkins: Doing an act with intention to assists the enemy.” National Archives file CRIM1/1202

⁸⁵ Gaol for Boosting Nazi Radio; Daily Mirror, 25 July 1940.

But it is the withholding of a large number of MI5 files on fascist aristocrats, MPs and army officers from the National Archives which most clearly suggests a continuing suppression of evidence of treason, treachery and pro-Nazi activities by the British ruling classes. The existence of these files is disclosed – including their individual PF registry numbers – in other de-classified material; yet the dossiers themselves remain absent from the official public record.

Unlike the United States, where both the FBI and CIA (the close equivalents of MI5 and MI6) are subject to Freedom of Information Act obligations, in Britain the Security Service and the Secret Intelligence Service are specifically excluded from scrutiny under FOI legislation. It is therefore not possible to ascertain whether the missing files remain locked in the intelligence services' registries or whether they have been destroyed. When – occasionally - MI5 does respond to requests for clarification, it asserts the right to pick and choose what information to release.

“Although it is Government policy to neither confirm nor deny whether any individual or group has been subject to investigation by MI5, an exception to this policy allows us to release to The National Archives files that are still in existence and at least 50 years old, if to do so would not damage national security.”⁸⁶

⁸⁶ E-mail from M15 to the author; 8 November 2018

Conclusion

Despite the continuing suppression of a substantial number of files, those papers which have been de-classified and released to the National Archives plainly show that throughout World War Two senior and influential figures in the British establishment not only supported Nazi Germany but took active – and illegal – steps to hasten a German victory; and, further, that there is compelling evidence that they were protected from the consequences of their actions by reason of their privileged status in society.