

Sunday Telegraph
14 NOV '82

ARE we better than our main allies, by sheer luck or good judgment, at catching spies; or are we simply far worse at breeding them? Those are the questions which arise as Geoffrey Prime joins the postwar line of British traitors. Soviet agents at first sight seem to pop up with the remorseless regularity of the cuckoo coming out to sing from a Swiss clock.



We have to admit to sheer luck in the Prime case. It was not MI5 who caught him but the constabulary of Meroia. The first damaging evidence was not his one-time Soviet cypher pad but his list of the 2,287 young schoolgirls of the Cheltenham area he had logged for possible molestation, with all the meticulous thoroughness of the Civil Service deskman.

Yet, whatever role chance or skill played in uncovering this and earlier treacheries, that first question can be answered only in the perspective of the second. At the end of a week that has seen much wild factual speculation (and even wilder comment) and has presented us, inside Parliament, with the grotesque spectacle of Left-wingers joining the chorus of agitated patriots, it is perspective, above all, that is sadly needed.

The first thing to look at more closely is the British record itself. Nothing that follows must be read as playing down, let alone excusing, the appalling damage that treachery has been able to inflict upon this country. However, all images, and especially the dark ones, need to be got into focus. Of the 16 British spies for the Soviet Union unmasked since the war (beginning with Dr Alan Nunn May in 1946 and running down to Geoffrey Prime today), no fewer than seven were prewar or wartime recruits, all of them suborned in very special climates.

Recruited in Korean war

In fact, for the last occasion before Prime when the Soviet KGB managed to enrol a member of the British intelligence community we have to go back to the foreign-born George Blake, who was recruited during the Korean war and who was discovered and made to confess some 10 years later in 1961. Indeed he was the *only* British intelligence official the Russians are known to have got their hands on in the whole post-war period, until Prime fell into their laps while serving with the RAF in Berlin in January of 1968. Our other spies of the postwar period held jobs such as Admiralty clerk, electronics engineer, RAF technician, minor civil servant and the like.

All this, heaven knows, is bad enough. But one patriotic popular paper has asked, apropos the Prime case, "Can Britain be trusted to keep any secrets?" (implying that other Western countries can); and another paper, printing our roll-call of traitors, categorically stated that it was worse than that of any of our allies. Some comparisons — however odorous — may therefore be salutary.

Much stress has rightly been laid on the damage to American intelligence interests caused by Prime, whose work at the Cheltenham code-breaking and monitoring unit was part and parcel of an intricate and interlocked Anglo-American operation. There have been assertions that the Americans were not fully informed about the background to Prime's arrest in the summer and that, as a result, Washington has been "winding down" its own intelligence co-operation with Britain. Both statements are wide of the mark.

The Americans were told everything that was significant in Prime's original 30-page confession and the way is clear, now that the case is no longer *sub judice*, for them to take part, alongside the British, in a much lengthier and more detailed interrogation of the convicted man. But essentially, right up to now, they have known what we have known.

There has, I am assured by both American and British sources, also been no lessening of contact between the two sides as a result of the Prime case. As for the American reaction, this has certainly been one of dismay, but at the professional level the dismay was tempered with sympathy and the general attitude has been: "There but for the grace of God, go we."

That feeling can be understood, for over the past 20 years key American defence and intelligence organisations have had the misfortune to go that way, and at a greater pace than

their British counterparts. Their story begins in 1960 with a purge of some two dozen officials of the National Security Agency (the American counterpart to our Cheltenham Government Communications Centre), after two homosexual members of the NCA, William Martin and Bernon Mitchell, had defected to Moscow with a suitcase full of secrets.

Hushing up by the French

Since then there have been no further espionage scandals within the NSA. But a total of nine other Soviet agents were arrested and convicted between 1965 and 1981. These have included personnel from the US Army, the US Air Force and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) itself. The material they handed over to the Soviet Union ranged from top secret codes and cyphers to information about sov satellite systems and the Titan Two missiles.

If we look at our main allies in Europe, France, especially during the Gaullist era, is thought to have hushed up its espionage scandals wherever possible. One that could not be swept under the carpet was that of the French spy in Nato, Georges Pacques, revealed in 1962. More recently, there have been three arrests of Frenchmen spying for the Soviet Union (mainly on French aerospace secrets), all between 1977 and 1980.

In West Germany, Gunther Guillaume, the Soviet agent unmasked while actually serving as one of the private secretaries to the former Chancellor Willy Brandt, was the most sensational catch. Literally dozens of other espionage arrests have been made over the past 30 years, though it must be added in mitigation that the Federal Republic, with its millions of postwar refugees from Eastern Europe has always faced a uniquely daunting security problem.

Considering therefore that Britain is the oldest of a

the Kremlin's intelligence targets and that we are still the prime European target, especially for advanced technology and communications, we have no need to be stood in the corner of the Nato room, at least as regards the record of the past 20 years. This does not, of course, in any way detract from the gravity of the Prime case as such, or from the desperate need to try to guard, alongside our allies, against a repetition.

So what of the future, and Prime's own significance? In her brief and necessarily opaque statement to the Commons, Mrs Thatcher listed three major questions that the Security Commission would now have to examine. These were first, how Prime's spying activities were made possible, both as regards his original recruitment and his long years of undetected treachery, and whether "defects in procedure" were responsible; secondly, what damage he had done; and thirdly, whether he could unmask any other Soviet agents still at work.

Obviously final answers cannot be given at this stage. But some clues are already apparent, and it is best to take the points out of order, because questions two and three seem somewhat less complex than the first.

There is general agreement in London, for example, that the American Defence Secretary, Mr Caspar Weinberger, got it about right when he declared, in characteristically crisp style, that the Prime case was damaging, "though not a disaster." Mrs Thatcher has herself made clear that the traitor was neither in a position to reveal Nato order-of-battle secrets to the Russians, let alone nuclear targeting and so on; nor, like George Blake, would he have been able to expose the identity of our agents (a curious phrase this, considering that a British espionage service is still not officially admitted to exist).

Prime seems in fact to have been purely a monitor and decoder of Soviet signals. He was not involved in the assessment of the material, which has always been carried out in a separate building at Cheltenham. Much less was he ever aware of the decisions, if any, made on those assessments, which were the responsibility of special committees — and ultimately the Cabinet itself — in London.

But by telling the Russians over so many years what we were listening to, and which channels and codes of theirs we had broken, he has obviously done serious damage to the whole alliance at the professional level as well as, perhaps, alerting the Kremlin to some of the broader political and strategic problems on our minds. On the Richter scale of espionage earthquakes, the Prime case probably registers around seven out of a maximum disaster count of 10.

As to Mrs Thatcher's third question about other Soviet moles, she is known to have been assured by Britain's security chiefs (doubtless touching wood and crossing fingers) of their conviction that Prime worked alone. A misfit and a loner in life, he was, it seems, a loner also in his treachery. Indeed, the incredible muddles he got into (losing key equipment he had been given by his spymasters and hanging on for years to material he should have passed them while working at Cheltenham) suggest that he would have proved a one-man disaster for any broader spy network to get hooked on to.

In other words, the experts appear confident that Prime himself has no accomplices still inside the Communications Centre. His decision to resign and go on

Listening to Soviet broadcasts (though this time normal ones) over a radio in his taxi-cab is regarded as part and parcel of the confused and panic-stricken state he had worked himself into at the time. Even so, under long hours of questioning spread over weeks and months, he might now be able to dredge up a few clues, not necessarily confined to Cheltenham.

The Prime Minister's first point—how to explain the security lapse and how to prevent a repetition of it—will be the hardest for the Commission to deal with. A series of earlier Commissions, to say nothing of the ceaseless head-scratching of the professionals all the time, has failed to come up with the answer. "Positive vetting," the 30-year-old system by which, currently, some 68,000 civil servants in sensitive posts, together with their referees, are grilled at intervals to establish their reliability, is clearly not enough. Prime was "P.V.-ed" no fewer than four times in 14 years and got through unscathed. Are the grillers not up to their job? A hard criticism, since Prime always managed to conceal his main peculiarity—the molesting of Gloucestershire schoolgirls—even from his own wife.

And, given the fact that he had escaped suspicion, it is even less reasonable to point with scorn at the times he was able to travel on his own passport to Berlin and Vienna to meet his KGB contacts. West Berlin, his one-time RAF station, and Vienna, a major tourist centre, were quite natural places for him to go anyway, and from each a trip to the other side of the Curtain is child's play to make and hard work to detect, even if there were known grounds for surveillance.

Extra surveillance is what it comes down to: body searches at Government buildings; security grillings with lie detectors at least once a year; perhaps even special permission for any private trip abroad. But quite apart from the vast extra sums of taxpayers' money

involved, this all brings us perilously close to the life-style of Soviet Russia, where half the population perpetually spies on the other half and where everyone is guilty unless proved innocent. This is the exact opposite of everything that democracies in general, and Britain in particular, hold dear.

Before we surrender these values, one final cautionary tale of comparisons. Despite the suffocating pressures of a police State and despite the savage penalties against the individual and his family for any attempt to change sides, the KGB has, over the past 20 years, itself suffered a constant haemorrhage of defectors to the West. Over the past 10 years Britain alone has received three major ones, ending with the important Major Zuzichkin from Iran only a fortnight ago. And, of course, the actual defectors, whether publicised or not, are not the whole story.

There are, in fact, no fool-proof security solutions for any country, because, humanity being as varied and unpredictable as it is, there are no fool-proof organisations, and organisations are all staffed and run by human beings.