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GCHQ up to its ears in secrets

Cheltenham centre eavesdrops on friend and foe alike in its central role in British intelligence. Richard Norton-Taylor reports

WHILE fiction writers have portrayed the security and secret service—MI5 and MI6—in a romantic and sometimes grubby light, GCHQ has been largely ignored. Yet the role of its staff of between 7,000 and 10,000 in Britain and overseas is regarded by the British and US governments as much more crucial than the conventional intelligence services.

At first sight, the work of GCHQ may seem unpromising as a backdrop to a thriller: teams of radio operators listening day and night to satellite and other telecommunications traffic, groups of linguists and mathematicians analysing the significance and the meaning of ceaseless recordings; sophisticated computers digesting apparently indecipherable noises.

What this means, if those in Whitehall responsible for interpreting the information and advising ministers to do their job properly, is that the British and US governments receive early warning of such events as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, or Argentine naval movements, or unusual military or diplomatic activity in Warsaw Pact countries.

But GCHQ, more and more integrated with the US National Security Agency (NSA), monitors commercial and private communications as well as the diplomatic traffic of allies. It is argued that it is important to eavesdrop on commercial exchanges since freight movements, for example, or oil prices could presage a more significant development.

There is another technical reason for such apparently indiscriminate shadowing of private and government communications. Signals intelligence (Sigint) is based on the wholesale harvesting of messages sent via the air waves or bouncing off satellites. While foreign governments can try to introduce counter-measures, private firms—let alone individuals—cannot.

James Bamford describes in his book, The Puzzle Palace, how the NSA has maintained a monopoly over latest computer and cryptographic and receiver technology developed by private companies.

After the importance of intercepting coded enemy messages was highlighted during the second world war Britain and America signed a secret UK-USA Sigint pact which later brought in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. They divided the world between them, with GCHQ establishing eavesdropping stations on Ascension Island, and in Hong Gong, Cyprus, South-east Asia and Africa.

GCHQ's operations — the subject of the 1978 ABC secrets trial — are officially defined as "the reception and analysis of foreign communications and other electronic transmissions for intelligence purposes." The NSA is officially described as having a much broader task. That is "the interception and processing of foreign communications passed by radio, wire, or other electro-magnetic means and the processing of foreign encrypted communications, however transmitted."

The US Senate discovered in 1975 that that definition was being used for surveillance of "individuals or organisations, involved in civil disturbances, anti-war movements, demonstrations and military deserters involved in the anti-war movements." The programme was code-named Minaret. The NSA used GCHQ intercepts to help in an operation which had collected files on 75,000 people.

The president of Western Union International told the US Senate three years later that the British government had demanded copies of all overseas telegrams handled by the company since 1945. Duncan Campbell, the journalist, has suggested that the NSA station at Menwith Hill, near Harrogate — jointly manned by British and American technicians — intercepts British overseas telephone traffic.

As computer technology gets ever more sophisticated and demands by governments for more and more information grow, the NSA and GCHQ become increasingly interdependent. But financially GCHQ becomes more dependent on the US.

Limit on YTS trainees in hospitals urged

By David Hencke

the community, where patients

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