

Super Blog:

The Real Story of the SDS

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3 The Secret History of Dick Thistlethwaite



DT in 1957, MH2025

There is no doubt that by the end of his political career Wilson was thoroughly alienated from, and by the secret state, but that was not the case during his second term of office when London was swinging, English football was the best in the World and the city which was his constituency was the epicentre of pop world. Up to 1967 he had used the Paymaster General, George Wigg, as an intermediary or moderator with the secret state. Wigg had no personal experience of the intelligence but had played an important role in keeping the Profumo Affair in the public eye.

Wilson himself also engaged and expected to be personally briefed. This was perhaps no surprisem since the man in MI5 responsible for counter-subversion throughout the second Wilson term of office was Dick Thistlethwaite. He was a year younger than

Wilson,; he was a northerner from the other side of the Pennines; they both went to Oxford just a year apart; they both studied PPE where they were taught by the same people including Isaiah Berlin and G.D.H. Cole; they both took firsts; Wilson's College – Jesus College- was just 300 yards from Thistlethwaite's – Queen's College in the city.

Even in the unlikely event that they had they had not known each other in Oxford, over the five years they worked together they must have worked out they had a great deal in common.

If MI5 is responsible for the redaction of DT's real name from the documents concerning the 1967 internal review of the MI5-Scotland Yard Special Branch relationship this should be no surprise. DT worked for MI5 for 31 years from 1941 to 1972 and by as early as 1947 was operating in high profile and often self-contained roles in the organisation. He retired at the age of 55 or 56, two years into Heath's brief three-year spell as Prime Minister.

Like Wilson in the early stages of his premiership, Heath moderated his relationship with the intelligence community by means of an informal but interfering ministerial intermediary, In Heath's case this was Lord Rothschild who unlike Wigg did have a background in MI5 where he organised wartime counter-sabotage operations and would have absolutely known DT. Heath himself would have been suspicious of DT and his apparent closeness to Wilson which he had personally witnessed. DTs comparatively early retirement may have been prompted by an awareness, as early as 1971, that his age and Conservative mistrust meant he was unlikely to rise further to become DDG or DG.

What is interesting about DT is that when it came to commissioning an authorised history – Christopher Andrew's *"The Defence of the Realm"* (2009) -although MI5 could not write him completely out of its history they only allow him to be mentioned in respect of two and half years of his long career. The six years that preceded that and at least twelve of the of the twenty or so other years are discussed in some detail without any reference to DT's pivotal role.

I am in the process of trying to remedy this, providing all the necessary authorities and references but that will take time. The nub of the story here is Thistlethwaite's relationship with Wilson and his role in reshaping MI5's relationship with Scotland Yard and the creation of SOS/SDS. To tell that story it is important to understand DT's back story. This makes it clear he was not, like Peter Wright the author of "Spycatcher", a self-important and opinionated minor character in the operations of MI5.

In 1939, recently graduated and a fluent German and French speaker, he had been volunteering in a Nazi Party-run Aryan social welfare programme in Hamburg, With War seeming inevitable in August he left for Strassburg on the French bank of the Rhine, where the British Consul took him on as a volunteer. After the declaration of war, when the British consulate was evacuated twice in the direction of the Swiss border. DT went with

them, but by Christmas he had resolved to return home. Immediately after Christmas he returned Burnley hoping to join up with the Military Police Corps.

He was at this stage in his life a 22-year-old who could barely pass for 18 and unsurprisingly he was unsuccessful in his application. Undeterred he signed up as a private in the East Lancs Regiment. By the time he had completed his basic training the remains of the regiment's units that had made it home from Dunkirk were back in Lancashire. At some stage however, towards the end of 1940, he volunteered or was put up for a War Office Selection Board for consideration as an officer. He was successful and after 14 weeks of basic officer training he was made a second lieutenant and posted to the Intelligence Corps.

This meant additional specialist intelligence and intensive language learning. Since he was already a good French and German speaker this would have been another language. In 1941 the only place where there was any military action taking place other than at sea and in the skies was in the middle east. It may be assumed from where he was posted for active service that his language learning was Arabic.

While he was completing his specialist intelligence training British commonwealth armies were securing British influence in the Middle East overcoming an Axis inspired coup in Iraq, defeating Italian East Africa and taking over the Levant – Syria and the Lebanon – from Vichy France. Hitler had also torn up the non aggression pact with Stalin and the British ambassador in Moscow, Stafford Cripps, had persuaded Stalin not only to fight Hitler but to become Britain's first fighting ally.

Neutral Persia was now the last place in the Middle East where the Axis powers still had any influence and diplomatic presence. It also had a land border with Russia and the Caucasus. In August 1941 British and Russian forces launched a coordinated invasion from north and south. Resistance by the Iranian Army collapsed within days and the Shah called for an armistice. The terms of the Armistice were the standing down of the Iranian Army and the immediate abdication and exile of the Shah in the custody of the British. The Crown Prince became the new Shah and ruled until 1979.

For the remainder of the war Persia was occupied by the Russians in the North and British in the South. A north-south land corridor was opened up between the British held ports and oil fields in the south and Russia. This became the safest Russian supply route for oil and American lend-lease materiel for the Red Army.

Since 1937 MI5 had been establishing a presence in overseas British-controlled territories; by posting MI5 officers called Defence Security Officers (DSOs) to embassies and consulates. By 1941 three original DSOs in Cairo, Gibraltar and Palestine had been added to DSOs in Malta, Aden, and Iraq. In Iraq a Combined Intelligence Centre (CICI) had been opened. These were all brought together to create a joint Military/MI5 - controlled Security Intelligence Middle East **SIME**.

After the invasion a DSO was established in Tehran responsible for a new CICI in Persia. By the end on 1941 DT had been seconded to MI5 and posted to CICI Persia. DT would spend the whole of the War and in fact his five remaining years of military service at the CICI in Tehran, rising to the rank of Major. It was a prolonged, intense and immersive induction into quite literally all the techniques and experience required in counter-espionage intelligence work, and also many of the developing techniques of counter-subversion.

When DT was demobilised from the intelligence corps, in September 1946, there cannot have been many intelligence officers who had the breadth and depth of experience of fieldwork or inside knowledge of the working of Russian Intelligence services that he had acquired in Persia. It is no surprise he was demobbed in Tehran straight into MI5. But he was not immediately repatriated but posted as DSO to the postwar tinderbox that was Palestine.

However, he was not there for long and by spring he had been repatriated to England. He was only there long enough to prepared for his new posting. With peace, the DSO posts were to be rapidly phased out but this did not mean that MI5 was to be returned to being a purely domestic intelligence service. While the DSOs had been posted to British-controlled territories – the new posts to be called Security Liaison Officers (SLO) would be posted to a wider range of foreign embassies. The model of linking Defence Security Officers and Offices was seen as highly successful in the case of SIME, and in 1946 a second organisation called Security Intelligence Middle East (SIFE) had been established.

However a similar arrangement, British Security Coordination (BSC), that had been set up in North America, had been less successful. This was partly because of the insensitivity of its head, William Stephenson, to the Anglophobic inclinations of the FBI director J Edgar Hoover, and as a result BSC had been shut by 1946.

But the British Embassy in Washington was the first to be given an MI5 SLO whose objectives would be to try to negotiate a the rapprochement with the FBI director with the aim of prosecuting the Cold war effectively but also in the hope of re-establishing nuclear cooperation with the US to enable Britain to win the nuclear Arms Race with the USSR.

The man given the task of achieving these objectives and establishing the role of SLO was 29 years old Dick Thistlethwaite who had been on MI5s civilian payroll for less than nine months.

On April 26, 1947, he was aboard the Mauretania in Liverpool, setting sail for New York. On the US immigration form he is identified as one of five Civil Servants travelling in Diplomatic cabin class, two with their wives and one with a maid. Dick was travelling with a personal assistant Margaret I. Maconochie. His fellow passengers included Percival P, Howse and his wife Joan E. Percival Phillip Howes and his wife Joan Ellen, nee Old. are

both on the Bletchley Park roll of honour and could have been sailing out to represent the newly forming GCHQ.

DT's time in Washington is the only part of his long career until recently acknowledged by MI5. It is told colourlessly without any back story in Christopher Andrew's "Defence of the Realm". It will give you a simple account of how things went, but it does not tell us when his posting ended or any of the extraordinary and controversial things in which he was later involved, though they themselves are mentioned.

In October 1947 DT and this PA were married in Washington Cathedral, with a reception in a large house at 1325 Thirtieth Street. Their first child, a son, had been born in July 1948 11 months later they were setting off for Liverpool from Montreal on the liner the Empress of France. Their address on the manifest was a c/o of Margaret's family in Dolphin Square in London but they would soon have their own home in Bromley.

He had barely set foot in the UK for a decade and he may have been keen to re-establish some UK roots for himself his wife and his young family, and there seem to be no overseas travel records for him until 1955. Their second child, a daughter, was born in 1953.

I have not been able to account for these next five years of his career, although given the direction his career would take it must have been a fairly significant role. His experience of MI5's overseas operations during and after the war would suggest a desk role in MI5's new OS (overseas) Division which was about to be created as he arrived home. That is speculative, but it is strongly supported by the next known move he makes.

On July 23 1955 he and his family are on board the P & O ship "Corfu" heading off for a new overseas posting in Singapore, He is off to become the Chief of SIFE. Top of his agenda is co-ordinating intelligence to end the "Malayan Emergency."

Seven years earlier members of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) had discovered their leader was a British agent. He was swiftly assassinated and the MCP and Malayan National Liberation Army began an armed struggle against British rule. The British government dubbed it the Malayan Emergency refusing to recognise it as a struggle for liberation and preferring to present it as struggle to prevent a communist takeover.

By 1955 after seven years of struggle the insurrection in Malaya was losing momentum, with many of its most able and experienced leaders killed or in custody. Shortly before DT and his family arrived in Singapore, Malaya had held its first national elections for a federal government. The turnout at over 82% was impressive and an alliance of parties had secured an overwhelming majority. However about a third of the adult population were not British citizens and were therefore disenfranchised. Although an amnesty was offered by the new government and peace talks took place, they broke down and fighting would continue until after DT left the post in 1959. But by 1957 the chance of a

communist takeover seemed unlikely and Malaya had been granted independence. SIFE HQ was therefore moved to Hong Kong.

As chief of SIFE He did not only coordinate counter-subversion and counter-espionage in Malaya but the whole region including Vietnam, Korea, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan. It also involved close liaison with intelligence services in Australia and New Zealand which had been actively supporting the Malayan Troops.

When he had been demobbed after the War he was allowed to keep the courtesy title major, but the quasi-military nature of the SIFE post saw him now given the rank of brigadier. This was a title he used when he took the family on a business trip to Japan in 1957.

When he returned to England with his family in 1959, he had been working for MI5 in high profile overseas positions for at least thirteen of the previous eighteen years. He had known the Director General, Dick White, personally for at least fifteen years and he had appointed by him to the SIFE position. But there was another senior officer, a lawyer and a conservative political activist more than ten years older than him who had only joined MI5's civilian establishment at the outbreak of the War. His name was Alexander Kellar and DT had for most of the eighteen years of his service been following in Kellar's footsteps. Kellar had been the Middle East desk of MI5, SIME's first civilian chief, then chief of SIFE at the start of the Malayan emergency.

When Dick White became Director General of MI5 in 1953 he rationalised and clarified the structure into 6 Branches, all of the OS division's responsibilities were transferred to E division, and a new F division responsible for domestic counter subversion including the CPGB was created. As Chief of SIFE, DT was part of E Branch and in 1958 Kellar was appointed director of that Branch.

On his return to England from the Far East DT was awarded a CBE but disappears from the radar again for a shorter while than in the 1950s. It is highly likely that he was given a role in E Branch's London team and quite possibly as Kellar's deputy. But in 1962 Kellar was moved to a more-high profile and mission critical role as Director of F Branch.

In a service where most officers retired aged 60 this was likely to be Kellar's last posting. It is not clear at what stage DT was himself transferred to F Branch as part of succession planning for Kellar. However, the change of government in 1964 meant that Kellar's appointment to F Branch had been an unfortunate one, and it is no surprise Kellar retired within a year, and DT had replaced him.

Andrew's authorised MI5 history does discuss in some detail how Wilson "came to depend" on F Branch's intelligence on militant trade unionism and CPGB. However it coyly references "Director F Branch:", without ever naming Thistlethwaite, and even quotes him in relation to the 1966 Seaman's strike.

This strike had been called in May 1966 two months after the election which had given Wilson a workable majority. Wilson believed this posed a serious threat to overseas trade and his economic strategy.

MI5 had already been bugging the CPGB headquarters for a long time and its "A2A" transcription service employed more than 50 English language s and 30 linguists to transcribe its taps and bugs. Andrew/MI5 tell us that A2A routinely sent transcriptions through to F Branch, and from this it was known "two NUS militants" were getting advice on how to run the strike from the CPGB Industrial Organiser Bert Ramelson. The two men getting the advice were Joe Kenny from Liverpool and Jim Slater from South Shields.

From May 24th the Prime Minister and his security advisor were briefed at least once a day by Thistlethwaite, or the DG Martin Furnival Jones, or occasionally F1/A Jams Elliot. Andrew does however give us an anonymised description of a DT briefing within the wider Civil Service:

"Director F already had a reputation as a popular briefer with a more extrovert manner when dealing with Whitehall audiences than most of his Service colleagues; Wilson's private secretary Michael Halls, who had heard him speak on previous occasions, called him 'Comic Cuts'. Director F was worried by the 'danger that the Government would look at these problems through Communist eyes as we were forced to do' and take too little account of the non-Communist influences on the strike which MI5's charter did not allow it to cover."

Andrew, Christopher. The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5 (p. 528). (Function). Kindle Edition.

In January 2025 a folder was declassified that contains some of Thistlethwaite and Furnival Jones correspondence about the Seamen's strike its reference is KV4-480 and the typescript daily briefings can be found in KV 3/448-1 and KV 3/448-2, The following extract give a flavour about of the close working relationship.

* 3. In the afternoon the Director General, James Elliott and I went to the House of Commons and after the Prime Minister and the Minister of Labour had had a few moments privately with Mr. Heath and Mr. Maudling we joined them. The Prime Minister told us that the meeting was being conducted on a Privy Councillor to Privy Councillor basis so that we were quite free to give a full account of the strike. This Mr. Elliott then did, speaking from the attached brief. The Prime Minister filled in with a few of his own observations on the strike and was followed by Mr. Gunter. Mr. Heath, who referred to Mr. Elliott's statement as "lucid", then asked a question about the timing of the meetings between the Communist Party and KENNY and SLATER. He did not commit himself about future action but the meeting was friendly and passed off smoothly.

R. Thistlethwaite.
R. Thistlethwaite.

F.
22 June 1966

CODE 18-75

TOP SECRET

* For full details of mtg - see 34a on SF.452-51/hw

Wilson was narrowly defeated in the 1970 General Election and Heath start his short three year occupation of Downing Street, As can be seen DT had a high profile with the new PM. But though he was just as interested subversion as Wilson he was also like him circum spect about the service, He appointed his own interfering intermediary in the sahep Lord Rothschild. Unlike George Wigg he was an intelligence insider having worked in counter sabotage around the world including with DT in Persta. DT had other friends in the government including Peter, Lord Carrington who had been High Commissioner to Australia all the time he was at SIFE.

It may be that Heath viewed him with some suspicion because of he apparently enthusiastic support for Wilson. By 1971 he was seeking information about his pension from the Army and he retired the following year.

Perhaps this reflects the ironic difference in attitude of the two main political parties to the CPGB, and therefore to the work of F Branch, For Labour there was a definite narrow party political interest in the destruction of the CPGB both in benefits at the ballot box, control of trade unions and constituency parties. The Conservatives' narrow political interest was served by the continuing existence of the CPGB and its apparent common interests with Labour. If the CPGB had never existed, the Conservatives would have had to invent it. However, when the CPGB did cease to exist in 1991 the Militant Tendency stepped up neatly to fill the gap.