

MI5's anti-Corbyn campaign and the slandering of Michael Foot

By Chris Marsden
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On September 19, one of Corbyn's key advisers, Andrew Murray, wrote in the *New Statesman*, asking, "Is the 'deep state' trying to undermine Corbyn?"

Murray, a leading figure in the Stop the War Coalition and former member of the Communist Party of Britain, was responding to a *Daily Mail* report that he had been denied entry to Ukraine by the USB secret services for being part of "Putin's propaganda network" and had still not been granted security clearance for parliament a year since applying for one.

Murray's suggestion that this article was part of a broader effort by the intelligence services "to block the election of a Labour government" is obvious to anyone who has watched the campaign against Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn unfold.

Leading state figures have routinely supplied the media with claims that he is a threat to national security—including Rupert Murdoch's *Sunday Times* reporting in 2015 an anonymous "senior serving general" stating that there would be "the very real prospect" of "a mutiny" if he became prime minister.

Earlier this year, Murdoch's *The Sun* also claimed that Corbyn was a paid informer for the Czech secret service in the 1980s, based on the claims made by a former spy for the Statni Bezpecnost (StB) secret police, Lt. Jan Sarkocy. The *Sun* editorialised that Corbyn "cannot be allowed the keys to No 10."

Murray's pointing to the MI5/MI6 elephant in the room was met with scorn. Labour's Blairite deputy leader Tom Watson led the charge, telling BBC Radio 4's *Today* that Murray's column was "a bit John le Carre. ... If he thinks the intelligence services are in some way trying to undermine the official Opposition then he should provide evidence, otherwise it's just fake news."

This follows a pattern of ridiculing any suggestion of foul play by the secret services, which are meant to be wholly uninterested in whether Corbyn forms a government despite the evidence of a de facto grand coalition of top Labour politicians, Tories, generals and media barons working to prevent such an outcome. Reports that a Momentum fringe event at Labour's conference at the weekend would feature "wargaming" of a coup to bring down a Corbyn government, for example, prompted the *Guardian's* Martin Kettle to write August 30 that "deep-state fears are a very British fantasy."

Kettle cited a column in the *New Statesman* by his former colleague Paul Mason, who declared the "wargaming" to be "pointless. If there is one upside to 30 years of free market economics in Britain, it is the strengthening of the rule of law. Britain has not only the Human Rights Act and a Supreme Court, but a state which operates consciously within legal checks and balances."

Watson hopes that the obvious difficulties in producing a "smoking

gun" proving the involvement of MI5 and MI6 will draw a veil over the issue. However, one of the latest media blitzes directed against Corbyn centres on historical events that indicate what is now taking place behind the scenes: the regurgitation and repackaging by the *Sunday Times* of discredited allegations that former Labour leader Michael Foot was a paid agent of the Soviet Stalinist secret service, the KGB.

MI6 targets Michael Foot

Foot was the leader of the Labour Party from 1980 until 1983 and stood down after losing that year's general election to Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. The allegations against him did not surface until 1995, when the *Sunday Times* began serialising, pre-publication, the memoirs of senior KGB officer Oleg Gordievsky, *Next Stop Execution*; Gordievsky had become a double agent for MI6 after being turned in the 1970s and was then recalled from the Soviet embassy in London when his cover was blown in 1985.

Foot contested the claims and took the *Sunday Times* to court, winning undisclosed but "substantial" damages—estimated to be equivalent to £250,000 today—by the High Court. The excuse for the fresh attacks on Foot is the publication of *The Spy and the Traitor*, written by *Times* Associate Editor Ben Macintyre. Ahead of its publication, the *Times* serialised some of its contents, concentrating on the sections on Foot.

Macintyre's book, the newspaper claims, "presents the first corroboration by MI6 officers of the allegations made by the Soviet defector Oleg Gordievsky that Foot had received a series of clandestine payments from the KGB, which classed him as an 'agent' and 'confidential contact'."

Nothing substantive has been added to earlier allegations by Gordievsky, other than that some of his MI6 colleagues and paymasters have used Foot's death to weaponise their earlier lies for use against Corbyn.

The *Times* made its political aims abundantly clear, titling one of its reports "Useful Idiots" and describing claims that Foot was a "paid contact of Soviet intelligence" as having "topicality as well as historical significance."

Sarah Baxter also writes, "Michael Foot flirted secretly with Russia. Jeremy Corbyn is blatant." Whereas, "There is no evidence that Corbyn was paid by the Czechs," Foot's supposed outing is proof that the "far left's...brand of socialism cannot exist without attaching itself to the tainted and unacceptable 'actually existing' models that render it unelectable to saner eyes. Corbyn has remained a 'useful idiot' to this day."

The Spy and the Traitor also outlines how Moscow supposedly tried

to undermine the 1983 election “when ‘in an intriguing harbinger of modern times’ it was ‘prepared to use dirty tricks and hidden interference’ to swing the election in favour of Foot,” the *Times* notes.

A tissue of lies

What is revealed by the renewed slander campaign against Foot is a dirty plot by the security services to bring down a Labour government had it won the 1983 general election that now reads like a dry run for today’s campaign against Corbyn.

Gordievsky’s “revelations” were supposedly made to his handlers in 1982—prior to the 1983 general election. This was under conditions in which the Thatcher government was waging a major offensive against the working class to “roll back the frontiers of the state that reached its peak with the brutal assault on the year-long miners’ strike of 1984-1985.

Thatcher’s first term in office had produced such a backlash that it appeared touch-and-go whether she would win a second term in 1983. This prompted the political savaging of Foot that is the background to Gordievsky’s initial slanders.

Foot came to leadership of the Labour Party due to a shift to the left among working people similar to that which led to Corbyn’s election. In 1981, a section of the Labour right, led by the “Gang of Four”—Roy Jenkins, David Owen, Shirley Williams and Bill Rodgers—split to form the Social Democratic Party after James Callaghan’s Labour government’s austerity measures had paved the way to power for Thatcher. Foot became Labour leader in 1980, while Tony Benn lost as deputy leader in 1981 by just 1 percent. The party’s election manifesto in 1983 supported high taxes on the rich, unilateral nuclear disarmament, abolishing the House of Lords, renationalising Thatcher’s privatisations of British Telecom and other industries, and withdrawal from the European Economic Community.

One element of the campaign to prevent Thatcher’s downfall was the plan to blackguard Foot as a communist stooge. The scenario attributed to Gordievsky was transparent nonsense. At an unspecified time in the early 1960s, KGB agents masquerading as diplomats are meant to have visited Foot in his capacity as editor of the left newspaper *Tribune*, supposedly because of its pro-Russian stance. They then slip a £10 note in Foot’s top pocket followed by 14 similar donations equivalent to £37,000 in 2018. Subsequent meetings do not take place privately, but once a month in London’s “Gay Hussar,” the favourite dining and watering hole of Labour MPs and left intellectuals, passed off as Foot “hiding in plain sight!”

Gordievsky manages to read all this in a file in the KGB headquarters in the Lubyanka, beginning with a declaration that a Major Petrov has christened Foot with the pseudonym “Boot.”

This paid relationship is said to have then petered out following the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, which Foot opposed.

Anyone familiar with Foot’s politics knows this to be a lie. Foot was a reformist opponent of Stalinism and the main ally of Anuerin Bevan, the leader of Labour’s left wing. With Foot as political editor after Bevan departed, *Tribune* argued for a foreign policy independent of the Soviet Union and the US. But in 1949, faced with the expansion of Soviet influence in Europe, it endorsed the founding of the NATO alliance, declaring, “The major threat to democratic socialism and the major danger of war in Europe arises from Soviet policy and not from American policy.”

Foot was also a vocal opponent of the Soviet invasion of Hungary and would never have formed such relations with the Soviet Embassy.

According to his slanderers, though MI6 took Gordievsky’s

revelations seriously and feared the prospect of a KGB puppet in Number 10, they decided to keep it under wraps, other than to inform Cabinet Secretary Sir Robin Armstrong, who also considered the information too “incendiary” to make public. They would only tell Thatcher and the Queen—the very people they would have been forced to inform—about Foot’s dirty secret if he won the election. In short, it was supposedly fine to have Foot lead Her Majesty’s Opposition, but not to take up residence in Number 10!

The only genuine explanation for such a decision is that Gordievsky’s ludicrous account was a highly problematic backstop—as proved by the *Times*’s damages pay-out in 1995—that wasn’t needed after Thatcher was re-elected.

Lessons for today

Just as with Corbyn today, Foot’s political retreats aided the right wing in securing its aims, including his own removal. Foot backed Thatcher’s Falklands/Malvinas war in 1982, telling parliament that it was Britain’s “moral duty and political duty and every other kind of duty to expel the Argentinians,” and concentrated his fire on the left in his own party—opposing Benn running against Denis Healey because of the threat to “party unity” and launching an inquiry into the Militant Tendency’s “penetration” of the Labour Party that resulted in the 1982 party conference adopting a list of proscribed organisations and the expulsion of Militant’s central leadership in 1983.

Thatcher won in part by exploiting the “Falklands Factor,” but also because the SDP-Liberal Alliance siphoned a large percentage of votes away from Labour—a scenario that is also being considered today with the Blairites threatening a split if they don’t succeed in removing Corbyn.

Aside from historic parallels that need no further explanation, one other factor ties the present campaign against Corbyn to the earlier moves against Foot.

Press reports last year confirmed that MI5 opened a file on Corbyn in the 1980s because of his support for Irish independence and that the CIA and Metropolitan Police Special Branch were also spying on him. The former head of MI5, Stella Rimmington, said, “I now see in Momentum some of the people we were looking at in the Trotskyist organisation of the 1980s, now grown up and advising our would-be prime minister Mr Corbyn on how to prepare himself for power...their names are familiar, shall we say that much?”

That was the situation when Corbyn was a humble backbench MP, and when the betrayals of Stalinism and social democracy had supposedly ensured the unchallenged authority of capitalism. For anyone to suggest that MI5 and MI6 would not be involved in efforts to prevent Labour coming to power today—when popular sentiment and social opposition to austerity militarism and war have led to two Labour leadership ballot victories and Labour reducing the Conservatives to an unstable minority government charged with resolving the desperate and escalating crisis surrounding Brexit—is what should really be described as a fantasy.

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