The MacDonald Discussion Group: A Communist Conspiracy in Britain's Cold War Film and Theatre Industry – or MI5's Honey-Pot?

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Of all the red scares that gripped the West during the twentieth century, it was the concern about communist penetration of the entertainment industry that generated some of the most sensational episodes. Nowhere was this more the case than in the United States of America, exemplified by the notorious challenge 'Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of the Communist Party?' issued by interrogators on the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) to the many hundreds of witnesses summoned to appear before them. While citizens from a range of professions (including teachers, the clergy, and union leaders) would find themselves the subject of a subpoena to appear before the Committee, it was HUAC's investigations into actors, directors, and playwrights in the American theatre and film trade that presented perhaps the most infamous area of HUAC's crusade, leading to a decades-long campaign dedicated to rooting out the perceived communist infiltration of American cultural institutions. Organizations such as the Federal Theatre Project came under intense and hostile scrutiny, and the Committee became convinced of the communist penetration of Hollywood, resulting in stars and industry professionals being forced to defend themselves when questioned about their political beliefs. Some, like the famous Hollywood Ten,[1] refused to answer the Committee's questions or name names, and were consequently found to be in contempt of Congress and gaoled. Others like Bertolt Brecht (the eleventh man of the Hollywood Ten) did chose to talk, but managed to bluff their way through and escape mostly unscathed.[2]

But while some refused or evaded the Committee, many did comply. Most prominently, the Motion Picture Association of America folded to the Committee's pressure, announcing in the so-called Waldorf Statement that they would not employ anyone suspected of being a member of the Communist Party or of any other subversive group, starting the system of blacklisting that disrupted the careers of hundreds who found themselves silently dropped from work.

In comparison to these public witch-hunts waged by HUAC and Senator Joseph McCarthy, and the more covert crusade being undertaken by J. Edgar Hoover and his Special Agents in the FBI, early Cold War Britain seemed to be a bastion of relative tolerance. Of course, there were certainly anti-communist incidents that periodically erupted across the twentieth century. It has long been known that British government agencies were involved in the banning of Soviet films, with the work of seminal directors such as Eisenstein subject to censorship.[3] Governmental security vetting of appointments to the BBC was an open secret,[4] as was the reluctance of the BBC to give voice to suspected communists on the airwaves.[5] Individual directors and actors would allege that they had been denied work because of their political affiliations, and some foreign nationals faced the uncertainty of only being offered short-term visa renewals by the British government rather than the security of documentation granting a longer stay.[6] But these seemed to be local and temporary campaigns rather than a sustained nation-wide policy, and Britain mostly seemed to resist the extremes of anti-communist paranoia that had gripped the USA.[7] No lesser figure than The Queen herself asserted this to be the case, stating to the world in her Coronation Day speech of 1953 that 'Parliamentary institutions, with their free speech and respect for the rights of minorities, and the inspiration of a broad tolerance in thought and expression - all this we conceive to be a precious part of our way of life

and outlook' – a statement immediately taken as a coded rebuke of McCarthyism, and an empathic endorsement of British political freedom.[8]

As a consequence, many of those blacklisted in their own countries moved to London. As Tony Shaw described:

It is a measure of the greater freedom from political interference the British film industry enjoyed during the Cold War that several prominent blacklistees chose to move to Britain to continue their careers. Even though the allegations of communist conspiracy made against them were groundless, it is also a mark of the industry's relative toleration of left-wing viewpoints that they were employed at all, especially given their notoriety.[9]

Adrian Scott, Howard Koch, Joseph Losey, Larry Adler, Sam Wanamaker, Donald Ogden Stewart, and Carl Foreman were some of the prominent Americans who continued their careers in Britain after becoming exiles from the United States – as did many exiles from other locations such as Eastern Europe, who were also drawn to Britain and its relative openness to granting work permits to émigrés, whatever their political backgrounds.[10]

But, despite these perceptions and royal assurances, how did the British security authorities actually perceive and investigate the risk of communist penetration of their own creative industries during the early Cold War, whether by these 'Un-American' Americans who were now appearing on their shores, or by other leftist involved in the local film and theatre trade? Were they indeed immune to these red scares, or did they in fact just occur more discreetly, carried out in obscure corners of Whitehall rather than in the glare of public testimony? Were lists drawn up,

investigations instigated, and careers affected, or were leftists free to carry on their artistic careers unhindered? Indeed, were there actual attempts by the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) to gain a sway amongst such professionals, or was this purely a fantasy conjured by the minds of cold warriors?

This article seeks to shed new light on Britain's security-intelligence response to such concerns, mainly though examining several important archival files recently released by Britain's Security Service, MI5, to the National Archives in Kew, London.[11] The core file that will provide the focus for this article is catalogued as KV 5/80, and concerns the surveillance maintained on what MI5 dubbed the MacDonald Discussion Group, a left-wing study group active in London in the 1950s and thought by British intelligence agencies to have links to the CPGB. The MacDonald Discussion Group sought to organise small, invitation-only events in private residences, recruiting individuals from the theatrical, film, and architecture professions who were interested in discussing left-wing politics but who were also fearful that open affiliation with leftist associations would tarnish their careers. It would be attended on occasion by stage and screen figures such as Patricia Burke, Ferdy Mayne, Sam Wanamaker, Mai Zetterling, and Herbert Lom, as well as a range of others employed in the industry in less prominent roles. However, despite the group's ambitions to increase its membership through organising a range of educational and political events, it appears that the group's actual activity never lived up to such goals: its meetings were sporadic in their frequency and suffered from limited attendance and cancellations, the speakers arranged for the group often appeared to be of only tangential interest, and the whole organisation limped on before finally becoming moribund within a few years of its launch.

Although this short-lived group's activity was inept rather than successful, and while it was quickly forgotten in the annals of Britain's cultural history, the group was subjected to detailed and intensive governmental surveillance and investigation from 1951 until 1954 (with the released file containing no material dating after 1955), with serious debate amongst MI5 officers as to whether it was indeed just an innocuous left-leaning study-group, or instead a secret Party-controlled front designed to develop influence – or even potential spies for the USSR – in the British entertainment industry. Indeed, so serious was MI5's interest that it appears that one of the group's core members was actually run as a secret informant – and the resulting surveillance investigation was classified as a 'Y-File', meaning that the case underwent restricted circulation even amongst those MI5 officers normally allowed access to top secret material.

In what follows, I will use the records that MI5 preserved in order to briefly reconstruct the MacDonald Group's structure, activity and membership, before analysing how MI5 officers interpreted and responded to this group's activity, and ask whether this operation resulted in Britain's own attempts at anti-communist restrictions in the film and theatre trade, which will include examining the released personal files MI5 kept on two other members of this group, Mai Zetterling and Sam Wanamaker.[12] In doing so, I will suggest that KV 5/80 not only sheds light on a hitherto little-known industry group, but that it raises broader (and indeed controversial) questions about the conduct of British intelligence operations against supposed communist sympathisers in the entertainment industry during this era.

Formation and objectives

According to MI5's records, the MacDonald Group began its short and erratic life in November 1951 with a small, private meeting held at the home of the actor Ferdy Mayne, where the objectives and ambitions for the group were discussed by the founding members. Remarkably, although only a handful of people attended, the founders of the group had already fundamentally underestimated the reach of the British intelligence services and the extent to which any suspect organisation was being surveilled. For even at this first meeting MI5 already had a source privy to the discussions of group's leadership (whose identity is not revealed in the file, although a possible candidate can be suggested, as I will address later), who provided bountiful detail about those attending the meeting as well as the group's structure and future plans – and then went on, across the life of the group, to provide a constant stream of intelligence. This information allowed MI5 to intimately monitor the operations of the group – although, as will be discussed, the stridency of much of the source's reporting means that many of the claims needed to be evaluated with a highly sceptical eye.

The founding members of the group were Duncan MacDonald, Ferdy Mayne,[13] and Walter Bor (also known as Buchbinder) – 'three persons who', the source confidently reported, were 'one hundred per cent communist'.[14] MacDonald was the initial driving force behind the organisation and hence his name was used by MI5 to identify the group. MacDonald possessed a range of interesting connections: an ex-Group Captain in the Royal Air Force who was now employed in the London film trade, he was at the time the husband of Patricia Burke, the versatile West End actress whose performances ranged across musical comedy and pantomime to starring in the 1947 Old Vic production of *Taming of the Shrew*.[15] She had previously been refused a visa to travel to the USA as a delegate to the 'Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace' in New York in 1949, suggesting that Western

intelligence agencies already regarded her with suspicion, and in later years Burke would be one of those who, along with John Osborne, Vanessa Redgrave, and Shelagh Delaney, were arrested and fined as part of the 'Committee of 100' anti-nuclear protests.[16]

At this time, MacDonald and Burke were also involved in a cooperative household at St Julians near Sevenoaks, which for a period counted the Swedish actress Mai Zetterling and her children as residents. Zetterling's autobiography described the household as 'one of the first communities' of this nature 'to grow up outside London', populated by 'Architects, analysts, designers, a film director; it even had its own school'. Her stay there was organised by the actor Herbert Lom ('he was political, he cared') and his group of 'friends' who 'were mainly professors, scientists, artists'.[17] The cooperative household was an organisation that, in itself, had already drawn MI5 and police attention, with the Kent police monitoring it for supposedly being a known community of ‘communist[s] or communist sympathisers’.[18] Despite this characterisation, others familiar with the household have strongly rejected any notion that it had far-left political motivations, instead affirming that the house's purpose was to provide communal living facilities for professional couples in order to provide in-house childcare and allow both parents to work (an innovation which appears to have struck police as suspiciously radical at the time).[19] It was also emphasised that MI5's information about the household and its residents was heavily slanted and often mistaken, for MacDonald and Burke, while resident in the house, were not the founders or leaders of the household.[20] Indeed, the later history of St Julians suggests that intelligence and police fears about a nest of communist activity were rather misplaced, for the household evolved, after 1956, into an exclusive private club (The St Julians Club) that still exists on the site today.

Whatever the actual facts, it was believed by MI5 that MacDonald and his wife had links to London's 'progressive' artistic and intellectual communities, and it was the combination of this with his political links that was of great interest and concern to security organs. His seemingly 'Establishment' background as a senior British military officer was compromised by several other facts, including suggestions that he was half Russian by birth, that he was present in Spain during the Civil War, and that he had connections with the CPGB (including apparent attempts to get Party sanction for the discussion group's activity).[21] Completing this picture was the fact that it was also believed by MI5 that MacDonald was 'in contact with the first Secretary [?and] the Assistant Air Attaché at the Russian Embassy in London'[22] – a combination that later led an MI5 officer to characterise MacDonald as 'a sinister and fanatical crypto-Communist, with a curious background and interesting connections', who, while not a 'direct danger to security', still offered 'the possibility that a man of his sort might be engaging in under-cover intelligence operations... [or] acting as a go-between or talent spotter'.[23]

The second founding member of the group, Walter Bor, was an émigré architect and town planner, who had fled from Czechoslovakia to Britain with his friend, Herbert Lom, after the Nazi invasion of 1938. Taking up work with the London County Council in 1947, Bor was an instrumental figure in rebuilding post-war London and went on to be a key figure in the design of Milton Keynes.[24] From later information in the file it appears that Bor's connections in the local architecture profession were the area of specific concern to MI5. But it was the third founder, Ferdy Mayne, who appears to be an individual of particular interest. Mayne, a German actor who became a naturalised British citizen before the Second World War, would have over two hundred acting credits in film and television roles over his long

career, the most prominent probably his role as Count von Krolock in Polanski's *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (1967). While his involvement in this secretive leftist group thus provides a fascinating parallel to a screen life that included credits in spy and detective works ranging from *Our Man in Havana* through to TV series such as *Epitaph for a Spy* and *The Third Man*, this may not have been his only link to the covert world. Although it is not possible to confirm from the released file, it is credible to suggest that it was Mayne who was possibly the source providing information to MI5, as it is alleged he had previously worked as an MI5 agent infiltrating Communist groups during the Second World War, making his appearance in a leftist group similarly penetrated by MI5 in the 1950s appear more than a mere coincidence.[25]

Aside from the three founders present at the first meeting, only three others attended: Ian Gibson-Smith (a photographer and producer described as a 'wealthy man of leisure'), Mai Zetterling, and Mary Habberfield (an employee of the Ealing Studios, who has numerous sound editing credits to her name). But despite this humble start, those at this meeting voiced an ambitious list of names of potential future members to be approached to join the group. Of the twenty people suggested, the most prominent names included Sam Wanamaker (the American actor and director), Lili Demel (widow of the actor Paul Demel), Ben Franckel (probably the composer Benjamin Frankel), Ernst Schoen (a German émigré and friend of Walter Benjamin who had left his job of director of programs on Frankfurt am Main radio to take up a position at the BBC in 1933), Ken Annakin (the film director), and Herbert Lom, as well as several other less prominent individuals then active in film, architecture and other professions in London. The actor James Robertson Justice was also suggested as a possible recruit, but his name was vetoed by MacDonald – a move

suggesting the political control that MacDonald wielded over potential members of the group.

Besides this hoped-for membership, the meeting also discussed possible lecturers who could conduct the educational program for the group, who would be recruited to speak to the group when it gathered in the future. The names offered came from a wide number of areas, including Professors Childe, Levy and Bernal, the journalist Gordon Schaffer, the physicist George Thomson,[26] the writers Jack Lindsay and James Aldridge, the Head of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts School Eric Capon, Emile Burns from the CPGB, the radical journalist Claud Cockburn, R. D. Smith of the BBC and the writer Olivia Manning (Smith's wife), Jack Murphy of Marks and Spencers, and the scientist Solly (later Baron) Zuckermann. It was suggested that these people could be asked to lecture at meetings of the group on subjects of 'topical interest', and also that they should be amenable to the need for the group to be discreet, with it being specified that 'if any persons attend who are not trusted from a Communist point of view, the Group will be made to appear to be non-sectarian and its lectures to be purely educational'.[27] As will be discussed in the next section, as all these potential lecturers (save Zuckermann) were believed by MI5 to either be Party members or 'crypto' communists, MI5 was immediately sceptical about the 'educational' nature of the events, instead believing it to represent a campaign to subtly indoctrinate people of influence on the stage and screen.

However, if the founders of the group voiced ambitious strategies for expanding the membership, the reality of what it was able to achieve was far more mundane. When the source reported on the second meeting of the group (held in December 1951, again in the home of Mayne), it appears that the bold plans to expand the group's reach had not entirely met with success, with it stated that 'owing to fog

the meeting was apparently abandoned since only five persons were present'.[28] The three founders outnumbered the other attendees, Herbert Lom and Bernard Berdchinger (an individual who was, amongst other things, described as an 'unusual personality in the Communist world', 'in the tie business' and 'very interested in Russian development projects'), and MI5's report on the event was padded out with trivialities such as the fact that Berdchinger 'runs a car' and left the meeting in the company of a student 'with red hair' who was 'reported to do some research or clerical work' for him.[29] It appears that, after this setback, the next reported gatherings, in December 1951 and January 1952, were only slightly more successful.[30] Attendance was again diminutive, with only nine and ten people (respectively) appearing at Mayne's flat for these events. Those attending were mostly the same individuals as before, although a few new names were on MI5's list, showing that at least some of those suggested in early discussions had indeed been persuaded to attend. For the first time, the educational activity planned for the group did go ahead, with the December meeting hearing a lecture provided by Berdchinger about his life and work in the textile industry through the economic slumps, and the January meeting hearing a lecture by Joseph Winternitz on a 'theoretical analysis of the present day economic situation'.[31] MI5 noted that there was little that was directly subversive in the content of these talks, stating of Berdchinger's talk that 'The discussion and the subsequent questions and answerers were not avowedly Communist', but still insisted that 'it would have taken little political knowledge to have gathered that the meeting was one of fellow-travellers, and that there was a general and considerable bias towards the attitude of Communist sympathisers'.[32]

A further meeting was held on 31 January 1952, this time with twenty-one people in attendance (including Sam Wanamaker for the first time), with discussions

by Bor comparing modern architecture in the USSR and the West which was said to consist of 'some excuses for the primitive state of Soviet architecture even at this date'.[33] However, just when it appears some momentum of activity had been achieved, the group then appears to have not met for over a year,[34] leaving the source, in early 1953, only able to relay to MI5 minor titbits such as the fact that Herbert Lom had bought a new house in Wimbledon in which another discussion group attendee was also thought to live.[35] The group was briefly revived in later 1953, with an October meeting at the house of Zetterling (ironically) spending its time hearing 'gramophone records on the American witch hunt',[36] and a November meeting at Mayne's address hearing a talk on 'the problem of Germany'.[37] But after this limping existence, it appears that the group was finally allowed to die. The MI5 file recorded that no meeting of the group was held after the end of 1953, with some of the last intelligence gathered detailing the marital split of Burke from MacDonald in 1954.[38]

MI5's Looking-Glass World

That, then, would seem to be the story of a curious but short-lived formation, perhaps of interest as a manifestation of a small left-wing Cold War émigré community in London's film trade,[39] but hardly a gathering of individuals that would seem to be able to command disproportionate influence within the theatre and film worlds, its educational program seeming to be little more than a series of dull and poorly attended talks rather than any form of effective or insidious indoctrination. However, the most remarkable aspect of KV 5/80 lies not so much in what it tells us about the MacDonald group in itself, but rather in what it reveals about MI5's *perception* of the group. While the activity of the group appears to have been sporadic (and indeed,

often inept), a strange, inverse correlation opened between the actual activity of the MacDonald group and the classified discourse generated about the group's possible functions. Convinced that communist sympathisers were covertly organising in the film and theatre worlds, the MacDonald Group was reified by British intelligence as a crucial site to study and assess, leading to pages of analysis, debate, and speculation being generated for the file of this otherwise minor group.

Undoubtedly one of the most hawkish voices was the source providing information to MI5, who cast the reporting in unequivocal terms, insisting that, far from an innocuous social group for left-wing actors, the group's structures were specifically designed for covert cultural penetration. For instance, from the outset the source stressed that MacDonald was organising the group along covert lines, emphasising the 'discretion' that was demanded from all members, and that the group was established with a clear 'two-fold' purpose. This purpose, as explained to MI5, was to:

> 1) Afford the opportunity for Communist discussion and Communist education to Communists or Communist sympathisers whose open adherence to the Communist Party might jeopardise their employment, [and]
>
> 2) Provide the opportunity for giving pro-Communist propaganda under suitable disguise of 'Progressive Discussion' to persons of left-wing sympathies, who are not Communist Party members.[40]

MI5's source undoubtedly painted a concerning picture -- but it is difficult to reconcile this ominous reporting with the reality of what was occurring on the ground. Indeed, the MI5 officer who handled the source appears to have been sceptical about the plausibility of some of the informant's bolder claims, warning in a comment when the report was circulated to others in MI5 that 'We should point out that we have as

yet no report on the reactions to their invitation of those people who are to be invited to join or lecture to the Group'.[41] The handler also noted that while it was likely that future lecturers would be aware that the group was a front, it was also conceivable that people could attend it believing it merely to be vaguely left-wing, and thus should not necessarily be regarded as crypto-communists active in British culture on the basis of group membership alone. However, as the source emphatically insisted that only a 'political innocent of scant intelligence' would not recognise the group for what it was,[42] and given that MI5's bureaucratic structures and prevailing political ideology conditioned the organisation to take such threats of communist penetration seriously,[43] these more lurid suspicions about the group's activity took hold, spurring MI5's officers to investigate the group in close detail.

MI5's investigation consisted of several concurrent streams, involving both the agent-running section of the organisation as well as intelligence officers who specialised in monitoring the Communist Party and Soviet espionage. Most directly, a file was opened on the organisation and the registry set about tracing all the names mentioned in association with it, in order to definitively identify those who were mentioned in connection with the group, and to see if the agency possessed other records linking such individuals to communist activity or security concerns. Such speculation at the first meeting about who could be approached to join the group inadvertently provided MI5 with a convenient roll-call of those regarded within the entertainment industry as possible sympathisers to the communist cause – with the result that MI5 now regarded them as potential communists, or at the very least as political allies of the MacDonald Group.

A lengthy report submitted in December 1952 sought to emphasise the risk posed by the group, providing a cross-referenced chart to the information held on

every member and lecturer, pointing out that twenty-six of the forty members and twelve of the thirteen lecturers were independently verified as being communists or communist-sympathisers. This was held to be more than a coincidence: 'This manifestly Communist composition of the group makes it clear that the M.D.G. is indeed a Communist discussion group, despite its camouflage, and it is reasonable to suppose that anyone attending its meetings or otherwise participating in its activities is likely to be sympathetic to Communism, and susceptible to conversion', with the conclusion that while 'no evidence is available to show whether it is directly controlled or sponsored by the Party' it was nonetheless a group 'authorised' by the Party.[44] The officer's recommendation was thus that 'any of its members or lecturers should…be classed as suspect Communist sympathisers', that records should be acquired and kept on what occurred during meetings of the group, that comprehensive source reports should be compiled on most members of the group, and that an intensive investigation might be launched against MacDonald himself.[45]

If that was the direct concern and investigative activity, the file also conveys a range of far more nebulous fears that MI5 officers conjured. For one, it was evident that MI5 was concerned about the growing influence of foreign-born communists, with the fears being voiced that Britain's openness to immigrants was drawing undesirables to her shores. Comments on the October meeting 1953 highlighted 'the strong American flavour' of the gathering (attended by people such as Donald Ogden Stewart Jnr. and his step-mother, Ella), and showed concern at the fact that 'there was a growing number of American "progressives" particularly in the Arts, who were gathering in London to escape what they call persecution in the USA', with it being 'interesting they should turn up in this type of disguised pro-Communist group' – a suggestion that linked the operations of the MacDonald Group to those who had been

blacklisted by the HUAC hearings, implying a continuum between communist penetration of Hollywood and what was now occurring in the London industry.[46] A similar fear was reiterated at the end of 1953, where it was highlighted that, of the ninety people who were now known to have been associated in some form with the discussion group, the 'great majority' were independently regarded as communists, with a marked bias of membership either being émigré Czech or Germans, or Americans active in the film and theatre trade who had left the United States due to their left-wing activity.[47] Consequently, this report concluded that the group remained a significant nexus to watch – a 'meeting-place for extreme Left-wing and Communist intellectuals and professional persons who do not wish their political creed to affect their livelihood or advancement', and that while 'few of the Group's members could be of interest to the RIS [Russian intelligence services]…many of them are highly intelligent and have access to many different social circles'.[48]

Perhaps the most extreme fear attached to the group was the assessment that it presented a likely mode through which Soviet intelligence would seek to penetrate Britain's cultural spheres. This was most explicitly voiced in January 1954, when an MI5 officer concluded, after considering the file and recommending that fellow officers study the group, that this was 'typical of a group within which it is to be expected that recruitment for Russian espionage is likely to take place.'[49] A further concurring assessment of this position stated that the MacDonald group was the sort of group 'from which Soviet spies, informants and supporting agents might well be recruited', and argued that it was similar in structure to many international discussion groups which had been used as recruiting grounds for Soviet intelligence.[50] This report went on to warn that the case of Whittaker Chambers (the American once-spy for the Soviet Union, whose defection and testimony to HUAC implicated Alger Hiss)

showed how that from '1930 onwards, the world depression & other factors brought hundreds of young people into the Communist fold and "made possible the big undergrounds, the infiltration of the Government, science, education….but especially radio, motion pictures, book, magazine & newspaper publishing"'.[51] This led the officer to surmise 'that a number of MacDonald's group in these kind of professions are likely to [?be] Communist sympathisers from this era', and thus part of a possible mass-infiltration of cultural intuitions that had been under way for decades – an issue of acute angst to British intelligence in particular, still reeling from the defections of the first of the Cambridge spies, Burgess and Maclean.[52]

Such alarmist assessments of the cultural penetration being undertaken by the MacDonald Group, coupled with the source's insistence about the group's sinister motives, suffered only one major problem – namely, as we have seen, the group could barely sustain its own meetings, let alone a wider conspiracy to recruit and subvert the industry as a whole. Despite several years of MI5's investigation, no evidence was ever found that the organisation rose beyond being a rather dull reading group, meeting in living rooms and having trouble attracting more than a few dozen members. Occasionally, this more prosaic explanation would win sway: in February 1952, a meeting was held in MI5 between several officers where the Group was discussed and it was suggested that the activity of the Group should be subjected to downgraded investigations, and some other officers appear to have been less impressed by the risk posed by the group.[53]

But such passive monitoring appears to have been too circumspect for other elements of MI5, who continued to regard the group as a key site for surveillance – and even the collapse of the group was not sufficient to deter their interest. In May 1955, the officer running the case provided a brief but extraordinary report on the

apparent demise of the Group: 'Source [i.e. MI5's informant] is heavily committed professionally and has been unable to revive the Group. However, when he has more time available, he intends to resuscitate the Group and he will report on the proceedings, statements and the identities of those who attend. It may be, however, that you would prefer Source not to revive this Group'.[54] This is the final entry in the released section of the file, and it is unclear whether the group was indeed resuscitated by the source or whether the revival was blocked. Whatever the case, it provides an amazing document to consider. MI5 had not only monitored the MacDonald Group from the outset, but now their source was actually encouraged to revive and run the group – the very group that was held to be the central mode of liaison between London's cultural spheres and the agencies of communist espionage and subversion. Like the plot of some le Carré novel, MI5 had come to run the organisation they ostensibly desired to suppress, turning it into a honey-pot luring in unwary leftists to be monitored.

Consequences

If these were the security concerns surrounding the group as a whole, there still remains the question of how association with the group might have actually affected the careers of those MI5 knew to be involved. It should be noted that, while the fears voiced by MI5 officers in these files might seem to rival the fear being voiced in America, the political and cultural climate of anti-communism was considerably different. Without a formal public outlet such as the HUAC hearings, and without a comprehensive private system of industry blacklisting, governmental allegations of communist affiliation did not carry the same career-killing taint as they

did in the USA, and many of those that MI5 observed as members of the group appear to have suffered few detrimental effects. Mai Zetterling, for instance, was one of those who came MI5's attention due to her links with MacDonald and his organisations, with a source linking her to both the overt cooperative household at St Julians and as one of the covert members of the MacDonald group.[55] Assessments left little doubt as to where they suspected that her politics fell: 'if her present enthusiasm for extreme Left Wing politics continues, she may well be led to join the Communist Party', and a personal MI5 file was duly opened on Zetterling.[56] However, while MI5 turned to the industry guide, *Theatrical Who's Who*, to establish Zetterling's particulars,[57] there is no evidence in the file that there were any direct attempts to limit her opportunities for work. Instead, while MI5 remained very interested in her associations with left-wing organisations and 'Un-American Americans',[58] as well as her various romantic involvements,[59] such surveillance remained an information-gathering exercise rather than direct harassment. In 1956, after several years of being the subject of a slowly growing file, Zetterling was recorded as being 'upset emotionally by reports from Hungary' – an event that seemed to mark a turning point in Zetterling's political associations, leaving Zetterling to have a long and successful career as an actor and director with MI5's file on her apparently mothballed.[60]

However, association with the MacDonald group did have far more negative implications for many other individuals, particularly in the cases of the American citizens who had fled the USA because of blacklisting, and who were now trying to re-establish their careers in the UK. One notable example was the director Sam Wanamaker, whose MI5 file is another of those that has been released to the National Archvies. Wanamaker's file reveals that he deliberately and pointedly avoided involving himself with any form of communist activity in the UK, obviously

attempting to make a clean break from the political associations that had seen his blacklisting in the USA. Unfortunately for Wanamaker, his attendance at a meeting of the MacDonald group early in 1952 was noted by MI5, who were already alert to his status as an 'Un-American' and looking for any sign that he might be politically active in his new home.[61] Therefore, despite the lack of any direct evidence that Wanamaker was interested in establishing links with the Communist Party, the affiliation with the discussion group was interpreted by MI5 as one of the indicators that Wanamaker continued to be sympathetic to communism. This had several major consequences. For one, given that British and American intelligence agencies routinely exchanged information concerning the activity of these émigré 'Un-Americans', MI5's general assessments of Wanamaker's activity were duly relayed to the intelligence liaison officer at the USA's London Embassy, who had previously been informed that Wanamaker 'continues to maintain contact with what are generally regarded as Left-Wing theatrical groups' in Britain, and that the 'general impression prevailing in the theatrical world' was that he appeared 'very sympathetic towards communists and communism'.[62] MI5's information on these individuals thus helped to sustain America's international campaign of monitoring and harassment, suggesting that British agencies were far more complicit in the witch-hunts than the public statements of the British government admitted.

Equally, the suspicion lingering over Wanamaker (fuelled in part by the MacDonald Group association) led to various direct campaigns of harassment by the British authorities themselves. When the Home Office periodically consulted MI5 over extensions of stay to Wanamaker's visa, MI5 unequivocally stated that Wanamaker's 'sympathies lay with communism and that he continued to be active in pursuit of them',[63] and then strenuously resisted further applications to remove the

time-limits on his visa. This was a rather obvious distortion of what MI5 knew about Wanamaker, for the surveillance records actually indicated that Wanamaker went to great lengths to avoid any communist activity, but is indicative of a willingness to exaggerate information against left-wing individuals in order to achieve desired political ends – as it was put in another document discussing the broader circle of émigrés, the advantage of pursuing the émigrés in this way was that it might help to break up 'the coterie of American communist sympathisers in the film and theatre world which seems to be forming here', as otherwise MI5 lacked any evidence of them being 'a direct threat to our security'.[64]

This harassment followed Wanamaker to the ground level, such as when MI5 wrote to the Chief Constable of Liverpool to warn him that Wanamaker had opened a theatre in the district and was 'one of those "Un-American Americans" who have sought refuge in this country and cannot with equanimity return to the USA', going on to tell the police that there was 'no doubt where his true sympathies lie', and requesting any information the police might receive to be passed on to MI5.[65] MI5 even recommended to the Home Office that Wanamaker be put on the internment list (and his wife on the restrictions list), in the event of hostilities breaking out against the Soviet Union – a contingency that obviously never came to pass, but still one that shows the extent of the hostility and suspicion with which individuals such as Wanamaker were viewed.[66] The great irony, of course, is that although MI5 viewed Wanamaker as a potential subversive and tried to find ways to exclude him from working in the UK, Wanamaker would go on to be the key figure in re-establishing Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London – activity that must surely rank as one of the great contributions to English cultural heritage and prestige in the twentieth century, and far from that of a dangerous communist seeking to spread covert influence.

Conclusions

The MacDonald Discussion Group file thus raises a series of stark questions about the effect that British security and policing had upon the cultural industries in the early Cold War. Most directly, it challenges us to think again about the political and cultural climate of Britain during the Cold War, showing as it does both the (abortive) attempts by known communists in the British film and theatre trade to form organisations, and the hitherto little-known campaign that Britain's intelligence apparatus undertook in order to combat this perceived (and exaggerated) threat. However, perhaps the most striking element that emerges from KV 5/80 is not the mere existence of this interaction, but just how entwined and compromised this interaction became – that in the quest to hunt out communist subversion in the film and theatre worlds, MI5 may have become one of the main reasons for its perpetuation. While the secrecy of the discussion group was one of the main factors that generated MI5's suspicions, it is just as plausible that it was this very climate of suspicion, generated by the American HUAC hearings and the perceptions that British authorities might follow suit, that actually drove many of these leftists into such covert groups rather than open meetings. The growth of the file, fuelled by the conspiracy-minded inclinations of the source and certain officers, became self-fulfilling proof that a communist conspiracy was under way, whereas the continuation of the file might instead suggest to a calmer mind that it was evidence of an intelligence failure, in that MI5 was unable to come to a plausible assessment of the material they had managed to generate. Indeed, KV 5/80 more plausibly suggests that there was not enough interest amongst British film and theatre intellectuals to

spontaneously sustain any such Marxist study group, and that the penetration operations by MI5, rather than minimising the threat, actually ended up sustaining the study group's activity beyond a point where it would have otherwise collapsed. And finally, KV 5/80 suggests that while Britain may have avoided the public ordeals of HUAC, this was not entirely due to the political benevolence of the government apparatus – rather, Britain may have just been more successful in keeping such surveillance activity away from public scrutiny.

[1] The Hollywood ten consisted of Alvah Bessie, Herbert Biberman, Lester Cole, Edward Dmytryk, Ring Lardner, Jr., John Howard Lawson, Albert Maltz, Samuel Ornitz, Adrian Scott and Dalton Trumbo.

[2] For details of Brecht's brush with HUAC, see James K. Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

[3] For example, many years before the official release of MI5's files, Temple Willcox explored British censorship of Eisenstein and noted evidence of MI5's involvement. See 'Soviet Films, Censorship and the British Government: A Matter of the Public Interest', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television,* 10: 3 (1990), pp. 275-292.

[4] For an investigative account of security vetting at the BBC, see Mark Hollingsworth and Richard Norton-Taylor, *Blacklist: The Inside Story of Political Vetting* (London: Hogarth, 1988).

[5] Ben Harker**,** '"The Trumpet of the Night": Interwar Communists on BBC Radio', *History Workshop Journal,* 75:1 (2013), pp. 81-100, provides a recent account of this negotiation.

[6] Rebecca Prime highlights how many Americans blacklisted from work in the USA could only obtain short-term renewals of visas in the UK, and were still subjected to pressure from the USA Embassy. See '"The Old Bogey":The Hollywood Blacklist in Europe', *Film History,* 20: 4 (2008), pp. 474-486.

[7] Giora Goodman, in a wide-ranging and important article investigating the impact of United States McCarthyism on British domestic policy, concluded that 'Whitehall proudly compared British traditions with U.S. practices and abhorred the likes of McCarran and McCarthy, who were often nearly as anti-British as they were anti-Communist', but also noted that 'the challenges of the Cold War and the need to maintain good relations with the United States pressed the British government to tighten its domestic anti-Communist policies and vetting programs that often also infringed civil liberties'. See 'The British Government and the Challenge of McCarthyism in the Early Cold War', *Journal of Cold War Studies,* 12:1, 2010, pp. 62-97. Reference on p. 95.

[8] The interpretation of this speech as a thinly-veiled condemnation of McCarthyism was prominently voiced in the American media. See, for example, 'McCarthyism: Myth & Menace', *Time,* 29 June 1953.

[9] Tony Shaw, *British Cinema and the Cold War: The State, Propaganda and Consensus* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001), p. 177.

[10] Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), discuss the activity of American émigrés in London. See especially pp. 398-407.

[11] I briefly note the existence and potential significance of these files in my *British Writers and MI5 Surveillance, 1930-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[12] It should be noted that a number of other British intelligence files relating to those blacklisted by American authorities are slowly being released to the National Archives, London (hereafter PRO) in the Security Service

(hereafter KV) series, such as the personal files kept on Carl Foreman (PRO KV 2/3262), Joseph Losey (PRO KV 2/3263-4), Paul Robeson (PRO KV 2/1829-30), and Charlie Chaplin (PRO KV 2/3700-1), and it can be anticipated further releases will provide a fuller range of material for study of this international interaction. Goodman, 'The British Government and the Challenge of McCarthyism in the Early Cold War', gives details from a number of these files.

[13] Mayne's name is also variously given in the file as 'Ferdie Mayer' and 'Freddy Mayne'.

[14] PRO KV5/80, serial 1a, B.1.K/WAY source report, report number 999, 10 December 1951.

[15] An overview of Burke's career can be found in her obituary published in *The Telegraph,* 27 November 2003. Available online at: www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1447823/Patricia-Burke.html.

[16] See *The Times,* 23 March 1949, p. 3; *The Times,* 19 September 1961, p. 10.

[17] See Mai Zetterling, *All Those Tomorrows* (London: Cape, 1985), p. 92.

[18] PRO KV 2/2994, serial 13z, extract from Chief Constable Kent report, 1 December 1954.

[19] Bronwen Wells, secretary of the St Julians Club and granddaughter of two of the founders of the household, issued clarifications in a letter to a newspaper, after media reporting on the household was promoted in the wake of the release of Zetterling's MI5 file in 2009. The letter stated that: 'The house was never run by the discussion group....St Julians was not started as a "Marxist study group", but was rather an exercise in communal living by several professional couples. It is not, and has never been, affiliated with any political philosophy; and certainly was never communist.' Given the exaggerations evident in other aspects of the investigation into the discussion group, it is likely that fears about the 'communist' nature of this household were similarly overblown. See http://www.courier.co.uk/Sevenoaks-Chronicle-Letters-April-2-2009/story-11985090-detail/story.html

[20] Ibid.

[21] These facts are discussed across several reports in KV 5/80. Further details regarding MacDonald, beyond those provided by MI5, have proved difficult to trace. MI5 regarded him as a 'mystery man', and this appears to extend even to his name: one MI5 document refers to him as 'Nick (Duncan) MacDonald', while the Dictionary of National Biography entry for Patricia Burke briefly states she was married to the pilot 'Group Captain Duncan C. MacDonald'. The fact that they were married outside of the UK during the Second World War means details are difficult to confirm via standard identity documents such as marriage certificates. Several officers named MacDonald attained the rank of Group Captain in the RAF in the era, but the most likely match appears to be the 'Duncan Charles Ruthven MacDonald' listed in various official Air Force Lists and London Gazettes over the period of 1935-1946, as this individual's documented birth year of 1913 matches that listed in KV 5/80. Further credence to this identity is suggested by the fact that a 'D. C. R. MacDonald' would, in the later 1950s and 1960s, be listed in industry guides as one of the directors of Guild Television Services (which specialised in television advertising), as well as (in the BFI database) the director of

the television advert 'Beautiful Morris Oxford' (1961), indicating that he possessed ongoing links to the film and television industry. Finally, a Duncan Charles Ruthven Macdonald was, until the year 2000, registered as secretary of the company 'Henry Cornelius Productions Limited' (with the Companies House documents listing his birth and death as 23 September 1913-31 March 2000). As Henry Cornelius (1913-1958) was a South African-born film director whom MI5 linked to the MacDonald Discussion Group, the appearance of the individual in this capacity would appear to confirm a link to the earlier group.

[22] PRO KV 5/80, serial 1a, B.1.K/WAY source report, report number 999, 10 December 1951.

[23] The description is contained in PRO KV 5/80, serial 11a, B.1.F/GHL note on the MacDonald Discussion Group, 1 December 1952. In an interesting contrast to this 'sinister' characterisation, Tom Morgan (son of one of the founders of the household and current managing director of the St Julians Club) stated in personal correspondence with me that although he could recall little concerning this issue, he could only 'remember Duncan as a very nice person'.

[24] Bor's obituary can be found online at:
http://www.theguardian.com/news/1999/oct/12/guardianobituaries.jonathanglancey.

[25] Although some general biographical profiles and discussions of Mayne suggest that he was involved in secret wartime work, tracing evidence for such claims back to a firm source is a more difficult task. The main basis for the allegation that Mayne worked for MI5 appears to be the posthumously published memoir of Joan Miller, one of MI5's wartime agents, which drops various hints about a German émigré (called 'X') matching Mayne's background who also worked in Maxwell Knight's section of undercover MI5 agents and 'remained a valued member of the office for many years after the war'. See Joan Miller, *One Girl's War: Personal Exploits in MI5's Most Secret Station* (Dingle: Brandon, 1986), p. 94. Although I would be hesitant to attach too much weight to Miller's evidence alone, the fact that Mayne reappears after the war as the leader of another secretive group undoubtedly penetrated by MI5 certainly gives weight to these claims, and renders him the most likely candidate to be MI5's source.

[26] A handwritten query on this name suggests that the correct Thomson may have actually been the professor of Greek at Birmingham, not a physicist as the source report stated.

[27] PRO KV 5/80, serial 1a, B.1.K/WAY source report, report number 999, 10 December 1951.

[28] PRO KV 5/80, serial 2a, B.1.K/WAY source report, report number 1088, 21 December 1951.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Details of the December meeting are provided in PRO KV 5/80, serial 6a, B.1.K/WAY source report, report number 2184, 22 January 1952. Details of the January meeting are provided in PRO KV 5/80, serial 7a, B.1.K/WAY source report, report number 2218, 25 January 1952.

[31] PRO KV 5/80, serial 7a, B.1.K/WAY source report, report number 2218, 25 January 1952.

[32] PRO KV 5/80, serial 6a, B.1.K/WAY source report, report number 2184, 22 January 1952.

[33] PRO KV 5/80, serial 7b, B.1.K/WAY source report, report number 2362, 6 February 1952.

[34] The report on the 31 January 1952 meeting (ibid.) stated that Gordon Sandison, Secretary of British Actors Equity Association, was booked to address the next meeting to be held on 14 February – but if this did go ahead, there is no record of it in the file.

[35] PRO KV 5/80, serial 12a, extract from B.1.F. source report, 23 January 1953.

[36] PRO KV 5/80, serial 20a, F.4/WAY source report, report number 6954, 5 November 1953.

[37] PRO KV 5/80, serial 23a, F.4/WAY source report, report number 7142, 18 November 1953.

[38] In this report a source states that 'Pat Burke has now finally left Nick MacDonald', but that she was 'still an ardent Communist however and has bought a house…which she hopes eventually to use for Marxist discussion groups for the benefit of those Communists connected with the theatre who for professional reasons are unable to be open members of the Communist Party'. MI5 officers noted that they hoped to cover these meetings and that they still intended to make a 'detailed study' of the MacDonald Group. PRO KV 5/80, serial 31b, extract from F.4/HDW source report, 10 November 1954.

[39] Rebecca Prime stresses the importance of these small-scale social circles in developing London's émigré communities, noting that the 'blacklisted community [was] centered around two (mutually inclusive) social poles, one being Donald Ogden Stewart and the other being Hannah Weinstein.' See "The Old Bogey":The Hollywood Blacklist in Europe', p. 481.

[40] PRO KV 5/80, serial 1a, B.1.K/WAY source report, report number 999, 10 December 1951.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

[43] The memoir of Stella Rimington, former head of MI5, paints an unflattering portrait of MI5 in the post-war decades, describing a 'haphazard' agency that offered no training to officers about the ideological motivations of those it was actually supposed to be investigating. See *Open Secret: The Autobiography of the Former Director-General of MI5* (London: Arrow, 2002), p. 98.

[44] PRO KV 5/80, serial 11a, B.1.F/GHL note on the MacDonald Discussion Group, 2 December 1952.

[45] Ibid.

[46] PRO KV 5/80, serial 20a, comment on F.4/WAY source report, report number 6954, 5 November 1953.

[47] PRO KV 5/80, serial 25a, note by W. A. Younger, 16 December 1953.

[48] Ibid.

[49] PRO KV 5/80, minute 28, minute by J. C. Robertson, 18 January 1954.

[50] PRO KV 5/80, minute 29, [signature illegible], 21 January 1954.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid.

[53] PRO KV 5/80, serial 8a, note by Courtenay Young, 13 February 1952.

[54] KV 5/80, minute 34, minute by A. R. T. Stuart, 3 May 1955.

[55] PRO KV 2/2994 serial 1z, B.1.F/WAY source report, report number 1734, 12 September 1952. KV 2/2994, serial 10a, B.1.F/WAY source report, report number 4123, 13 February 1953.

[56] PRO KV 2/2994, serial 1a, B.1.F/WAY source report, report number 2456, 21 November 1952.

[57] PRO KV 2/2994, serial 3a, extract from *Theatrical Who's Who*, 8 January 1953. Sections of this serial have been redacted from the released file.

[58] Her involvement with Donald Ogden Stewart Jnr, for example, was monitored by MI5's source. See PRO KV 2/2994, serial 13a, F.4/ARTS source report, report number 14821, 28 March 1955.

[59] In 1956, MI5 recorded the information that Zetterling was 'presently the mistress of Tyrone Power'. See PRO KV 2/2994, serial 20a, F.4/ARTS source report, report number 24,128, 23 November 1956. When, in April of 1958, she married David Hughes, various articles reporting the wedding from *The Evening Standard*, *The Daily Express*, and *The Times* were clipped and inserted into Zetterling's file. Ever diligent, MI5 ran Hughes's name thought their card file to see if he too was on record as being a security concern, but no trace was uncovered

[60] PRO KV 2/2994, serial 20a, F.4/ARTS source report, report number 24,128, 23 November 1956.

[61] PRO KV 2/3106, serial 22a, B.1.F/WAY source report, report number 4138, 13 February 1953.

[62] PRO KV 2/3106, serial 18a, letter from W. M. T. Magan to American Embassy, London, 4 September 1952. While it no doubt factored into their ongoing general assessments, it does not appear that MI5 specifically relayed information about the membership of the MacDonald Discussion Group to the Americans – probably due to the sensitivity of the operation and their source in the group.

[63] PRO KV 2/3106, serial 26a, note for file by E.1 (MI5), 13 May 1954.

[64] PRO KV 2/2994, serial 16a, letter from E.1 to Peck (Aliens Department, Home Office), 19 August 1955.

[65] PRO KV 2/3107, serial 53a, letter from MI5 to Chief Constable Liverpool, 26 November 1957.

[66] A note on this recommendation is at PRO KV 2/3106, serial 32a.