

DAVID LEIGH recounts the 30-year history of the Foreign Office

Death of the department

DETAILS ARE coming to light for the first time of the secret death, after a 30-year secret life, of a worldwide British propaganda network, operating against communism and mostly in the Third World. It was an operation which had failed to change with the times and within the last 18 months was purged largely on the orders of the then Foreign Secretary, Mr Tony Crosland. Among other things, Mr Crosland objected to its links with certain right-wing journalists.

The operation was radically reorganised into a smaller, still secret, Foreign Office department with a brief to support British interests in general. Indeed, it is reported from a number of well-placed Whitehall sources that the new Foreign Secretary, Dr David Owen, is considering making hitherto confidential material openly available.

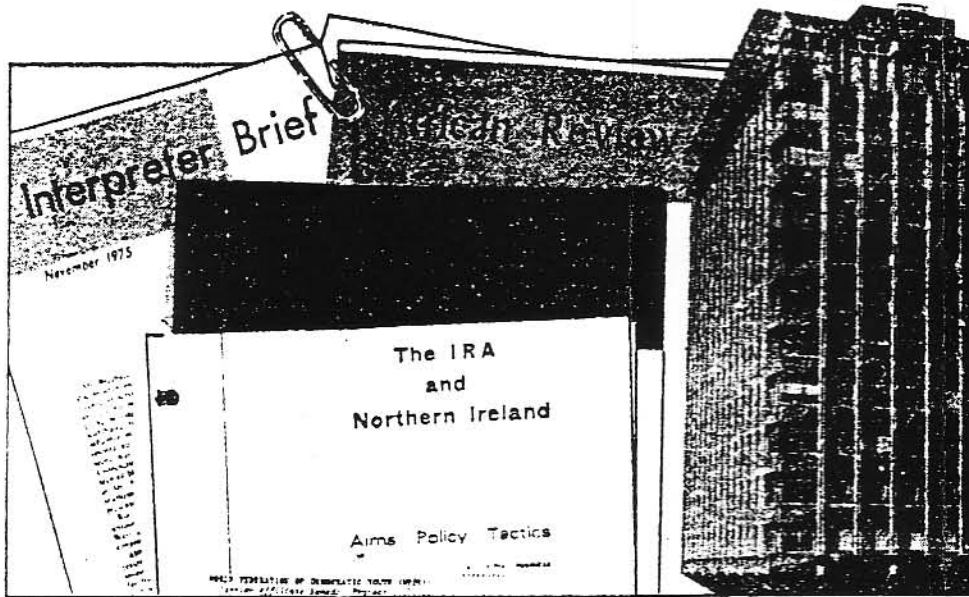
This would be the logical culmination of moves to bring the organisation — the so-called "Information Research Department" of the Foreign Office — under firm political control, and abolish its furtive Cold War attitudes.

IRD, as it was known, also performed a legitimate task of research and information. Indeed it can be argued that a successful propaganda operation must for most of the time provide objective and useful information. Besides its activities abroad therefore, it provided an often valued service to journalists and writers in this country. That is the view of Guardian journalists who have been on its mailing list.

Journalists are accustomed to supping with a long spoon from all kinds of sources, and it is no reflection on any of them that IRD approval of them and they included some of the best known writers on foreign affairs. There is evidence that IRD did its best to disguise its real role in distributing propaganda from some of its clients: the operation, carried out over the entire 30 years since the war, was on the secret vote, and has never been made known to Parliament or public.

Since the last war, Britain has paralleled some of the covert international propaganda activities of the CIA, which have been documented and agonised over so extensively in the US.

As a former senior CIA official, Robert Armory, said rather enviously in an interview 10 years ago, complaining of disclosures that the CIA funded student bodies, and other organisations: "In our free motherland of England... everybody shushes up in the interests of their national security and... what they think is the interest of the free world civilisation."



Christopher Mayhew, then a junior Labour F. Minister, invented IRD, writing a confidential paper to Ernest Bevin, the Foreign Secretary of 1947. He proposed a covert "propaganda counter-offensive" against the Russians by means of a new FO department. Attlee called him down to Chequers to discuss it and until 1950 Mayhew ran IRD with Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick, then deputy under-secretary at the FO and later chairman of ITA.

The Department was secret. Britain was the first country to go over to the counter-offensive, Mayhew recalls, although the CIA and the US information agency were being set up at about the same time. IRD distributed material worldwide through embassies.

"We certainly did absolutely nothing to distort or twist the British media," he says. "It was only black propaganda in the sense that our work was all undercover and the existence of the department was confidential."

The main victims of the secrecy seem to have been foreign newspaper readers — and the British public who were kept in the dark, while non-accountable cold warriors went to work nominally at least, on its behalf.

The Russians knew about it from the very beginning because Guy Burgess, one of the three Communist defectors in the Philby affair, was posted to IRD in 1948. Mayhew wrote a memo sacking him after two months for being "dirty, drunk and idle."

IRD was staffed with many émigrés, from "Iron Curtain" countries, often journalists and writers specially recruited into this airless world. IRD officials themselves were screened from parts of what

went on and ordered not to tell even other FO staff where they worked. Their task was set out in a document former staff recall, speaking of "forces" at home and abroad to be fought. Reference books alluded only to IRD's "special tasks." In last year's diplomatic list the cover still kept up. IRD's job, it says, is merely "the compilation of information reports for HM missions abroad."

Modelled on wartime psychological warfare operations, IRD flourished in the 1950s. The staff of the Soviet section alone rose from 20 to more than 60. Embassies had resident IRD men under cover

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who planted material on local journalists and opinion formers. This was controlled first from offices in Carlton House Terrace, and then, as it expanded, from the 12-storey Riverwalk House, Millbank, in London.

A typical IRD operation in its heyday would have been, for example, to study Eastern block press reports of drunkenness and produce an article rubbing in just how rife alcoholism was under communism. Senior officials concede that past material was heavily "slanted."

The CIA, whose worldwide propaganda operations, radio stations and front news agencies have recently been extensively exposed, would call this

"grey" propaganda. It is basically factual material to which "spin" could be added at will.

The ethical objection which is raised by IRD's critics both inside and outside Whitehall is that the public does not know what it is getting and so cannot make allowances for the "spin." It differs thus from straightforward propaganda for the British point of view which is plainly no bad thing.

IRD also encouraged book production described in Whitehall as "cross fertilisation." Robert Conquest, the scholar and author, who has been frequently critical of the Soviet Union, was one of those who worked for IRD. He was in the FO until 1956

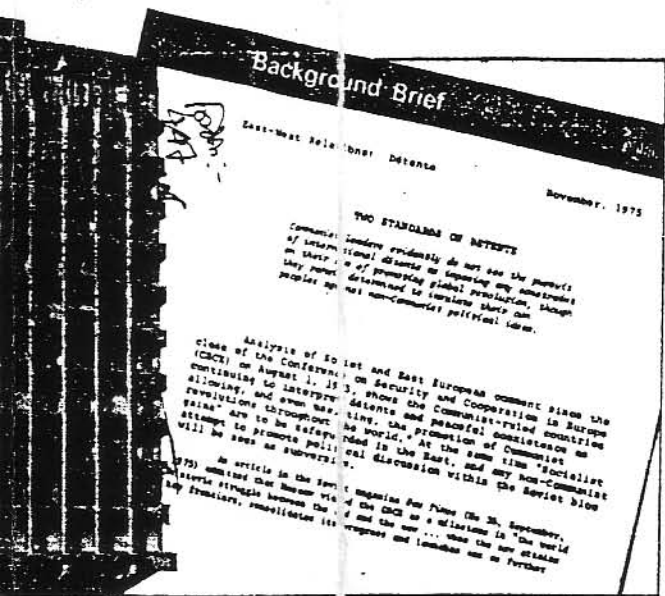
After he left, he says, IRD suggested to him that he could combine some of the data he had gathered from Soviet publications into a book. He sold Bodley Head a ready-made series of eight called "Soviet studies." Bodley Head says it published as a normal commercial arrangement selling 1,500 copies, a third of the total to a US publisher Fred Praeger. Praeger, who had published a number of books previously at the request of the CIA, also says this was a normal commercial arrangement.

David Floyd, Communist affairs correspondent of the Daily Telegraph, also recalls writing a booklet on China at IRD's request. This was commissioned by IRD because they wanted to distribute it to diplomats, they told him.

IRD's main targets were in the Third World — "hitting back at Russian propaganda as hard as we could," as Mayhew puts it. It also set out to "be of use to" British media and opinion formers. As well as supplying material to

Office's covert propoganda operation

nt that never was



FO. There was a natural distaste for an "outsider" department and the staff of IRD were regarded as at least old-fashioned.

Publications included, for example, lists of Communist front organisations such as the forthcoming world youth festival in Havana and booklets on African, Asian and Russian affairs, as well as a cyclostyled Background Briefing at regular intervals.

By 1976 IRD was no longer secure in its covert tasks. Sir Michael Palliser, the new PUS and a "reforming bureaucrat" as one colleague describes him, ordered a hard look to be taken at it. Sir Colin Crowe, former High Commissioner in Canada was brought out of retirement to investigate. It was as a result of his report that Labour Ministers became aware of IRD's approved list of British contacts. They — from their own political standpoint — were alarmed, according to several Government sources, with the political complexion of a handful of them including Mr Brian Crozier, director of the Institute for the Study of Conflict. There were interchanges with the head of IRD, Mr Ray Whitney, currently shortlisted for the Tory seat of High Wycombe. The list was pruned by Tony Crossland. Mr Crozier, asked about this episode, refuses to discuss it with us. "I regard the Guardian as a hostile newspaper," he says.

A second internal inspection of IRD followed. Owen was apprised of the situation when he took office and authorised the disbandment of IRD in May '77.

The Think Tank inspectors have reported FO information departments were being reorganised. In fact 20 or 30 IRD-staff were retired, made redundant or transferred to the research department proper. Almost £1 million was then being spent by the FO on "unattributable" propaganda. The Think Tank was scathing about the value of information work in general but said unattributable material had a role in creating "helpful political attitudes" in the more influential Third World countries.

Government propaganda has not stopped. A new department, Overseas Information Department has been set up inside the FO proper, much smaller and with a much wider brief. Senior Government figures emphasise no domestic propagandising as such goes on since Owen's arrival. It is also reliably reported in Whitehall that Owen is even considering declassifying these background briefs and making them available to press and public over the counter. This would be an extraordinary departure: IRD itself died as it lived for 30 years, a secret kept from the British public.

The Millbank office of the department—and some of its products

the BBC World Service, secret lists were compiled of approved journalists and trade unionists to whom material was offered if not always accepted. More often IRD simply offered quite straightforward research help. Recipients — often experts in their own fields — could and did judge its quality.

By the time IRD was finally purged, one of its list contained a cross section of the General Council of the TUC. The journalists list contained about 100 names.

Those we have traced include two Labour journalist MPs, Roderick MacFarquhar and Colin Jackson. There were three writers connected

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with the Financial Times; five from the Times; two from the Observer; five from the Sunday Times; five from the Telegraph; six from the Economist; one from the Daily Mail; two from the Mirror; one from the Sunday Mirror; and one from the Express.

Guardian journalists on the lists included Hella Pick, Michael Simmons, Ian Wright and Victor Zorza.

Other journalists were informally blacklisted as politically undesirable or had assistance withdrawn if they became politically embarrassing.

British introductions to IRD were made discreetly: one distinguished liberal jour-

nalist recalls how he was taken to lunch at a London club by his retiring predecessor in the newspaper who passed him on to his IRD contact. All journalists were told as little as possible about the Department. Material was sent to their homes under plain cover. Correspondence marked "personal" carries no departmental identification or reference.

They were told documents were "prepared in the FCO primarily for members of the diplomatic service, but we are allowed to give them on a personal basis to a few people outside the service who might find them of interest... they are not statements of official policy and should not be attributed to HMG, nor should the titles themselves be quoted in discussion or in print. The papers should not be shown to anyone else and they should be destroyed when no longer needed."

Eventually IRD's star began to wane. It was cut down in 1964 and again in 1968, former employees say. In 1970 under the then PUS, Sir Denis Greenhill, it was "slashed" according to several government sources. Around this time IRD was told to stop concentrating so heavily on communism and promote other British interests. It set up a counter subversion unit to deal with the IRA. It was also encouraged to moderate its briefing material.

It published a loose leaf manual, The IRA—Aims, Policy, Tactics, delivered among others to Ian Hamilton at the Institute for the Study of Conflict. It included intelligence material and descriptions of IRA front organisations in Ireland, the US and Britain. The aggressive cold war stance, however, was still unpopular with the