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# Anti-Communism and Media Surveillance in Ireland 1948-50

John Horgan

Ireland in the immediate post-war period offers, to the student of Cold War politics and intrigues, some unusual insights into the nature of political surveillance in general and to the surveillance of the press in particular, according to documents recently released by the US State department and made available in the US National Archives in Washington.<sup>1</sup> Politically, the situation was becoming more volatile. Fianna Fáil, which had been in power continuously since 1942 and had won its most recent election in 1944, was coming under increasingly vocal criticism from two key groups of erstwhile supporters: urban workers, who had been chafing under wages stand-still orders for much of the war, and who were disappointed that the end of the conflict had not produced much in the way of material benefits; and republicans, many of whom had been interned during the war, and some of whom felt in any case that a sense of drive and purpose was missing from Fianna Fáil's approach to the national question.

The two war elections of 1943 and 1944 – and particularly that of 1944 – had been marked by an intensification of the red scare tactics utilised by Fianna Fáil against the Labour Party in particular. This tendency was again emphasised, notably by Sean McEntee, then Minister for Local Government, in the by-elections in November 1947 which saw the emergence and vote-getting power of Sean MacBride's new party, Clann na Poblachta. McEntee's speeches, in particular, endeavoured to demonstrate that many of Sean MacBride's supporters and party members had been public or covert affiliates of the Communist Party.

De Valera lost two out of three of the November by-elections and a general election was called for early in 1948. Both McEntee and Sean Lemass beats the anti-Communist drum in this election with great fervour: Lemass, for his part, warned that Ireland was 'on the list for attack in the campaign now being waged to destroy Christian democracy in Europe'. These charges prompted the Labour Party, in desperate self-defence, into equally colourful language: its leader William Norton, at an election rally on 22 January 1948, referred to Communism as a 'pernicious doctrine... detestable to the Irish people, who prized religious liberty and freedom of conscience'<sup>2</sup>.

McEntee, in an exchange of correspondence with Peadar Cowan of Clann na Poblachta, accused a number of people of loyalty to the Communist cause. Many of them were for many years standard-bearers of the Irish Left, such as John de Courcy Ireland, Sean Dunne, Roddy Connolly, James Larkin jr. and Con Lehane. Two of the names on McEntee's shopping list, however, are of particular interest to students of the history of Irish journalism: R.N. Tweedy and Sean Nolan. Possibly unknown to him, members of the diplomatic staff in the United States Legation in the Phoenix Park were casting their net even wider, and reporting to their superiors in Washington the existence of what they plainly believed to be an organised conspiracy by Communists and fellow-travellers to infiltrate the Irish media.

Vinton Chapin of the US Legation told Washington on 30 January 1948 that this view was shared by senior Irish officials, and that the alleged conspiracy had put down roots in some unlikely quarters. Reporting on a conversation with Freddie Boland, secretary of the Department of External Affairs, he quoted Boland as having said that a Communist, 'Moscow-inspired' document which he had read indicated that Communist policy should direct its interests to rural workers in Ireland and to a 'softening of the local press'. Boland's comment was that both policies were now evident to some degree and that, insofar as the press was concerned, 'this did not exclude the Irish Press'.<sup>3</sup>

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1. I am indebted to my DCU colleague, Professor Eunan O'Halpin, whose major study of Irish security policy is to be published shortly by Cambridge University press, for access to some of the documents cited in this article.

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2. *Irish Independent* 23 January 1948.

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3. US National Archives, Department of State, 841D.OOB/1-3048.

Three publications attracted the Legation's particular attention: the *Irish Democrat*, the *Review*, and the *Irish Press*. They were an odd trinity. The *Irish Democrat* was a Communist paper published in London by the Connolly Association, the *Review* was a journal of opinion with links to the Irish Communist Party which will be discussed later, and the *Irish Press* was, of course, totally controlled by the Taoiseach, Eamon de Valera.

The history of the *Irish Press* suggests that left-leaning tendencies in that paper might have been expected. Its first editor, Frank Gallagher, in an early memorandum to sub-editors, warned his staff to 'be on your guard against the habits of British and foreign news agencies to look at the world mainly through imperialist eyes... Propagandist attacks on Russia and other countries should not be served up as news.'<sup>4</sup> The Third Secretary of the US Legation, R.M. Beaudry, reporting to his Washington superiors on 3 February 1948, gave details of a conversation he had had with a Fr. McLaughlin of Boyle, Co., Roscommon, who had entertained both de Valera and Gerry Boland during the election campaign and 'found them both unhappy about the poor way in which the *Irish Press* had handled their speeches.'<sup>5</sup>

Fr McLaughlin was in no doubt as to the cause. 'This results from an infiltration of communistic elements on the staff of the paper. The Foreign News Editor of the *Press* [Brian] O'Neill, was, he stated, born in New Jersey, wrote for the *Daily Worker* in New York, was a foreign correspondent for TASS, and formerly held a Communistic party card.'

Nor did Fr. McLaughlin's enthusiastic, if amateur espionage end there. The drama critic of the *Irish Press*, Tony Mulloy (otherwise spelt Molloy), he told the Americans, was said to be a communist and had visited the Soviet Legation in Stockholm in the summer of 1947 'in the company of Miss O'Brien, a writer for the *Irish Independent*.' Miss O'Brien and Molloy later married: her apparent fall from political grace – both she and 'Mulloy' contributed articles to the *Review* – was in no way mitigated by the fact that she was 'a relative of Lord Inchiquin of Limerick.' In a later despatch to Washington, Molloy was described as a former editor of the Gaelic section of the *Irish Press*, and 'a communist sympathiser or fellow-traveler'.<sup>6</sup> He was also the pseudonymous author of the 'Uncle Mac' column for children in the *Irish Press*:<sup>7</sup> his politics might have alarmed the patriotic readers of that newspaper who recommended his articles to their children. He later again aroused the suspicions of the Americans when it emerged that he was to be the editor of a new Labour Party paper, *The Nation*.

Fr. McLaughlin tied the ends of his conspiracy theory neatly together by pointing out that the Balalaika, a Dublin restaurant owned by Michael FitzPatrick, a Clann na Poblachta deputy for Dublin North West who was a 'working communist', advertised regularly in the pages of the *Review*. Mr. Beaudry, while noting that it was impossible for him to press Fr. McLaughlin too closely on the accuracy of his statements, considered them 'interesting and possibly important.'

O'Neill's links with left-wing movements and even the Communist Party were, if not exactly a matter of public record, not buried too far under the surface either. Contemporaries of his have indicated to the present author the belief, current in Dublin journalistic milieux at the time, that 'O'Neill' was not even his real surname which was thought to be Brennan. There was a widespread belief – possibly erroneous – that he had served a term of imprisonment in Britain during the war for suborning members of the armed forces there. In fact he had come to Ireland during the 1930s, certainly one jump ahead of the British police force. He wrote a book, *The War for the Land* which was published with a foreword by Peadar O'Donnell in 1934.

According to another US despatch,

'Mr de Valera employed him on the *Irish Press* staff without consulting the editors and no one knows what recommendations O'Neill brought with him to receive this preferment. As foreign news editor O'Neill systematically takes advantage of his position to slant

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4. National Library of Ireland, Gallagher papers, 18361 (3) undated.

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5. US National Archives, Department of State, 841D.OOB/2-1048

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6. US National Archives, Department of State, 841D.OOB/9-2349.

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7. Information from Michael O'Riordan, June 1998.

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8. Cardinal Mindzenty was a Hungarian Catholic prelate who had been subjected to house arrest by the Communist authorities: his case was taken up with enthusiasm by many Catholic newspapers throughout Europe.

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9. US National Archives, Department of State, 841D.OOB/9-2349.

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10. Personal information from a private source.

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news. He minimises anti-Soviet statements and uses a series of journalistic devices to misrepresent the news items as originally received. His ingenuity in the Mindzenty case,<sup>8</sup> at least, was not sufficient to disguise his sentiments and the treatment given the case by the *Irish Press* caused a marked drop in its circulation. When this fact was brought to the attention of Mr de Valera with the suggestion that O'Neill be transferred to a less strategic department, Mr. de Valera merely disregarded the incident.<sup>9</sup>

In fact de Valera was worried. He called in the editor of the *Irish Press*, William Sweetman, and told him that the Department of Justice had been expressing concern about his foreign news editor. Sweetman was unapologetic, and asked de Valera bluntly whether he had any doubts about him (i.e. Sweetman) as editor of the newspaper. When de Valera expressed confidence in his editorship, Sweetman assured him that 'O'Neill' was the best foreign sub-editor the paper had, and that he read all 'O'Neill's' material. Sweetman's assurances were enough for de Valera.<sup>10</sup> 'O'Neill' ended his career with the *Irish Press*, but came out of retirement after ten years to write a special report for the paper on the funeral of Frank Ryan.

There were other spies in the camp, as it happened. One of the most interesting of them, it appears from the US National Archives files, was the editor of the *Standard*, Peadar O'Curry. O'Curry was a peppery Ulsterman who ended his career as a sub-editor on *The Irish Times* after the closure of the *Standard*, but in the late 1940s this weekly newspaper was, under his editorship, to the fore in harrying the Labour Party and Clann na Poblachta, on the real or alleged communist sympathies of some of their adherents. McEntee used its tirades against Labour to good effect at election times, digging up anti-Larkin material from its pages in 1944 for use in the 1948 campaign. O'Curry, however, was not content with public criticism, but saw it as his role to identify, for the Irish security services, the danger of communist infiltration in the National Union of Journalists. Under his editorship the paper, which had a circulation of about 80,000, published a series of alleged exposes concerning people in the Labour Party whom it thought were crypto-Communists. Some of the articles were so detailed that it was thought they had been written on the basis of Special Branch files (Milotte, 1984).

Close co-operation between Irish and US security services ensured that a copy of a memorandum written by O'Curry for the Special Branch on 17 November 1948 found its way to the US Legation, which dutifully forwarded it to Washington. The context is interesting: the NUJ had recently sent a deputation to the Minister for Justice in order to foster closer relationships between journalists and the Gardai: O'Curry saw it as his duty to warn the Special Branch of the possible dangers of taking journalists into police confidence.

O'Curry's memorandum argued that it was not possible to assume that journalists in Dublin were 'themselves adherents of the principles of democracy.'<sup>11</sup> He drew a sharp distinction in this regard between some of the Dublin membership and the Derry members of the NUJ, who had originated a motion at the NUJ District Council in Dublin which pledged the Union's total opposition to Communism and to 'all attempts at Communist infiltration of the Union'. The motion was passed, but not unanimously, and O'Curry drew the Special Branch's attention to other factors which he undoubtedly considered more relevant.

'At the same meeting the appointment as delegate of the Union to the T.U.C. was approved and the interpreter of Union policy and leadership chosen was a Mr. McEnerney (sic) of *The Irish Times*, a recent import into journalism, who is a founder of the so-called 'Connolly Association', who when working in the L.M.S. in Belfast formed with Betty Sinclair and one McCullough the triumvirate running the Communist Party in the Six Counties. The Dublin Branch contains quite a few active Communists and has as its delegate to the Dublin Trades Council Mr. Hickey of the *Irish Independent*, who is the Irish correspondent of the Communist *Daily Worker* of London.' Hickey,

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11. US National Archives, Department of State, 841D.OOB/12-148.

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although he fulfilled that role, was in fact non-political: like many Irish journalists of his era, he supplemented the meagre salary paid by Irish employers by freelance writing.<sup>12</sup>

'What guarantee is there', O'Curry asked rhetorically, 'that information, perhaps not necessarily of a confidential and political character, given to journalists in the course of co-operation with the Ministry of justice, such as is asked will not be communicated by persons such as are indicated to organisations which have the declared object of destroying the democratic Government of the Irish Republic and replacing it with a Godless totalitarianism?'

Michael McInerney had in fact been industrial organiser for the Communist Party of Northern Ireland in the early 1940s. After moving to Dublin, he and other members of the Communist Party joined the Labour Party, establishing the Central Branch of that party, which played a notable role within the party until many of its members were expelled some years later (Milotte 1984:195-196.) As his militant political attitudes mellowed, he became a respected member of the journalistic profession in Dublin and, although always sympathetic to left-wing causes, enjoyed the trust of a number of Cabinet ministers. He ended his distinguished career as political correspondent for *The Irish Times*.

O'Neill was the Dublin correspondent for the *Irish Democrat*, the second of the three publications mentioned above. In the late 1940s it was particularly vociferous in its opposition to the Marshall Plan, as an extension of 'America's colonisation of Europe programme'. It was not available for purchase in Ireland, but it urged its readers in England to 'buy an extra copy of the *Irish Democrat* and post it home.'<sup>13</sup> Of more concern to the US Legation was the *Review*, described by the Legation as 'a local paper of limited circulation'

The officials noted:

It appears, [the US officials noted,] that it has been able to enter into an agreement with the *Irish Worker's Weekly* in order to obtain the latter's ration of newsprint which would otherwise not be available to this publication. While the editor's name is not disclosed, he solicits correspondence addressed to No. 11 Sandford (sic) Road, Dublin, which, it will be noted from the case history of J. Nolan, that it is his present given address.

The 'J. Nolan' named is of course Sean Nolan, whose role in the Communist Party of Ireland and its various publications has been well documented by Milotte and others. His main activity was running the Party's bookshop in Pearse Street in Dublin. The *Review*, however, although it may have been edited clandestinely by Nolan, was, according to Fr. McLaughlin, financed by R.N. Tweedy. Tweedy was one of the few middle-class intellectuals who had been recruited to the Communist Party of Ireland during the Popular Front period: with Sean Nolan, he had been involved in the Central Branch of the Labour Party, and was one of those expelled at the time of the purge. His business interests included peat technology, in which he had been involved since the early years of the State: it was also an area in which he was involved in co-operation with the Soviet Union, also a developer of peat technology.

The US Legation was in no doubt about its provenance and the politics of the *Review*.

It professes to portray an Irish way of life based on Catholic tenets which may be rationalised to Communist ideology. Its influence may not be great at the moment nor is it believed that the Communist elements are well organised or substantially fortified by funds. However, there can be little doubt that adherents are working under cover undaunted by the powerful elements which stand in their path, particularly the power of the church, the discipline of the Army, and a police force which scrutinizes all undercover operations.<sup>14</sup>

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12. Information from Michael O'Riordan, June 1998.

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13. US National Archives, Department of State, 841D.OOB/1-3048.

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14. US National Archives, Department of State, 841D.OOB/9-2349.

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The significance of all of this material is of course open to over-estimation, but one aspect of the industrial context relating to the unionisation of journalists in Ireland can be said to give it an added significance. The National Union of Journalists, a British-based union, had gained a foothold in Ireland as early as 1926 (Bundock 1957). By the late 1940s, however, and despite industrial gains by the NUJ, nationalist sentiment was beginning to chafe at the role of British-based unions. These sentiments were endorsed, and may even have been covertly encouraged by Sean Lemass, whose ministerial brief included the trade unions, and who told the Irish Council of the NUJ at its annual meeting in 1949 (when he was out of office and managing director of the Irish press) that it was particularly important that Irish workers should be enrolled in Irish unions. The Guild of Irish Journalists was set up as a rival to the NUJ in March 1949 and was affiliated to the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, and claimed to be 'A National Trade Union, founded and controlled by Irishmen, with a place in its ranks for each and every Irish journalist'. It appealed to all Irish journalists to work 'for the implementation of a progressive Social policy, based on Christian principles and having as its aim a fairer division of profits and a voice in the management of and a share in the ownership of industry' (Guild of Irish Journalists 1952). In reality it represented only a minority of Dublin journalists, notably those employed by the *Evening Mail*. Office-holders in the Guild, however, included O'Curry and Liam Skinner, a devotee and later biographer of Lemass. In addition, one of its vocal early supporters was Billy McMullan, general president of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union in 1949-50, who was a close political associate of Lemass and was appointed by him to the board of CIE. McMullan attended one of the Guild's early meetings at its headquarters in North Frederick Street in Dublin, and assured them: 'If anyone does anything against you we will not hesitate in dealing with them' (Guild of Irish Journalists 1949).

The Guild remained in existence until the 1960s; its membership dwindled until it could no longer afford to pay the annual affiliation fee to the Guild Congress of Trade Unions. It can perhaps also be remembered, in part, as one of the legacies of the Cold War to Irish journalism – a Cold War which is evidenced in particular by the US intelligence files. It is a matter for considerable regret that similar files for the Irish security services for the same period remain unreleased and may even have been destroyed.

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