Special Branch and the Great War

For King and country - Andrew Staniforth reports on how the Great War developed the relationship between policing and intelligence agencies, which still exists today.

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The Centenary of the First World War adds special poignancy to this year's Remembrance Day. It serves as a timely reminder of those who served, fought and died to ensure that our liberties and freedoms were protected from the excesses of violent extremism.

During the Great War police officers joined the 8.7million men who served as part of the British Army. Whether they joined the military as reservists, volunteers or were conscripted, they were required to resign from the police. Having resigned, many police forces re-allocated their constabulary collar numbers almost immediately to new recruits. Many police officers gave their lives for King and country during the Great War but the exact number of fallen officers is not known. However, what is clear is that they put their duty to protect others first, the selfless act so evident in police officers keeping

communities safe today.

At the forefront of the police war effort were the officers of Special Branch, who led intelligence gathering operations to uncover German reconnaissance and espionage on the British mainland.

Covert intelligence

At the beginning of the 20th century the Metropolitan Police Special Branch (MPSB), although a permanent police department since 1883, remained very small with some twenty officers based at Scotland Yard. The covert surveillance activities of Special Branch served to provide the government of the time with a richer picture of immigrant political groups settling and operating in London.

The work of Special Branch in identifying potentially troublesome foreign nationals came to the attention of the Foreign Office who not only had a well-established undercover intelligence service abroad but they also had a keen interest in political agitators in Britain.

Officer in charge

Prior to the outbreak of war, the Directorate of Military Operations (MO) at the War Office had commenced operations of two new departments, MO2 and MO3, which had responsibility for foreign intelligence and counter-espionage.

These new departments were to improve the covert gathering of information and required a field operative to lead their activities at home and abroad. The Foreign Office were swift to approach and recruit their man, not a Minister or military chief but a police officer, Superintendent William Melville of the MPSB.

Superintendent William Melville left the Metropolitan Police having served thirty years in the force. His primary task in his new role was to act as General Controller for the War Office agents abroad, as well as carrying out secret investigations of his own.

German spies

The new covert career of Melville was spent pursuing the threat from German espionage, which had been identified as a potential risk to the security of Britain. Melville was ideally suited for this work having been previously posted to France by Special Branch to monitor the movements at ports of the English Channel where he remained for four years, becoming fluent in French and developing an extensive range of covert investigative techniques.

During his work for the War Office, Melville operated from premises at Victoria Street in Westminster, London. He submitted a range of reports to his senior colleagues but it was gathering intelligence on German spies that presented his greatest challenge.

Local threats

To pursue his investigations Melville spoke to other police superintendents but found convincing them that a threat from German espionage may be present in the communities

in which they protected was received with some scepticism.

Melville's focus upon German espionage served to convince him that German spies were indeed active in England reconnoitring invasion routes. Perhaps unsurprisingly, local constabularies at the time were not focused upon threats to the wider national security of the UK, and many senior police officers and government officials found his reports to be alarmist.

National network

Undeterred, Melville continued his efforts to identify the extent of the suspected German espionage. To increase the range of his coverage he recommended a wider network of intelligence gathering be established.

In his reports he outlined a scheme of surveillance on all suspected foreigners around the country, suggesting the utilisation of the Police, the Postal authorities and the Coast Guard Service.

Melville's reports failed to convince the Home Office and his proposal to establish a surveillance network across the UK was not developed, despite recommending a greater collaborative working arrangement to tackle a national requirement.

Collaborative approach

Diligently pursuing his investigations, and drawing on his years of policing experience, Melville continued to gather intelligence and track German espionage related reporting until at long last, his intelligence reports began to fuel the belief in others that German espionage activity was indeed being conducted in Britain.

When presenting his evidence of German espionage to the Committee of Imperial Defence sub-committee in 1909, Brigadier General Sir James Edmonds acknowledged: "We have no regular system or organisation to detect and report suspicious cases, and are entirely dependent on casual information."

Based upon this evidence, informed by years of intelligence collection by Melville, the sub-committee made recommendations to establish a new Security Service Bureau (SSB). This new department would become the direct predecessor of the Security Service (MI5) and the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS or MI6) which continue their national security operations today.

The creation of MI5 and MI6, working alongside Special Branch, provided a unique intelligence gathering apparatus at the eve of the Great War. Appointed as the first Chief Detective of MI5, Melville supported his former MPSB colleagues in preparation for war.

Increased capacity

In January 1914 the MPSB was led by: one superintendent and one chief inspector, supported by 10 inspectors, 45 sergeants and 46 constables. A total of 113 staff protected the entire UK. Of this number, 34 were employed at ports throughout the country, five

were attached to the Aliens Registry, 12 were locating suspects up and down the country, 10 were protecting royalty and the Cabinet; five were investigating cases of sabotage for the Admiralty and four were searching passengers and their baggage at Victoria Station. When all the other miscellaneous duties had been taken into account there were only 16 officers left to respond to day-to-day incidents. The Special Branch was so overburdened that the Head of Special Branch, Detective Superintendent John Quinn, feared that some of his men might suffer breakdowns.

Initial requests to increase their total annual budget of £19,325 to recruit more staff was declined by the Home Office but by November 1914, given the extent of suspected German espionage activity on the UK mainland, the Special Branch quickly doubled in size.

Defending the realm

During the first days of the Great War senior MPSB officers were transferred to the jurisdiction of the military. As part of this transfer, and acknowledging their expertise, ten French-speaking MPSB officers were seconded to the Intelligence Corps and despatched to France.

The intelligence gathering skills of Special Branch detectives, supporting the operations of MI5 and MI6, served to protect Britain throughout the Great War. It is a relationship between very different emanations of state power that continues to this day.

The unique collaboration between the police and intelligence agencies to tackle those with violent extremist political and religious ideologies remains the cornerstone of our national security apparatus.

As we remember those police officers who served in the Great War we should recognise that the struggle against violent extremism continues, in which direct plots to target the Queen have been recently thwarted. More than ever, there remains a vital role for Special Branch and the wider UK police counter-terrorism network to detect and disrupt the activities of contemporary terrorists.

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