

What History Teaches: The Case of David Lewis

Communism posed the greatest security and intelligence challenge in the twentieth century. One year after September 11, terrorism seems communism's likeliest successor. If this proves true for even the first decade of the twenty-first century, we should mine the past for its lessons. How the West dealt with the communist challenge – and won – may hold lessons for how it should – and should not – face the terrorist threat.

Communism and terrorism differ greatly. By the mid-twentieth century, Communism drew support from powerful, identifiable states – chiefly the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union recruited spies in the West to work against Western interests. Soviet intelligence organizations controlled the spies. Western security and intelligence agencies battled this threat. What helped intelligence organizations target Communism was the fact that Soviet networks could be identified, challenged, and penetrated.

The terrorist threat reaches into Western societies. This places security and intelligence communities in a dilemma: how to fight the adversary without compromising free speech, privacy, and tolerance of diversity. How we strike the balance between security and openness defines the state's attitude towards individuals and civil liberties. Because security and intelligence communities advise government on what the threat really is, and how best to combat it, they are key actors in the debate. These agencies often define the terms of the debate itself.

This paper will explore the activities of the RCMP Security Service with regard to David Lewis, a prominent, non-communist, Canadian politician, who died in 1981. First,

the paper will review David Lewis' relationship with communism. Second, the paper will examine the RCMP Security Service's treatment of Lewis. Third, the paper will offer conclusions on what we might learn from the Lewis case that could guide security and intelligence work on the terrorist threat.

Almost from birth, David Lewis was a fierce opponent of Soviet communism. Early in life, he gained first-hand experience of communist tactics. Lewis was reared in the small Polish-Russian town of Svisloch. In 1919, Poland, supported by Britain, France, and the US, waged war against the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks retaliated, pushed Polish forces almost to Warsaw, and occupied Svisloch.

Lewis' father was an active member of the Jewish Labour Bund, a socialist group. The Bolsheviks arrested Lewis' father and threatened to execute him as a Menshevik. Eventually, they released him. The Bolsheviks' treatment of his father angered Lewis, and led to "a lasting animosity toward all communists."

At 14, Lewis attended a speech by a leading Menshevik. Communists tried to disrupt the meeting by staging fainting spells. On the way home, Lewis and his father expressed "anger and contempt" toward the communists. As a university graduate, Lewis applied for the Rhodes Scholarship. He easily satisfied the Interview Committee that he was not a communist. According to Lewis: "This presented no difficulty; not only was I not a communist, but my father's lessons and my experiences in Svisloch and Montreal had made of me a strong anti-communist." In the 1930s, he lost a bitter battle for Cartier riding in Montreal to Fred Rose, a communist. The 1939 Hitler-Stalin pact, which

communists endorsed, repulsed Lewis. In the early 1940s, Stalin's killing of two members of the Jewish Labor Bund, Erlich, appalled Lewis.

The single public accusation that Lewis behaved like a communist came from inside his own party. For years, the CCF had dreamed of a permanent "home" for the party that would double as an adult education facility. After cobbling together savings, the party bought a house in downtown Ottawa and called it Woodworth House. Soon, the Woodsworth House was in poor financial straits. An internal squabble commenced. One side, led by Frank Underhill advocated selling Woodsworth house because of the costs of upkeep. The other side, led by David Lewis argued that with better management Woodsworth House could be solvent. David moved to unseat the Board of the House, including Underhill. Months later, Underhill accused David of using communist tactics in his fight over the house. But apart from this name-calling incident, Lewis was widely known for his anti-communist views.

Lewis also advocated for civil liberties. He criticized the Canadian government its practice, following on the revelations of Soviet defector Igor Guzenko, of interrogating people without the usual legal protections. He argued the case of Noel Perusse, a public servant denied a promotion, probably on security grounds. The management would not reveal the reason for the denial. A Board of Arbitration was struck. It emerged that, as a university student, Perusse had criticized Chaing Kai Shek and welcomed the victory of Mao Tse Tung in a student newspaper, the Quartier Latin. This was a commonly held CCF view. The Board heard Lewis' arguments and recommended to the Minister of Justice Davie Fulton that Perusse be promoted. He was.

David Lewis had no motive for supporting communism or assisting the Soviet Union. Lewis was a well-known public figure who had no access to classified material. Even had he wished to spy to Moscow, he had no way of doing so.

The RCMP and David Lewis

The RCMP held a file on David Lewis from 1931 to 1984, three years after his death. The RCMP, and later, the RCMP Security Service, suspected that Lewis was a communist and never stopped trying to prove it.

In February 1931, an investigator reported that Lewis had chaired a meeting of the Young People's Labor League, which was suspected of harboring communists. A 1936 report offered that Lewis attended a meeting of the "communist committee" at the headquarters of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation. In light of tensions between the CCF and the Communist Party, the "Communist Committee" probably was a strategy group on how to fight communism, not embrace it.

A 1937 report, included in the file on the Communist Party of Ottawa, noted that Lewis was writing a booklet questioning the appropriations for National Defence. A March 1939 report characterizes Lewis as "an opportunist...aiming to get into the limelight." It notes that Lewis' association with known communists is what triggered the Security Service's interest in him.

In the 1940s, the RCMP intensified its reporting on Lewis. A headquarters memorandum to the Ottawa Division in May 1940 asks that the "present activities of Lewis be made the subject of further discreet investigation in order to determine whether or not he is engaged in any pursuits prejudicial to the welfare of the State."

A politician took an interest in Lewis' activities. A note from the private secretary of the Minister of Justice, Louis St. Laurent, in December 1944 asked the Security Service to get information about Lewis.

Even RCMP Security Service reporting indicated that Lewis opposed communism. In March 1942, the Service reported that at a meeting Lewis, had, "seized every opportunity to flay the communists." A December 1942 report mentions that Lewis stepped down from a position in an organization because of the interference of two individuals the Service believed to be communists. A March 1948 memorandum characterizes Lewis' views as "radical but certainly not communistic, which places him at the center of the CCF." An April 1948 memorandum notes that Lewis "had always expressed himself as strongly anti-communistic."

The Security Service also collected newspaper articles that emphasized Lewis' aversion to communism. In May 1948, the Ottawa Journal quoted Lewis that "the CCF rejects...without qualification, every maneuver of the communists." The Communist Canadian Tribune, also found in the Security Service files, stated in April 1949 that David Lewis had proclaimed that "the main task of CCFers in the unions is to fight the communists in the unions. Yes, just like that—not the bosses, not anti-labor governments, but fight communists." The Security Service learned in April 1949 that Lewis, rejecting provincial views, retained the CCF position in favor of the creation of NATO.

But there was nothing Lewis could say or do to escape the Security Service's suspicion that he was – secretly if not openly – a communist supporter. The more he attacked communism publicly, the more he was suspected of supporting it privately.

In the late 1950s, the Security Service turned up the investigative heat on Lewis. Surveillance teams followed Lewis when he visited Montreal in May 1958. Over six days, the surveillance team reached a startling conclusion: Lewis liked smoked meat. We learn that at 7:45 p.m. on May 21, for instance, Lewis entered Chubby's Smoked Meat store on Decarie Boulevard. On May 28 at 6:43 p.m., the team reported, Lewis repaired to Dunn's delicatessen. Security Service watchers reported on still other encounters between Lewis and delicatessens. Arguably, Lewis' consumption of smoked meat was injurious to his health. But it is harder to argue that his actions threatened Canadian security. The investigator's summed up the results of the surveillance operation with one word: "nil."

The Security Service's unwavering interest in Lewis disturbed some officers. Writing to the Commissioner in June 1958, an officer reported that headquarters had "justified" surveillance on the ground that Lewis had a close association with individuals suspected of being communists. The officer then notes that Lewis is a leading figure of the CCF and states that "it was not at all because of this connection that we undertook" the investigation. The officer then opines: "The results of the investigation have not proven to be particularly worthwhile."

The 1960s changed the world, but not the worldview of the Security Service. Now Lewis' political views on current issues fattened his file. Lewis criticized Canada's nuclear arms policy. Canadian communist leader Tim Buck praised him for his views. This was dutifully recorded in Lewis' file. A 1967 report sees a smoking gun in Lewis' criticism of the Vietnam War. The League for Socialist Action organized a protest day on Vietnam. According to the Security Service report, Lewis had agreed to let "to let his

name be used in regard to the action and this had influenced a lot of people to given support” to the protest. Equally damning, the Canadian Embassy in Havana reported that a Canadian businessman thought Lewis would support his efforts to increase Canadian tourism in Cuba.

The 1960s the Security Services file on David Lewis held contrary indications, just as had reporting from earlier decades. In 1967, Lewis rose to support police officers and their difficult and often unappreciated job. Speaking to an international police conference, Lewis stated that “the difference between a police state and a country such as Canada is that a major part of a policeman’s job in Canada...is to preserve liberty—not limit it.” This eloquent defence of law, order and liberty was dutifully recorded by the Security Service and placed in Lewis’ file.

In 1969, a report notes that Lewis opposed the military junta in Greece. So, the file notes did Flora MacDonald, a future Conservative Minister of Foreign Affairs. A 1969 note indicates that a Soviet officer serving in the United Nations Secretariat –well known as a haven for members of the KGB – had passed a bottle of vodka to a Canadian delegate to a UN event that Lewis attended. Lewis was not the recipient. But, for the record, the Security Service noted that Lewis had been on the Canadian delegation.

In 1978, the Security Service asked the Canadian embassy in Warsaw to monitor Lewis’ activities on a visit to Poland. Lewis asked for the Embassy’s help to look up someone he had known. It is evident that this individual—possibly Fred Rose-- had moved to communist Poland from Canada. The embassy, discomfited by the role assigned to them, noted that Lewis had conducted himself openly.

The RCMP Security Service closed its file on David Lewis on September 26, 1984, three years after Lewis' death. There was little to show for the fifty years of effort. In the end, the Security Service let him off the hook. Its final assessment reads: "The contacts and activities of David Lewis are consistent with the positions he had held. His association with Communist countries and other socialist individuals reflects both his ethnic origin and the ideology that he proclaimed throughout his public career."

Why?

Considering Lewis' background and his life, how do we explain the Security Service's unflagging interest in him? To answer this question, we must take a step back, and consider the cases of two individuals, one Canadian, one American.

Fred Rose

Fred Rose, a leader of Canadian communists from the 1920s to the 1940s, was a charismatic politician who won election to Parliament. In wartime, the Soviet Union allied itself with Western countries, including Canada, to fight Germany. Soviet diplomats in the West used the warm atmosphere to try and recruit agents for the Soviet Union. In Canada, Soviet diplomats approached, and received assistance from Fred Rose. Rose had no access to classified government information. But other Canadian communists did have access. Because of the long term police surveillance of the communist party, members knew how to operate secretly. This pleased the Soviets. The party counted among its number soldiers, scientists and public servants privy to classified information.

For his role in recruiting agents for the Soviets, Fred Rose was convicted of espionage. He spent five and a half years in prison. Rose left prison in 1951, a broken man. The Party and the Soviets shunned him; he was tainted. His friends abandoned him. He tried to return to the electrical business he had left on entering politics, but he business failed. Defeated, Rose returned to his native country, Poland, in 1953. In 1957, the government revoked Rose's citizenship and he was never allowed to return.¹

Samuel Dickstein

The United States had its own version of Fred Rose, though on a minor scale. Samuel Dickstein won election to the US Congress in 1923. He served eleven terms over the next two decades. During the 1930s, he spearheaded efforts to investigate Nazis in the US, as well as communists. In 1937, Dickstein got in touch with a Soviet agent as part of a bargain to get a fraudulent visa for a client. In 1938, Dickstein offered the Soviet ambassador information on an anti-Soviet, Russian fascist group, for a fee of several thousand dollars.

Though suspicious of his motives, Soviet intelligence placed Dickstein on the payroll. He provided the Soviets with information they could have obtained elsewhere, and he made a few speeches, which he would have made anyway, that seemed to favour their interests. Although one of Dickstein's early handlers, Peter Gutzeit, had a vision of spending large sums of money to influence the US Congress, but nothing came of this. The Soviets were disappointed when Dickstein supporting a bolstering of the FBI's budget. By the time the Soviets had concluded that their experiment with Dickstein had

failed, Dickstein has relieved them of US\$12,000, which in 1997 terms amounted to some \$133,000.ⁱ

David Lewis, as far as is known, had no connection to Morris Dickstein. Lewis did have contact with Fred Rose. But in the minds of security and intelligence agencies, the men were connected. All three were East European Jewish immigrants to North America. Rose and Lewis were Eastern European Jewish immigrants to Canada. If Rose or Dickstein could work for the Soviets, then so could Lewis. He fit the profile.

Beyond the analogy to Rose, throughout his life, David Lewis had dealings with individuals who the Security Service considered suspicious. As a youth, he was involved in socialist and labor activities in Montreal. A Rhodes Scholar, he may have rubbed shoulders with members of the British communist party.

In Canada, Lewis had dealings with Fred Rose, a former political competitor and others in the party. Knowing the dangers of communism, Lewis may have hoped to convert some of them away from the cause. In the 1960s, Lewis tried to persuade the Canadian government to let Rose visit Canada, to see his family. In 1978, Lewis may have visited Rose in Poland. What led Lewis to try to assist Rose is unclear. It may have been a humanitarian impulse. How the government dealt with communists became a civil liberties issue that drew Lewis' criticism.

Lewis' visceral hatred of communism and his tireless efforts to keep communists out of the NDP and out of unions did not align with associations or friendship he might have had with individual communists. The Security Service judged that no such association could be innocent. Why, except for a devious purpose, would Lewis have

anything to do with these individuals? The Security Service was not willing to consider, or conclude, that these associations were innocent and had nothing to do with national security.

The Security Service had free reign in pursuing its theories and inquiries. The Service could investigate an individual for years and never inform the Minister. In fact, the Service saw keeping the Minister ignorant as a favor to him: if questioned on a sensitive matter, if he could claim ignorance – honestly. The “don’t ask don’t tell” aspect of investigate lay the groundwork for a corporate culture that could continue to probe a subject long after leads had run dry. The absence of accountability opened the door to endless bureaucratic collection – why not?

Lessons Learned

After five decades of effort and two years after his death, the Security Service concluded that David Lewis was not a Soviet agent.

What were the implications for David Lewis of the surveillance he endured? We do not know if Lewis ever became aware of these actions. But we can safely say that others were aware. What effect could the information collection activities have on Lewis? Would an individual who became aware of Security Service investigation against Lewis have trusted him less? What opportunities or possibilities were extinguished? What would have been the implications of a quiet, behind the scenes comment, that Lewis was suspected of supporting communism? What would be the implications of associating an individual with a terrorist group, or asking questions of a large number of people about this individual?

It is necessary to conduct investigations of individuals who may pose a threat. But it is important to understand the implications of launching an investigation. Investigations, by definition, are not neutral. They intrude on civil liberties. When an intelligence service asks questions about an individual without that individual's consent, it can harm the individual's relations with other people.

In David Lewis' case, the long-term investigation was particularly worrisome. As the leader of a political party represented in Parliament, he played an important role in Canadian democracy. Any indication that he was targeted to serve another political party's interests would represent a threat to democratic institutions. Public figures are not immune from investigation. But the decision to investigate, the amount of time spent on the investigation must be carefully balanced against the possible harm that will be inflicted on democratic institutions.

In addition to the civil liberties concerns raised by the Lewis case, it is possible to derive operational insights.

First, do your homework. In the decades that the Security Service followed David Lewis, they recorded his anti-communist views numerous times. The Security Service ignored these comments, and focused instead on his association with people believed to be communist. Had the Security Service studied David Lewis' past more closely, or spoken to Lewis, they might have reached the conclusion that they were barking up the wrong tree. The Security Service knew how to become suspicious of an individual; it had trouble exonerating them.

Second, prioritize. David Lewis had left wing views, immigrated to Canada from Eastern Europe, and had dealings with communists. But unfamiliar does not equal dangerous. Lewis may have merited limited investigation, not endless inquiry. Time is precious. The time you put into one case robs you of time to investigate another.

Third, test your theories against available evidence. Accept that, sometimes, good instincts are bad indicators. Backgrounds or associations with problematic individuals can mean something or nothing. Backgrounds and associations present facts to be examined. They do not constitute guilt.

Security and intelligence officials face many challenges. They must detect and deter spies and terrorists. They must decide who is friend and who is foe. Bad decisions endanger civil liberties, damage democracy and compromise public safety. Good decisions can avert a second September 11.

ⁱ The Haunted Wood, 141-49.