

Ian Mitchell's Russia-related BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

16 – *Zinoviev Letter* – Bennett

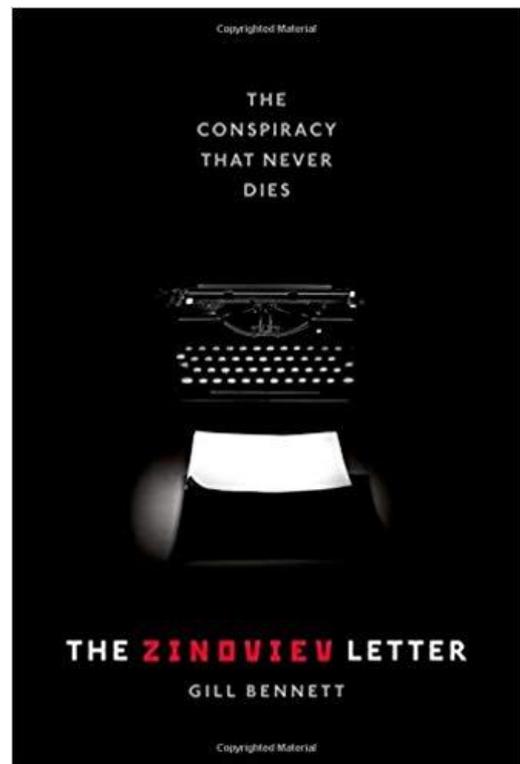
THE ZINOVIEV LETTER – the Conspiracy that Never Dies

Author: Gill Bennett

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(available on Amazon, [click on cover image for link](#))

Keywords: Zinoviev, Communist Party Great Britain, Ramsay MacDonald, conspiracy theory, dirty tricks

Reviewer: Ian Mitchell, 3 September 2018



Reason to read: This is a substantial and authoritative history of one of the most controversial and long-lasting items of “fake news” ever published. In passing, the book also notes how the British secret services evolved from a clubbish, “imperial” group of chummily interconnected teams into the complex of modern, bureaucratic and much larger organisations we think we know today.

Grigori Zinoviev was one of the most influential figures in the Russian Revolution. In October 1924, as head of the Comintern, he *allegedly* wrote a letter to the Communist Party of Great Britain urging it to provoke insurrection in the armed forces and elsewhere with a view to facilitating the violent overthrow of the state. A paragraph later he ordered it to lend public support to the Anglo-Soviet trade agreement that was then being negotiated. This letter was *allegedly* intercepted by a British secret agent in Riga and—very unallegedly—published by the *Daily Mail* four days before the general election which resulted in Britain’s first socialist government, led by Ramsay MacDonald, being thrown out by an electorate influenced by the content of the Letter.

This is about all we know for sure of this curious eruption from the bowels of the shadowy world of espionage and counter-espionage. But from then till now, the Zinoviev Letter has been a synonym for unprincipled manipulation of public opinion by the media for political ends. Earlier forgeries like the Protocols of the Elders of Zion (by the Tsarist Okhrana), or manipulative falsifications of documents like the Ems telegram (by Bismarck), had been state efforts. This was the first time the free press in a democratic country had had such a massive and *direct* impact on politics. It was not to be the last.

Main talking points:

1. The Conclusion gives a very clear and concise summary of the various theories about whether the Letter was forged and, if so, who might have forged it and why. Ms Bennett groups the

possibilities under three headings: the Reds (communists), the Whites (anti-Soviet Russian exiles) and the Blues (right-wing British interests). She concludes that the Blues made use of a White document to discredit the Reds, but they did not initiate the forgery. It was a case of political opportunism rather than conscious conspiracy. But many secrets went to the grave with those involved. We now know we will never know the whole truth.

2. Even if Zinoviev did not send his alleged Letter, he could have done. He sent similar ones to other communist parties, including in the United States. The Soviets seemed to think, as Putin does today, that you can be friends with people whose societies you are trying to undermine.
3. The Russians have more recently evolved an interesting distinction between forgeries and disinformation. Forgeries are intended to be passed off as real documents—a passport, say—whereas disinformation is not concerned with any document in itself so much as with the effect of its *publication*. (p. 221) Even Ramsay MacDonald himself said that the importance of the Zinoviev Letter was not its authenticity or otherwise, but the way it cost the country an early second term of Labour government.

Thought(s) provoked: Given that there is no such thing as entirely honest government, the story of the shady operations of many of the figures in this tale, many of whom misbehaved out of the office, suggests that government by free and flawed human beings is better for the rest of us than mercilessly uncorrupt government by totally honest people with an agenda. There is nothing more dangerous than the aggressive purity such as the Bolsheviks claimed for themselves. By contrast, the man who dealt with the Zinoviev Letter, the Head of the Northern Department of the Foreign Office in 1924 (J.D. Gregory), was a gifted but slippery Catholic who speculated in currencies on the side, in concert with a weird and colourful woman who later became a Hollywood actress. Today he would be drummed out of office with pharisaic righteousness by the angry forces of “transparency”. I doubt that we are better off excluding such interesting and entrepreneurial people from public life. Zero tolerance is self-defeating.

Incidental interest: Ms Bennett quotes an intelligent response to aggressive purity betrayed. “After the rude shock of the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the Soviet invasion of Finland in 1939, the *Daily Herald* proclaimed [on 1 December that year] that ‘the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics is dead. Stalin’s new imperialist Russia takes its place.’” (p. 154)

Amongst the many instances Ms Bennett gives of the Zinoviev Letter’s having been used for nearly a century as the gold standard for press misbehaviour, one concerns Brexit. A respected historian argued in mid-June 2016 that “if David Cameron were forced to resign after losing the EU referendum, he would be the ‘first British Prime Minister since MacDonald’ to be ‘brought down by the British press and, more specifically, to be ousted by the *Daily Mail*.’” (p. 259)

Surprising points: The European Court of Human Rights handed down a judgement in the early 1980s which had the effect of forcing Britain to stop unrestricted phone-tapping by the security services. This resulted, in time, in legislation bringing all the services out of the imperial shadows and putting them at least nominally under the direct control of Ministers. The Security Services Act (1989) dealt with MI5, and the Intelligence Services Act (1994) did the same with MI6 (i.e. SIS) and GCHQ.

Negative issue(s): The style of writing (except in the first eight pages where Ms Bennett vividly describes her visit to Moscow in 1998 looking for evidence from the Russian archives).

Style: Bureaucratic: too many names and organisations and too little narrative. Perhaps that is inevitable in this kind of book. It is easy to sympathise with Douglas Hurd who, when introducing the Security Services Bill to parliament in 1988, said, “I have nothing against the thriller as an art form, but those who unwittingly get their ideas of the Security Service from Sapper, le Carré or Deighton will not bring much understanding to the Bill.” (p. 209) However, the upside of the downside, if I may put it like that, is that Ms Bennett’s judgements seem measured and sound, and her notes are full and interesting.

Publishing quality: A workmanlike artefact. I spotted only one typo (“polarized polarised” on p. 214)

Smile(s): First, one that could apply today: a civil servant wrote shortly after the 1924 election that the new government should not take any action against the USSR, but rather “ignore everything connected with Russia as completely and as long as the Russians will allow us to do so... Russia has been much in the public eye lately, and the probability is that public opinion is ready for some other form of entertainment.” (p. 87)

Secondly, when the puritanical maverick, Hugh Dalton (later President of the Ramblers’ Association), was appointed to the Foreign Office after Labour returned to power in 1929, his “first instructions to his Private Secretary was to make a chart ‘showing who in responsible positions in the Foreign Office were Roman Catholics.’” (p. 146)

Finally, in 1964, Harold Wilson, the new leader of the Labour Party, had become so obsessed with political manipulation of the media that he tried to stop all current affairs programmes being broadcast on the day of the general election. Though the proud master of political detail failed in this, Bennett dryly remarks, “Wilson did succeed in getting *Steptoe and Son* postponed so that it was not screened until after the polls closed.” (p. 168)

Author: Gill Bennett was Chief Historian of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office from 1995 to 2005. She wrote [the internal study of the Zinoviev Letter](#) commissioned by Robin Cook immediately after he became Foreign Secretary in 1997. She has also written an interesting biography of Desmond Morton, the shadowy ex-spook who founded the British economic intelligence unit and who was a near neighbour and close confidante of Winston Churchill in his wilderness years in the 1930s.

Link(s): See Ms Bennett debating with Sir John Scarlett, former head of MI6, about “How Russia Sees the World” at this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1227&v=GmkjDUgeEl0

Overall recommendation level: FAIRLY HIGH

About the reviewer: Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including *Isles of the West* and *The Justice Factory*. He is writing a multi-volume study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called *Russia and the Rule of Law*. He lives in Campbeltown and can be contacted at ianbookrec@gmail.com. For other reviews in this series, see: <https://www.moffatrussianconferences.com/ian-mitchell-s-russia>