

**Human Intelligence in New Zealand History**

*Following publicity for the launch of Secret History: State Surveillance in New Zealand, 1900-1956 (Auckland University Press) in July 2023, the first of a two-volume history of security intelligence in twentieth century New Zealand, authors Richard Hill and Steven Loveridge were frequently asked about the general trajectory of human intelligence (humint) through that century and beyond. One response was to produce this short article for the journal Public Sector, published by the Institute of Public Administration New Zealand (Volume 46, Issue, Spring 2023). It has been reproduced here with the kind permission of the journal's editor, Kathy Catton.*

All polities (forms or systems of government) have covert surveillers who report on people and organisations seen to be, actually or potentially, a threat to security. This article addresses human intelligence ('on the ground') activities in Aotearoa New Zealand, as opposed to signals intelligence (the interception and study of electronic transmissions) in New Zealand history. Before 1840 both Māori tribes and British authorities in Australasia gathered intelligence in pursuing their interests. When the founding colonising party arrived in the Bay of Islands in January 1840, it imported a state structure with a strong policing component. The key to controlling the new colony was the uniformed police patrol, whose job was to surveil both Māori and Pākehā. This overtly gathered knowledge was supplemented by covert surveillance, when necessary, of sectors of the population that presented perceived threats to either the integrity of the state itself or to the values and interests it stood for.

The main counter-subversion targets of such political policing in the early decades of the colony were those Māori who resisted the colonising project. When warfare ensued in the 1840s and 1860s, military intelligence supplemented police surveillance. After indigenous resistance had been overcome, mostly by 1870, targeting pivoted towards Pākehā dissidents. By now, the colony's police forces (who were amalgamated into the New Zealand Police Force in 1886) were expanding their use of detective policing. Increasingly, their surveilling gaze fell upon movements that challenged the status quo – socialists, trade unionists, and social campaigners. Surveillance escalated in times of industrial strife, especially following the resurgence of militant labour in the early 20th century, culminating in the Great Strike of 1913.

Likewise, increasing geopolitical tension intensified the watch for foreign spies, a mission that vastly expanded once war broke out with Germany in 1914. 'Enemy aliens' residing in Aotearoa New Zealand were closely scrutinised or detained, and surveillance over the wider population expanded enormously. Those who opposed the war in cause or conduct – pacifists, anti-conscriptionists, sectarians, socialists, and militant labour (including the Labour Party after its founding in 1916) – became subjects of scrutiny. Such surveillance led to many convictions for sedition and other offences.

The interwar period began with an amplified fear of revolutionaries, the start of what our book *Secret History* designates 'the latent cold war'. Counter-subversion activities were now carried out increasingly by detectives specialising in political surveillance. Their main target was Communism, which had established an international base after the Bolshevik Revolution, and New Zealanders who were considered susceptible to its influence.

By the late-1930s, ominous geopolitical tensions fuelled the watch for foreign spies. When war with Nazi Germany began in 1939, the new conflict was, from an intelligence perspective, in many ways a rerun of the old: a national emergency requiring draconian methods of surveillance and discipline. Institutionally, however, wartime intelligence services were overarched from 1941 by a new, military-based agency, the Security Intelligence Bureau. After a major political fiasco, from 1943 it was increasingly brought under Police control and disbanded at war's end. The detective offices then resumed principal responsibility for human intelligence.

During the war, both the Police and the Bureau continued to surveil Communists despite the Soviet Union joining the Allies in 1941. After the 'cold war proper' began in 1946, surveillance greatly expanded. The work of the political detectives now included vetting would-be and established public servants for 'loyalty', and disrupted careers occasionally came to public attention. Such countersubversive work, mostly aimed at left-of-centre New Zealanders, was supplemented by the search for Soviet agents. In 1949, Australia and New Zealand faced pressure from London and Washington to improve their security arrangements. While Canberra established an MI5-style agency, Wellington elected to group the political detectives into a Police Special Branch.

Despite the Branch's rigorous surveillance of the momentous waterfront dispute in 1951, domestic and external criticism at the lack of a stand-alone ('professional') security agency endured. In 1956 the government decided to strip the Police of its human intelligence responsibilities, and the New Zealand Security Service was established quietly by Order in Council that November. Headed by Brigadier Bill Gilbert, it was fully operational by the time the remnants of the Special Branch closed in August 1957.

The NZSS inherited the Branch's 'secret files' and carried on its priorities and methods. But since it had no power to arrest, it had a different orientation, advising the government on security threats rather than seeking to prosecute. Its expanding filing system recorded the private lives of people believed to be Communists or influenced by Communism; careers and relationships suffered. Targets included those who left the Communist Party after the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Revolt in 1956 but remained involved in 'progressive' causes. In 1969, the NZSS was given a statutory basis and renamed the NZ Security Intelligence Service (NZSIS).

In-depth surveillance of suspected subversives expanded with the rise of the counterculture and the New Left from the late-1960s. Those concerned with such disparate issues as nuclear weapons, the war in Vietnam, sporting ties with apartheid South Africa, the cost of living, and Māori rights had files opened on them. Surveillance itself became a subject of protest, culminating in mass demonstrations against a 1977 statute that legalised and regulated NZSIS 'interception' powers such as phone tapping. Other highprofile moments included the expulsion of Soviet spies, the trial and acquittal of former top official W.B. Sutch for espionage, and terrorist episodes, including the 1985 French bombing of the Rainbow Warrior.

The ending of the cold war from 1989 reorientated the NZSIS away from its long-term emphasis on Soviet Communism. It began to focus more on other concerns, such as economic security, international terrorism, and organised crime. In 1996 these concerns were incorporated into legislation. In 1999 covert 'powers of entry' were established statutorily, authorising a practice that a recent case (*Choudry v Attorney-General*) had highlighted. The

9/11 attacks in 2001 and the ensuing ‘war on terror’ sparked another reorientation for New Zealand’s security agencies.

There has always been tension between New Zealand’s surveillance regime and its self-image of an exceptionally free and fair society. In the 21st century, further oversight and appeal mechanisms and a partial declassification of historical files have been presented as embedding greater accountability and transparency. However, public safeguards remain limited, and the question of how best to balance civil liberties in a parliamentary democracy with the state’s need to monitor potential or actual enemies remains a highly contested one.

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