THE BRUNS

INFORMATIVE,

FEATURES PAGE

IN-DEPTH, INVESTIGATIVE REPORTS

Students, subversives, and spies

Eight decades of RCMP espionage at Canadian universities

By Ned Richardson-Little
The McGill Daily

MONTRÉAL (CUP)—Canadians were shocked in 1997 when it was revealed that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) had been spying on a group of activists planning to protest an upcoming international summit in Vancouver. RCMP officers infiltrated the group, creating detailed security files on law-abiding individuals preparing to dissent peacefully and legally.

But what's even more shocking is that the RCMP has been conducting similar espionage since the First World War.

In his recent book, Spying 101, historian Steve Hewitt documents the 80 years of secret RCMP activities undertaken at universities and colleges across the country. Their espionage efforts aimed to ferret out legitimate subversives, agitators, degenerates and communists—the perceived instigators of subversion. But, in practice, the RCMP Security Service, which dates back to 1917, collected information on anyone even vaguely connected with left-wing political movements, human rights groups and Québec separatists, to name only a few—essentially, anyone who dared to challenge the status quo.

The counter-subversion branch of the RCMP maintained active files on 48,000 people and 6000 organisations in 1967. The 1981 McDonald Commission, which investigated the Security Service's activities, referred to over 800,000 files on individual Canadians. Former Québec Premier and CBC broadcaster René Lévesque had a file in his youth, as did historian Pierre Berton. Erstwhile Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Bora Laskin had a file from when he taught law at the University of Toronto.

Though few knew it as they protested conscription during the Second World War, marched against Vietnam or fought for civil rights, the RCMP was watching.

UBC AND MCGILL—PINKO HAVENS?

In the Security Service's early days, universities were hardly a prime focus. According to the RCMP, foreigners and the poor—not the affluent—were the carriers of communism. But, the logic went, students were still capable of being corrupted. Communism never really took hold in the halls of higher learning, but nevertheless, the authorities saw universities' hallowed halls as a potential powderkeg.

In 1923, a source from the Socialist Party of Canada told the Security Service that "the student body of the UBC [University of British Columbia] is the nucleus of the coming revolution." One professor estimated that a quarter of UBC students were "Red." Such questionable reports added grist to the RCMP's mill, sparking further investigations on campuses nationwide.

At McGill, the Labour Research Club was thoroughly investigated during the 1920s. Inquiries were made regarding members like Eugene Forsey and David Lewis, who went on to become a Senator and a leader of the federal NDP, respectively. Though McGill was suspected of having communist ties, there was never a major crackdown on campus. The RCMP Commissioner concluded that "the Communists' purpose in the affair is propaganda and nothing else, and they have visions of getting hold of groups of students, each of whom belongs to some club or society, and in this way spreading their doctrines secretly."

Much later, during the 1960s, certain campuses received much more RCMP attention than their less 'subversive' counterparts. UBC was considered the most radical of campuses and, consequently, had the most surveillance. In 1964, the RCMP had files on 64 faculty members and had 'references' to another 23. But of these individuals, only four were members of the Communist Party.

SOVIETS IN OUR BACKYARD?

In 1945, the Igor Gouzenko case suddenly made the RCMP look more closely at higher education. Gouzenko, a Soviet cipher clerk who defected to Canada, revealed the existence of a sweeping North American Communist spy ring. His exposé showed that civil servants, scientists and members of the Canadian Communist Party had been working for the Soviet Union. Canada's official—not to mention public—perception of domestic communism was radically altered.

"The Gouzenko case had a big influence on universities," says Hewitt. "What shocked the government was that there were academics, civil servants, the elite, acting as a fifth column in society. It changed the perception of subversion. Members of the university community—and several of those alleged to be spies were graduates of McGill University—now shared a corner with workers and ethnic minorities" as propagators of ommunism, Hewitt attests.

To the public, universities were now definitively seen as potential breeding grounds for communism. Watson Kirkconnell, the president of Acadia University, was equally fearful of a Red student uprising and stated that "it is clear that there are militant Communist 'nuclei' at McGill, Toronto, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Edmonton and Vancouver." After the revelation that many McGill graduates were linked to the Soviet espionage ring Gouzenko warned of, the Québec Chronicle-Telegraph declared, "You send your boy to McGill a Canadian democrat, and he graduates an international Communist."

Despite the hype, Security Service estimates for the number of Communists on Canadian campuses were low. At McGill, there were 70 "left-wing sympathisers" and 30 with "communist ideologies" out of a population of 7,000, amounting to less than 1 per cent. The University of Toronto had a slightly higher subversive population, with 50 Communists out of a population of 5,000. But alarmist visions of a red flag rising over Ottawa were not quashed by these low numbers. In conversations with RCMP officers of the era, Hewitt found that "they would always point to the Russian revolution, in which a small committed group of Bolsheviks were able to take over."

It was not only the openly Communist activities on campuses that worried the RCMP—they were also concerned with the insidious influence these activities would have on other sectors of civil society. "The police did not focus on open communist activity, but instead interpreted the questioning of societal norms as a sign of the hidden influence of communism," says Hewitt. This was similar to the attitude of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, who believed that communism was linked the greater social 'problems' of drug addiction, sexual weakness, and degeneracy.

THE 1960S AND BEYOND

In the 1960s, things began to change on campuses—as they did within the RCMP. No longer were campuses simply "Red" or "white," but there were new brands of subversion to frighten the Mounties. Trotskyists, Maoists, Red Power, Black Power, Québec separatists and the New Left presented the Security Service with all kinds of new threats to be investigated. During this period, a greater distinction was made between real protest movements and more subversive ones, but many legitimate groups were still targeted.

The 1970s marked a general decline in activism and perceived subversion, and hence an increased level of critical thinking in the observations of the Security Service. "Demonstrating the growing impact of a higher level of education among the Mounted Police and the growing sophistication of the Security Service, individual policemen went beyond simply reporting the trend, instead trying to explain it," says Hewitt. "In fact, they seemed fascinated by the conundrum of youth, among whom radicalism had appeared to arrive so suddenly and who were now returning to an apparently passive form."

By the early 1980s, universities had ceased to be a major concern for the RCMP. Backlash from the public was too great to risk exposure, and any perceived threats were disappearing. "In a climate of heightened media and political scrutiny, the only safe targets were groups or activities that had been targeted for most of the Cold War period," Hewitt notes.

In 1984, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) was created as a body to handle intelligence work independent of the RCMP. The new organisation had a clear mandate and an outside review; soon after its creation, the counter-subversion branch was phased out. 54,000 of 57,000 files on individuals were destroyed, though about 100 were still monitored closely. The only groups still under observation were those that were openly communist or Trotskyist.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

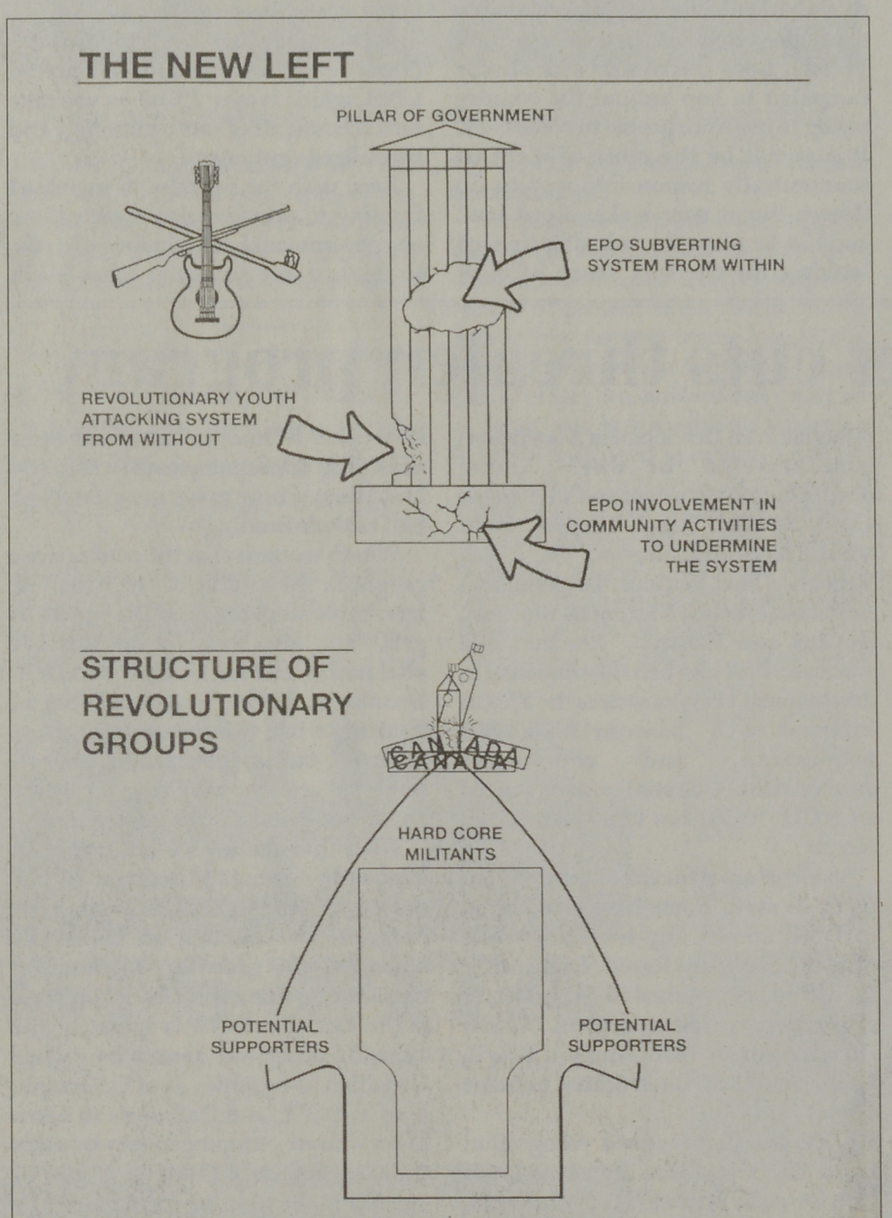
Throughout the RCMP's targeting of university campuses, most of their information came from students, faculty and administrators. There were many instances of illegal bugging and wiretaps in RCMP history, but with reference to campus scoops in particular, the authorities' information tended to come from other sources.

"The use of electronic surveillance was quite rare," says Hewitt. "It was mostly having informants in the faculty and staff."

The student press was also an unconscious accomplice in gathering information on students and clubs. Mounties combed through student newspapers in order to find evidence of subversion. A reference to the president of the Student Labour Club being a "leftist" in The McGill Daily led the RCMP to declare the club "communist infiltrated." Later, when the Labour Progressive Party Club of McGill was suspended, the names of those who wrote letters of protest to The Daily were forwarded to RCMP headquarters.

"I would bet that the Mounties read the student newspapers more than the students," says Hewitt.

But the press had the power to embarrass the RCMP as well. In April 1961, Montréal's La Presse newspaper ran an article about how the RCMP had asked a Université de Laval student for information on two anti-nuclear protesters. The story made its way to Parliament and became cause for the Oppostion to attack the government. "Since the end of the of the First World War, [RCMP] members had performed security investigations in almost complete secrecy. The incident at the Université de Laval changed that," says Hewitt.



Slides from a September 1971 RCMP presentation on security threats to Canada given to Pierre Trudeau and senior cabinet ministers and bureaucrats.

Cartoon mocking the RCMP from the Carleton University student newspaper, 25 January 1963.

Beating down attacks from the Opposition, Justice Minister Davie Fulton—the administrative head of the RCMP force—publicly defended his men. But, as Hewitt attests, "privately, it was a different story...RCMP headquarters dispatched a letter to its divisions instructing them to suspend 'all investigations connected with Communist penetration of universities and colleges...pending an analysis of our requirements.'"

"The real checks on the RCMP were public opinion and the media," says Hewitt.

SO WHAT DID THEY FIND?

"I didn't come across any evidence of activities encouraging violence," says Hewitt. The Security Service found few real subversives, but that did not stop them from documenting almost everyone they came across in their investigations. "There was a perception that the more paperwork you produce, the higher the chance of promotion," says Hewitt. "They were good at collecting information, but they weren't good at analysing it."

The excessive documentation and spying on universities was also a result of having too many resources for an almost non-existent threat. "There were campus organisations that had no apparent ties to the left, communism or communists, but were investigated anyway because of rumours, innuendo or police stupidity, or because of make-work efforts," says Hewitt. "Having a security intelligence service necessitates it having something to do, if for no other reason than to justify its existence, including its assigned resources."

AND THE DANGERS TODAY?

While Canadian intelligence agencies were not involved with universities for most of the 1980s and 1990s, this could be changing. Investigations into protest movements such as those in 1997 are now becoming public. And Middle Eastern and Muslim students, the scrutiny and harassment of whom dates back to before September 11, 2001, have come under even heavier suspicion since.

"The Canadian military's National Counter-Intelligence Unit investigated the purchase in 1998 of a building in Moncton by Muslim students at the University of New Brunswick who were seeking to convert it into a mosque," says Hewitt. "In another example, an international student at a Canadian university who attended a dinner in 2000 with a diplomat from his native country—a country on the United States' list of nations that support terrorism—had a visit the next day from two members of CSIS."

Hewitt sees parallels emerging between the RCMP's vague and damaging definitions of subversion over the past 80 years and modern usage of terms relating to 'terrorism.'

"The application of the label 'terrorist,' however, involves a little recognised shade of grey. The attacks of September 11, 2001 were terrorism incarnate. But is a group that uses violence to combat a repressive regime, for example, really a terrorist organisation? Should dictatorships' labelling of their opponents as 'terrorists' be accepted?...Is it accurate to label those who vandalise property as terrorists, as the United Kingdom has done?" asks Hewitt.

"Finally, is it ever in the interest of an intelligence agency to downplay a potential threat? These questions and more need to be asked, but after September 11, the rush to pass legislation, and the push to follow the lead of the United States, they most likely will not be," Hewitt says. Our 1960s campus forebearers were unaware that they were being surveyed by the RCMP as they carried out their daily activities as students. We, too, may have someone looking over our shoulders as we speak.

For more documents, as well as information on getting security files from the past, visit www.spying101.com. All images from Steve Hewitt's book Spying 101: the RCMP's Secret Activities at Canadian Universities, 1917-1997.