

Britain's Rumour Factory

Origins of the Gas Chamber Story

*An essay published in tribute to Prof. Robert Faurisson on his 88th birthday
25th January 2017*

For more than thirty years, historians have been aware of once-secret memoranda by senior British intelligence official Victor Cavendish-Bentinck in which he casts doubt on the alleged use of homicidal gas chambers by National Socialist Germany.¹ Writing to Whitehall colleagues at the end of August 1943, Cavendish-Bentinck used dismissive language which today in most European countries would undoubtedly see him prosecuted for "Holocaust denial".

During the trial of British historian David Irving's libel action against Deborah Lipstadt in 2000 (now dramatised in the Hollywood film *Denial*) some of Cavendish-Bentinck's remarks were raised by Irving as justification of his claim that the gas chamber story originated as a propaganda lie. In his judgment against Irving, Mr Justice Gray accepted the counter-arguments of Lipstadt's defence team. Their interpretation has since appeared in a book by Prof. Sir Richard Evans, who was among Lipstadt's defence witnesses.

Seventeen years on from the Irving-Lipstadt trial, it is now possible to access a broader range of British documents, including intelligence material. In this essay I shall attempt to clarify what these documents tell us about the role of British propaganda and intelligence in relation to the initial allegations of homicidal gassing by National Socialist Germany.

The conclusions can be briefly summarised:

- Britain's Political Warfare Executive and its predecessor first deployed stories of homicidal gassing as part of propaganda efforts in two areas unconnected to treatment of Jews. Their objective was to spread dissension and demoralisation among German soldiers and civilians, and among Germany's allies.

¹ Walter Laqueur, 'Hitler's Holocaust', *Encounter*, July 1980, pp 6-25; this article was a preview of the same author's book *The Terrible Secret* (Boston: Little Brown, 1981)

- Partly because they knew of these earlier propagandist initiatives,² Victor Cavendish-Bentinck and his British intelligence colleague Roger Allen disbelieved later stories that homicidal gas chambers had been used to murder Poles and Jews. They succeeded in having these allegations removed from the draft of a joint *Anglo-American Declaration on German Crimes in Poland*, published on 30th August 1943.

Part I: The first Revisionists?

In August 1943 Poland's government-in-exile lobbied the British and American governments to issue a public statement condemning "German terror in Poland". Moray McLaren – head of the Polish section of Britain's main propaganda body the Political Warfare Executive (PWE) – advised the Foreign Office "in confidence that, from his contacts with the Poles, he has recently gained the impression that they are becoming seriously worried lest the Germans might shortly succeed in persuading Polish quislings to come forward and even form some kind of puppet government. The present Polish request may possibly have some connexion with such fears."³

Moreover Britain's own Special Operations Executive (SOE) responsible for organising and supplying Polish underground fighters, reported that German anti-partisan operations were increasingly successful in "affecting their work, in that the cells of the underground resistance movement in the affected areas are to a great extent liquidated, and materials delivered are liable to be discovered. SOE would accordingly welcome any form of deterrent that could be devised."

² In a footnote to his *Encounter* article (p 15), Laqueur writes that in an October 1979 letter to him, Cavendish-Bentinck "wrote that his pre-War experience of Germany had been limited, and that he therefore disbelieved the atrocity stories in 1942-43. He added that when he visited Auschwitz in late 1945 and reported to the Foreign Office that millions of people had been killed there, it was *still* not believed in the Foreign Office." This is Laqueur's paraphrase: neither in his 1980 article nor his 1981 book does he quote the precise words of Cavendish-Bentinck's letter, nor does he give any reference for Cavendish-Bentinck's claimed 1945 report to the FO from Auschwitz. In 1979-80 all SOE and PWE papers would of course have been closed to researchers, and Cavendish-Bentinck would still have felt bound by the Official Secrets Act, so it would not be surprising for him to have given Laqueur a false rationalisation for his earlier scepticism.

³ Foreign Office minute by Denis Allen, 11th August 1943, FO 371/34551

Denis Allen of the Foreign Office's Central Department (not to be confused with the unrelated Roger Allen who also figures in this story) suggested that a statement should be issued with "some indication that the actions being carried out by the German authorities in Poland will in some measure be held against Germany as a whole". With the British Parliament in its summer recess and Prime Minister Winston Churchill on his way to Quebec for a secret summit with U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt, the most logical opportunity would be for a joint Anglo-American statement (issued to the press rather than to Parliament).

Allen's department had prepared a draft statement which was discussed with the Poles. This condemned the "brutality" of German anti-partisan operations involving mass deportations in the Lublin area of southeastern Poland. The draft statement (which made no reference to Jews and seemed to relate to Polish civilians) alleged:

"Some children are killed on the spot, others are separated from their parents and either sent to Germany to be brought up as Germans or sold to German settlers or despatched with the women and old men to concentration camps, where they are now being systematically put to death in gas chambers.

"His Majesty's Government re-affirm their resolve to punish the instigators and actual perpetrators of these crimes. They further declare that, so long as such atrocities continue to be committed by the representatives and in the name of Germany, they must be taken into account against the time of the final settlement with Germany. Meanwhile the war against Germany will be prosecuted with the utmost vigour until the barbarous Hitlerite tyranny has been finally overthrown."

By 27th August this draft had been agreed with the Americans and was planned for release three days later: a copy was handed to the Soviets. However at this eleventh hour the intelligence side of Whitehall stepped in.

The Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) had evolved shortly before the war and stood between the political and military "consumers" of intelligence, and the organisations responsible for obtaining it, including MI6, MI5 and GC&CS (known today as GCHQ). One former JIC chairman describes its role as the "final arbiter of intelligence".⁴ In a phrase which might equally well apply today to historians, its wartime chairman and secretary wrote that the JIC had

⁴ Sir Percy Cradock, *Know Your Enemy: How the Joint Intelligence Committee Saw the World* (London: John Murray, 2002), p 261

an important task in ensuring that information and sources were assessed with critical impartiality:

“...[I]n the Political Departments, e.g. the Foreign Office and Colonial Office, the officials who receive, collate and assess information are also responsible for formulating policy. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but the system does possess a serious weakness. One who is concerned in devising and recommending policy, and in assisting in its execution is likely, however objective he may try to be, to interpret the intelligence he receives in the light of the policy he is pursuing. To correct this possible weakness, it is clearly desirable that some quite objective check be placed on all intelligence received. ...We believe that no Department, however experienced and well staffed, has anything to lose by bringing the intelligence directly available to it to the anvil of discussion and appreciation among other workers in the same field.”⁵

During the war years the JIC was headed by Victor Cavendish-Bentinck,⁶ who was also in charge of the Services Liaison Department at the Foreign Office, where his right-hand man was Roger Allen, a pre-war barrister.⁷ (Since its creation in July 1942, Roger Allen had also served as Joint Secretary to the War Cabinet’s Committee on the Treatment of War Criminals.⁸) Rather belatedly on 27th August, with the draft statement almost ready for release, Roger Allen raised the alarm, pointing out that the statement seemed to be mainly based on an “aide-mémoire” supplied by the Polish government-in-exile. While he accepted that with regard to deportations of Polish civilians “the general picture painted is pretty true to life”, he warned Cavendish-Bentinck:

“On the other hand, it is of course extremely difficult, if not impossible, for us to check up on specific instances or matters of detail. For this reason I feel a little unhappy about the statement, to be issued on the authority of His Majesty’s Government, that Poles ‘are now being systematically put to death in gas chambers’.”

⁵ Victor Cavendish-Bentinck and Denis Capel-Dunn, *The Intelligence Machine: Report to the Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee*, 10th January 1945, CAB 163/6

⁶ His most senior military intelligence colleague Kenneth Strong later wrote of Cavendish-Bentinck: “He had the scepticism that any good Intelligence officer needs, and a mental alertness which usually put him that vital step ahead of the other members of his committee.” Maj. Gen. Sir Kenneth Strong, *Men of Intelligence* (London: Cassell, 1970), p 118.

⁷ Roger Allen should not be confused with his namesake Denis Allen, mentioned above.

⁸ FO 1093/337

The “gas chambers” reference seemed to be based on two references in the Polish aide-mémoire’s appendix, both supposedly drawn from telegrams sent from Poland on 17th July 1943.

The first telegram stated, in relation to deportees sent to the Majdanek camp:
“Commander-in-Chief armed forces Lublin district informed me that he had evidence that some of these people are being murdered in gas cells there.”

By “commander-in-chief” this telegram presumably meant the district commander of the Polish underground army. The second telegram stated:

“It has been ascertained that on July 2nd and 5th 2 transports made of women, children, and old men, consisting of 30 wagons each, have been liquidated in gas cells.”

Roger Allen pointed out to Cavendish-Bentinck:

“It will be observed that the first of these reports gives no indication of the date of the occurrence, or the number of people concerned; the second is silent as to the place and the source.

“It is true that there have been references to the use of gas chambers in other reports; but these references have usually, if not always, been equally vague, and since they have concerned the extermination of Jews, have usually emanated from Jewish sources.

“Personally, I have never really understood the advantage of the gas chamber over the simpler machine gun, or the equally simple starvation method. These stories may or may not be true, but in any event I submit we are putting out a statement on evidence which is far from conclusive, and which we have no means of assessing. However, you may not consider this of sufficient importance to warrant any action.”⁹

Cavendish-Bentinck wasted no time in passing this analysis on later that day to the Foreign Office top brass, adding his own sceptical note:

“In my opinion it is incorrect to describe Polish information regarding German atrocities as ‘trustworthy’. The Poles, and to a far greater extent the Jews, tend to exaggerate German atrocities in order to stoke us up. They seem to have succeeded.

“Mr Allen and myself have both followed German atrocities quite closely. I do not believe that there is any evidence which would be accepted in a Law Court that Polish children have been killed on the spot by Germans when their parents were being deported to work in

⁹ Roger Allen to Victor Cavendish-Bentinck, 27th August 1943, FO 371/34551

Germany, nor that Polish children have been sold to German settlers. As regards putting Poles to death in gas chambers, I do not believe that there is any evidence that this has been done. There have been many stories to this effect, and we have played them up in PWE rumours without believing that they had any foundation. At any rate there is far less evidence than exists for the mass murder of Polish officers by the Russians at Katyn. On the other hand we do know that the Germans are out to destroy Jews of any age unless they are fit for manual labour.

“I think that we weaken our case against the Germans by publicly giving credence to atrocity stories for which we have no evidence. These mass executions in gas chambers remind me of the stories of employment of human corpses during the last war for the manufacture of fat, which was a grotesque lie and led to the true stories of German atrocities being brushed aside as being mere propaganda.

“I am very sad to see that we must needs ape the Russians and talk about ‘Hitlerite’ instead of ‘German’.”

Cavendish-Bentinck added a handwritten note to William Strang, who as an Assistant Under-Secretary was joint-third in the Foreign Office hierarchy:

“I daresay that my minute is too late to be of use but I feel certain that we are making a mistake in publicly giving credence to this gas chambers story.”¹⁰

In fact he was not too late: Cavendish-Bentinck and Allen became in effect the first successful Holocaust revisionists. Central Department’s first response was: “it seems too late to make substantial changes. But we could telegraph to Washington and Moscow.”

At 9.05 p.m. that evening a “Most Immediate” telegram was despatched (marked “of particular secrecy and should be retained by the authorised recipient and not passed on”):

“On further reflection we are not convinced that evidence regarding use of gas chambers is substantial enough to justify inclusion in a public declaration ...and would prefer if United States Government agree, that sentence in question should end at ‘concentration camps’.

“Please telegraph United States Government’s views urgently.”¹¹

¹⁰ Victor Cavendish-Bentinck to William Strang, 27th August 1943, FO 371/34551

¹¹ Foreign Office to Washington, Telegram No. 5741, 27th August 1943, FO 371/34551

Similar telegrams were sent to the Prime Ministers of the Dominions (Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa) retracting the earlier reference to “gas chambers”.

The Americans agreed to the changes. Secretary of State Cordell Hull duly notified his Ambassador in Moscow:

“At the suggestion of the British Government which says there is insufficient evidence to justify the statement regarding execution in gas chambers, it has been agreed to eliminate the last phrase.”¹²

The words “where they are now being systematically put to death in gas chambers” were removed from the statement before it was published simultaneously in London and Washington.¹³

David Irving’s critics have sought to interpret this episode in their own way. Prof. Sir Richard Evans writes in his account of the Irving-Lipstadt libel trial:

“There was no evidence here or anywhere else, indeed, that the British Political Warfare Executive had invented the story of the gas chambers: they had on the contrary received a report from people with contacts in Central Europe about them. Nor was there any evidence that the Foreign Office considered reports of gassings to be a lie; they were simply unsure about them. Moreover, their real doubts related to claims that *Poles* were being gassed. Even Cavendish-Bentinck agreed that the Germans were ‘out to destroy the Jews of any age unless they are fit for manual labour.’”¹⁴

Even when Prof. Evans wrote this fifteen years ago, it was clear that Cavendish-Bentinck had been sceptical about the existence of homicidal gas chambers, rather than (as Prof. Evans suggests) merely doubting that they had been used to gas Poles in addition to Jews. As for the role of PWE, the Cavendish-Bentinck minute suggests that they had (at least at some stage) exaggerated (if not actually invented) gas chamber stories. For confirmation of this, we must turn to the PWE’s own files from earlier in the war.

¹² Cordell Hull (Secretary of State) to William Harrison Standley (U.S. Ambassador, Moscow), 30th August 1943, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1943, General, Vol. 1* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963), pp 416-417

¹³ ‘German Crimes in Poland: A British Warning’, *The Times*, 30th August 1943, p 4

¹⁴ Richard Evans, *Lying About Hitler* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), p 131

Part II: Whispers of Gas

In his judgment against David Irving in 2002, Mr Justice Gray ignored or misinterpreted Cavendish-Bentinck's words. Gray wrote:

“As to whether the British disbelieved the [gas chambers] story, the only evidence to which Irving was able to point was the note made by Cavendish-Bentinck that there was no evidence to support the claim. That appears to me to be far cry from disbelieving the story.”¹⁵

As shown above, Cavendish-Bentinck had gone much further than pointing out the absence of evidence. He had compared these latest “atrocities stories” to a “grotesque lie” perpetrated against Germany during the First World War, and had suggested to a senior colleague that Britain should not be “publicly giving credence to this gas chambers story”. How on earth could Mr Justice Gray interpret this as meaning anything else but that Cavendish-Bentinck (at any rate in August 1943) disbelieved the story!

Mr Justice Gray's judgment went on:

“As to whether British Intelligence made propaganda use of the story, the evidence produced by Irving extended no further than second-hand accounts of BBC broadcasts about the gassing. There was no indication that British intelligence played any part in these broadcasts. In my judgment the evidence does not support the claim made by Irving.”

In fairness to the judge, it is only now becoming possible to trace the detailed history of British propaganda and homicidal gassing stories. Part of the problem is that in the early years of the Second World War, Britain's propaganda machinery was a tangle of bureaucratic and factional infighting. A year before the outbreak of war, an official Department of Propaganda in Enemy Countries was set up at Electra House, the London headquarters of the Cable & Wireless telegraph company. Around the same time MI6 created Section D (based at St Ermin's Hotel near St James's Park) to study and prepare methods of unconventional warfare, including propaganda.¹⁶

In July 1940 Section D became part of the new Special Operations Executive, which for a while took over Electra House's operations as part of its own propaganda section known as SO1, based after November 1940 at Woburn

¹⁵ Irving v. Penguin Books Limited, Deborah E. Lipstadt [2000] EWHC QB 115 (11th April, 2000)

¹⁶ M.R.D. Foot, *SOE in France* (Abingdon: Frank Cass, 2004), p 4

Abbey, a country house in Bedfordshire. Continuing internal disputes led to the new Political Warfare Executive (PWE) being created in August 1941, under Foreign Office control. While PWE handled enemy countries, propaganda at home and in Allied countries was supposedly the domain of the Ministry of Information.¹⁷

The documentary record showing British propagandists' promotion of homicidal gassing stories runs from December 1940 (under SO1) to March 1942 (under PWE). In this period the gassing stories did not relate to Jews or Poles, but Cavendish-Bentinck would have suspected that the Jewish and Polish lobbies had picked up the story and put their own spin on it, in a case of what would later be termed "blowback", defined as follows by intelligence historian Mark Lowenthal:

"The main controversy raised by propaganda activities is that of blowback. The CIA is precluded from undertaking any intelligence activities within the United States. However, a story could be planted in a media outlet overseas that will also be reported in the United States. That is blowback. This risk is probably higher today with global twenty-four-hour news agencies and the World Wide Web than it was during the early days of the cold war. Thus, inadvertently, a CIA-planted story that is false can be reported in a U.S. media outlet. In such a case, does the CIA have a responsibility to inform the U.S. media outlet of the true nature of the story? Would doing so compromise the original operation? If such notification should not be given at the time, should it be given afterward?"¹⁸

One of the most secret parts of SO1/PWE work involved the propagation of rumours, known as "sibs" from the Latin verb *sibilare* (to whisper), by an Underground Propaganda (UP) Committee. This dated back to the Electra House days in 1940 shortly before the creation of SOE, and continued through the various bureaucratic changes.

From August 1941 the UP Committee was chaired by David Bowes-Lyon, younger brother of the then Queen (and uncle of the present Queen Elizabeth II) – he was also a cousin of Victor Cavendish-Bentinck. He later summarised the purpose of sibs in a "Most Secret" paper for senior bureaucrats:

¹⁷ Nicholas Rankin, *A Genius for Deception: How Cunning Helped the British Win Two World Wars* (Oxford University Press, 2009), p 280; Eunan O'Halpin, "Hitler's Irish Hideout" – A Case Study of SOE's black propaganda battles', in Mark Seaman (ed.), *Special Operations Executive: A new instrument of war* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), pp 201-202

¹⁸ Mark Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy* (Los Angeles: CQ Press, 2015) pp 241-242

“The object of propaganda rumours is... to induce alarm, despondency and bewilderment among the enemies, and hope and confidence among the friends, to whose ears it comes. If a rumour appears likely to cheer our enemies for the time, it is calculated to carry with it the germ of ultimate and grave disappointment for them.

“Rumours vary immensely in their degree of credibility, the wideness of their diffusion and the type of audience for which they are designed; but they have these factors in common, that they are intended for verbal repetition through all sorts of channels, and that they are expected to induce a certain frame of mind in the general public, not necessarily to deceive the well-informed.”

The UP Committee (which included representatives from PWE, SOE, MI6 and the Ministry of Economic Warfare), was responsible in the first instance for deciding on suitable rumours, which would then be cleared through the Foreign Office or JIC:

“Dissemination of those rumours finally approved is the function of SOE. For this purpose whispering organisations have been set up in neutral countries and in unoccupied France.

“Lines have also been established by which rumours can be passed to SOE’s collaborators in Germany, and directives on oral propaganda to an organisation in Northern Italy.

“It should be emphasised that the method of dissemination is essentially oral, and this is the most difficult form of propaganda for enemy security services to deal with.

“Rumours are not deliberately placed in the Press and Radio in Europe, though they have from time to time appeared in the newspapers or broadcasts, having been picked up by correspondents or commentators.

“In the USA, however, a news agency controlled by SOE has been used to place them in the Press of the American continent; but here again the newspapers were quite unaware that the material was in any way inspired.

“Rumours are therefore the most covert of all forms of propaganda. Although the enemy may suspect that a certain rumour has been started by the British Government, they can never prove it. Even if they succeed in capturing an agent engaged in spreading whispers, there will be no written evidence against him, and should they extort a confession from him, nothing is easier than for the British Government to deny the whole story.

“In fact, although more than 2,000 rumours have been disseminated in the last year, we have no evidence that the enemy have ever traced

any of them back to a British whispering organisation. Those that have been denied or otherwise referred to have, as far as we know, been attributed to other sources.”¹⁹

Alongside Bowes-Lyon other members of the UP Committee included Sir Hanns Vischer (a Swiss-born former missionary and MI6 officer since the First World War); Sir Reginald Hoare (Cavendish-Bentinck’s brother-in-law, a veteran diplomat and member of the Hoares Bank family); Leonard Ingrams (financier, pioneer aviator and father of *Private Eye* founder Richard Ingrams); and SOE representative Alec Peterson (an influential teacher, headmaster and educationalist who later created the International Baccalaureate system).²⁰

On 3rd December 1940 a sib was launched via SOE “that the Superintendent of the Bethel Institute for Incurables had been sent to Dachau for refusing to permit the inmates to be put in lethal chambers. Within two weeks it was reported that this rumour was circulating in Switzerland and, on the 19th December, that the Vatican had issued a decree condemning the killing of physical or mental deficients. The rumour has appeared in intercepted letters, and last Sunday the *Sunday Express* carried the story that 100,000 mental deficients had been executed.”²¹

The Bethel Institution was a well-known Protestant charitable hospital for the mentally ill and epileptics. In fact its director – Protestant theologian Friedrich von Bodelschwingh – was not sent to Dachau or any other camp. He survived the war and died in 1946.²²

The main purpose of this sib was to stir up hostility between the Churches and the National Socialist Government over the issue of eugenics and euthanasia. SO1’s French specialist Prof. Denis Brogan (a Cambridge political scientist) was said to have “extremely fine Catholic contacts” in various countries,²³ and “Catholic channels for rumours” were also discussed with Douglas Woodruff, the influential editor of the Catholic journal *The Tablet*.²⁴ At this very early stage the gassing rumour was restricted to

¹⁹ David Bowes-Lyon to David Stephens (PWE Secretary), 1st February 1942, FO 898/70

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ SO2 Executive Committee, Progress Report for Week Ending 23.1.41, HS 8/216

²² ‘Obituary: Pastor von Bodelschwingh’, *Manchester Guardian*, 18th January 1946, p 3

²³ SO2 Executive Committee, Progress Report for Week Ending 12.12.40, HS 8/216

²⁴ SO2 Executive Committee, Progress Report for Week Ending 30.1.41, HS 8/216

“incurables” – it was a story about euthanasia rather than political or racially motivated executions.

A few months later SOE reported with satisfaction that this sib had been picked up by Vatican Radio. Moreover Elizabeth Wiskemann – a Swiss-based, Anglo-German journalist, historian and MI6 operative – had acquired “fresh evidence supplied by Austrian-born Swiss who had just returned from visiting Vienna to the effect that all elderly people in Vienna were in terror.”²⁵

Among other euthanasia sibs (first circulated in November 1940) was a “rumour that doctors in military hospitals in France have been instructed to make death easy for incapacitated soldiers and airmen”. Extra bite was given to this sib by the suggestion (intended to promote inter-service resentment) that in the case of infantry the loss of one limb would amount to incapacity, leading to euthanasia, whereas this “was not to be considered incapacity in the case of Air Force or SS troops”.²⁶

Intercepted letters from Swiss civilians during August 1941 showed that they were innocently passing on versions of the gas chamber story. One wrote:

“Somebody from Bern who was in Germany said, the new bombs from England were awful, they break half a street to pieces, and somewhere in a shelter, people were all on the ceiling smashed like flies, it was terrible, and so very many were ill with their nerves as they had not room for them in the hospitals, and with some which were not get better, they just open the gas and kill them, like the heavy wounded too...”

A separate letter gave another variant inspired by the same sib:

“The severely wounded Germans are apparently just gassed! We have heard several stories about this and from people coming back from the country.”²⁷

While most sibs originated from PWE, the success of this gas chamber rumour led to a War Office suggestion passed to Cavendish-Bentinck’s JIC in November 1941. They had heard it from their military attaché in Berne, Col. H.A. Cartwright (who was in fact an MI6 officer) as “a story which, with some

²⁵ SO2 Executive Committee, Progress Report for Week Ending 3.4.41, HS 8/216

²⁶ SO2 Executive Committee, Progress Report for Week Ending 3.9.41, HS 8/218

²⁷ Ibid.

variations, has been circulating freely in Berne, and has come in from various quite independent informants always from apparently reliable sources.”²⁸

In this version of the rumour:

“Guards and superintendents of trains containing wounded German soldiers from the Eastern Front are ordered at certain places to put on their gas masks. The trains then enter a tunnel where they remain for upwards of half an hour. On leaving the tunnel all the wounded soldiers are dead. Severely wounded soldiers are disposed of in the same manner in so-called emergency hospitals, of which there are many.”

Cartwright had added:

“The Guard who furnished this information is stated to have been on duty on one of the trains in which wounded soldiers were ‘gassed’. He was sworn to secrecy under penalty of death, but stated he could no longer withhold his secret from the outer world by reason of his conscience, and wanted the German public to learn the fate of their wounded soldiers.”²⁹

The Inter-Services Security Board (through which PWE and others cleared their rumours in case they inadvertently clashed with other British secret operations) had raised no objection, and added: “We recommend this rumour also as useful propaganda.”

This recommendation might have proved significant in the longer term. The difference between a rumour/sib and propaganda is of course that the former (as with “black” propaganda) was intended to be untraceable to British sources.

During 1941 SOE “disseminated a rumour that the Germans had ordered 500 mobile crematorium units from the Ford works in Cologne and Antwerp to be ready by the Spring”. This sib came back in the form of a story circulating in France that “the German army has crematory ovens installed in lorries and cremate all their own dead. ...This enables the Germans to fix a figure for their losses at whatever they please, and leave no evidence to controvert them.”³⁰ Later an intercepted Swiss letter showed a variant of this rumour, that the Germans “burn their dead in travelling crematoria and keep their

²⁸ S.N. Shoosmith, JIC Memorandum, ‘Rumours of a Military Nature Intended to Mystify and Mislead the Enemy’, 3rd November 1941, CAB 81/105

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ SO2 Executive Committee, Progress Report for Week Ending 2.7.41, HS 8/217

losses carefully concealed until the campaign is ended. In this way members of the family wait and hope for the best.”³¹

It might be relevant that during the summer of 1941 a rumour campaign was launched against I.G. Farben, the giant German pharmaceutical and chemical conglomerate.³² The first hints of this suggest that the campaign was first designed for the Ministry of Economic Warfare to cause financial problems for the company in neutral countries, by for example adulterating samples of its products so as to undermine Farben’s reputation.³³ By September 1941 it was reported with satisfaction that anti-Farben stories were widely believed in France:

“There is now a conviction throughout the country that the Germans are attempting to ruin the health of the French people by sending back French sick and wounded prisoners inoculated by the Germans with the bacilli of disease, while there have been rumours of the flooding of the French market with German drugs producing certain forms of debility.”³⁴

It is unclear whether this campaign was in any way connected to later allegations that I.G. Farben’s pesticide Zyklon B was used for homicidal gassings.

Some versions of the Farben rumours combined them with stories intended to spread panic about typhus, and an interesting variant was added by suggesting that typhus had become so bad that Jewish physicians had been called up for service as army medics.³⁵ The implication of this sib was that ordinary Germans (and citizens of German-occupied countries) would react badly to the idea of Jewish doctors: this is drawn out further in a later sib:

“It is not only because of the plague danger that German doctors on the East front always wear surgical masks in the wards. So many of them are Jews now that there used to be trouble when the wounded were able to see their faces.”³⁶

³¹ SO2 Executive Committee, Progress Report for Week Ending 1.10.41, HS 8/218

³² SO2 Executive Committee, Progress Report for Week Ending 9.7.41, HS 8/217

³³ SO2 Executive Committee, Progress Report for Week Ending 16.7.41, HS 8/217

³⁴SO2 Executive Committee, Progress Report for Week Ending 24.9.41, HS 8/218

³⁵ SO2 Executive Committee, Progress Report for Week Ending 29.10.41, HS 8/218

³⁶ Sib R/867, Minutes of U.P. Committee Meeting, 5th December 1941, FO 898/69

In November 1941 the Underground Propaganda Committee approved a sib which cunningly linked euthanasia by gassing to typhus and defeatism:

“These stories about gassing the wounded on the East Front are due to a misunderstanding. The Gas Vans and Trains are used only for plague cases and are really merciful since the poor fellows would have no chance anyhow.”³⁷

Meanwhile a fantastically gruesome sib hinted at mass murder and industrialised cannibalism:

“The Germans are rounding up healthy Russian prisoners and transferring them in batches of a thousand at a time to a prison camp near Kiev. It may be a coincidence that cans of something called ‘Russian beef’ are already being exported from a factory near Kiev to the most hard hit parts in the Ruhr.”³⁸

Later that month a note from the War Office Deputy Director of Operations, Col. John Sinclair (who became Chief of MI6 from 1953 to 1956) to David Bowes-Lyon approved the UP Committee’s new development of the gas chamber story:

“The Germans need every hospital they have got for their own wounded, so foreign workers who fall seriously sick are just sent to the gas-chamber.”³⁹

This was later given a further twist:

“Foreign workers should not go to Germany because they are transferred to occupied Poland or blitzed districts, gassed if unfit, sterilised, cheated of their wages, or liable to be treated as hostages.”⁴⁰

As the situation on the Eastern Front worsened, the SOE Executive Committee noted:

“We have now arrived at a situation where it is virtually impossible to distinguish between ‘come-backs’ on certain of our rumour campaigns and genuine reports from enemy and occupied territory. We have, for

³⁷ Sib R/729, Minutes of U.P. Committee Meeting, 14th November 1941, FO 898/69

³⁸ Sib R/724, Ibid.

³⁹ Sib R/773, Minutes of U.P. Committee Meeting, 21st November 1941, FO 898/69. This gas chamber rumour was sent to Cavendish-Bentinck’s JIC for consideration at their meeting on 25th November 1941, see note by the JIC Secretary, Lt. Col. Stephen Shoosmith, headed ‘Rumours of a Military Nature Intended to Mystify and Mislead the Enemy’, CAB 81/105

⁴⁰ Minutes of U.P. Committee Meeting, 5th December 1941, FO 898/69

instance, for the last four months been keeping up a steady campaign on the subject of Fleck Typhus on the Eastern Front. This at first met with no noticeable reaction, but the number of reports has steadily grown, until the prevalence of this disease is now an accepted fact. It seems probable that the reports now refer to genuine outbreaks, but the rumour campaign can claim credit for putting into the minds of the German people an exaggerated idea of its seriousness.”⁴¹

It is perhaps significant that SOE’s leaders here register the point that – in the case of typhus – propaganda rumours had become fact. Had he been aware of genuine use of homicidal gas chambers, Cavendish-Bentinck could have made a similar point in August 1943: but he didn’t.

In fact when the *Daily Mirror* on 23rd March 1942 reported euthanasia by gassing in a report filed by its Lisbon correspondent, it was highlighted by SOE as a “come-back” of one of their sibs, rather than a potentially true story. The *Mirror* report read:

“Through the widow of one of the men concerned, I learn that 300 Germans wounded in hospital at Dresden were quietly disposed of with gas as they were unlikely to be of further use to the Reichswehr. All had lost limbs or arms on the Eastern front, or had appalling body injuries.”⁴²

Conclusion

I have catalogued these very early references to homicidal gassings because they indicate that Victor Cavendish-Bentinck believed he had good reason, in August 1943, to disbelieve stories about mass murders of Poles and Jews in gas chambers. It is of course illegal in many European countries to express such a view today.

As opposed to the growing tide of historical revisionism, orthodox or “exterminationist” historians now suggest that the homicidal gassing of Jews began in February and March 1942, and maintain that the first homicidal gassings of Soviet and Polish prisoners in Auschwitz took place in August-

⁴¹ SOE Executive Committee, Progress Report of SOE for week ending 17.12.41, HS 8/219

⁴² SOE Executive Committee, Progress Report of SOE for week ending 25.3.42, HS 8/220; David Walker, ‘Germans gas 300 of their wounded’, *Daily Mirror*, 23rd March 1942, p 1. The journalist David Walker had been an MI6 asset since 1938: he later revealed some carefully selected highlights of wartime secret work in his memoirs *Lunch With a Stranger* (London: Allan Wingate, 1957) and *Adventure in Diamonds* (London: Evans Brothers, 1955).

September 1941.⁴³ Yet SOE were putting out a rumour or “sib” about the gassing of “incurables” (i.e. euthanasia by gas chamber) in December 1940, and an extension of this rumour to encompass gassing of severely wounded soldiers was already current by the summer of 1941 – i.e. before the very first alleged gassings of prisoners at Auschwitz.

Revisionists accept that a euthanasia programme began in Germany at the start of the war (using lethal injections) but it was abandoned in August 1941 on Adolf Hitler’s orders due to the scale of religious opposition, especially from the Catholic Bishop von Galen of Münster. The alleged use of gas chambers in this euthanasia programme has been seen by revisionists as an attempt to bolster Holocaust myths.⁴⁴ British propagandists’ invention of a “lethal chamber” aspect to euthanasia could in this context be seen as the basis for later accretions of myth.

With so many gaps in the documentary record, we might never know precisely how these stories were built up. What we can say is that existing SOE and PWE records fatally undermine one of Prof. Richard Evans’ arguments against David Irving. As noted above, Evans wrote:

“There was no evidence here or anywhere else, indeed, that the British Political Warfare Executive had invented the story of the gas chambers.”

In fact PWE/SOE certainly did invent stories about homicidal gassings – the inventions were circulated long before any such gassings are now alleged to have taken place.

ANDY RITCHIE, London, January 2017
andy_ritchie@yahoo.com

⁴³ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (London: Vintage, 2011), p 185

⁴⁴ Robert Faurisson, ‘A Challenge to David Irving’ in *The Journal of Historical Review*, Winter 1984, pp 289-305

Principal Characters

(Sir) Denis Allen (1910-1987), New Zealand-born career Foreign Office official; in 1943 was number two to Frank Roberts in the Central Department, which then covered Holland, Belgium, Germany, Austria, Poland, Hungary, Spain and Portugal; British Ambassador to Turkey, 1963-1967; swapped jobs with his namesake below to become the FO's Deputy Under-Secretary for Middle East and Africa, 1967-69.

(Sir) Roger Allen (1909-1972), barrister recruited to Foreign Office during Second World War; liaison between FO and intelligence, in connection with the Joint Planning Staff and the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), both during and after the war. Also served as Joint Secretary of the War Cabinet Committee on Treatment of War Criminals, set up in July 1942. British Ambassador to Turkey, 1967-69 after swapping jobs with Sir Denis Allen.

(Sir) David Bowes-Lyon (1902-1961), Political Warfare Executive officer and chairman of the Underground Propaganda Committee which developed "sibs" or rumours of homicidal gas chambers. Younger brother of King George VI's Queen Elizabeth, and uncle of today's Queen Elizabeth II.

(Sir) Victor Cavendish-Bentinck (1897-1990), career diplomat 1919-1947; chairman, Joint Intelligence Committee, 1939-45; British Ambassador to Poland, 1945-47; once tipped to become Chief of MI6, but following a divorce scandal resigned from the Diplomatic Service and began a business career; late in life succeeded to the title Duke of Portland in 1980; known to friends and colleagues as Bill

Col. Henry Cartwright (1887-1957), MI6 officer; military attaché in Berne, Switzerland, 1939-45; passed a version of the "gas chamber" rumour to the JIC via the War Office in November 1941

Moray McLaren (1901-1971), head of PWE's Polish section. Scottish journalist and author; biographer of Sir Walter Scott. Worked for the BBC, 1928-1940; first Programme Director for Scotland, 1933-35.

Maj. Gen. Stephen Shoosmith (1900-1956), served as JIC Secretary (with rank of Lt. Col.) in 1941; in this capacity he circulated to Cavendish-Bentinck and his JIC colleagues the rumours (or "sibs") devised by black propagandists, mostly originating with PWE. Later Principal Staff Officer to Field Marshal Montgomery, Deputy Supreme Allied Commander, Allied Powers, Europe, 1954-56.

David Esdaile Walker (1907-1968), Oxford-educated journalist and MI6 asset; *Daily Mirror* and Reuters foreign correspondent, 1936-52; later with the *News Chronicle*. Used by MI6 and SOE to circulate "sibs".