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The Mazzini Affair and the (Temporary) closure of British SIGINT

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# What will be covered

- Brief history of postal interception in the British Isles
- Some background on Mazzini
- Mazzini discovers his letters being intercepted
- Parliamentary debate
- Parliamentary committees
- The Aftermath
- Postal interception post-Mazzini
- Some speculation

Postal interception has a long history.

- Wie es scheint, ist die Verletzung des Briefgeheimnisses so alt wie die Post. From "Die schwarzen Cabinete," 1863.
- Not long after the Arab conquest of Persia, the Persian postal system was retooled to provide intelligence..uncertain whether that was done in the pre-conquest system
- The Latin term "perlustro" has, at times, exclusively meant interception of letters, and first gained that meaning under the Roman Republic.
- Earliest explicit reference to interception of letters in England comes from 1324, but there are references in 1252 and 1284/1285 which may talk about perlustration.

Perlustration in the British Isles developed over time, in tandem with the postal system.

- First glimmerings under Henry VIII and Elizabeth I.
- Stuarts really got into that: side benefit to the money postal services brought in.
- Commonwealth picked up where Stuarts left off.
- Ability to gather intelligence was a motivation behind creation of Post Office
- After the Restoration, the people who'd done this for the Commonwealth made their peace with Charles II and kept at it. John Wallis is a crucial figure here.



John Wallis

Circa 1701

- Walsingham is often described as the founder of British Intelligence, but Wallis has a stronger claim: the work he started lasted close to 200 years.
- Wallis deciphered Royalist messages for Parliament in 1643.
- Did some work for the Rump Parliament.
- Made his peace with Charles II.
- Employed his grandson, William Blencowe, as assistant.
- Blencowe became the first official Decipherer when Wallis died in 1703.
- Blencowe got into political troubles, and committed suicide in 1712, but the organization continued.

Several organizations involved, sometimes with overlap between them.

- Private Office of the Post Office: handled domestic interceptions, mainly for law enforcement.
- Secret Office: handled interceptions of foreign and diplomatic mail.
- Deciphering Office: cracked ciphered letters, very tied to Secret Office.
- Very small numbers of people did this work.

In addition to the small numbers of personnel, there were other problems.

- Hiring was often nepotistic, sometimes quite literally.
- This caused problems when political enemies of the families working in the office came to power.
- Originally, budgets came from postal profits. But then the Crown gave up postal revenue to Parliament.
- Some positions in Private Office, Secret Office, and Deciphering Office were such closely guarded secrets that they appeared to be sinecures, and were attacked as such.
- Private Office was often underfunded, and at one point, was deprived of all funding. This meant Secret Office picked up domestic interceptions for a few years in the 1790s.
- Eventually, Private Office, Secret Office, and Deciphering Office were funded out of Secret Service funds.



It's a mistake to think of the Secret Service funds of the 18th. and 19th centuries as something like the budget for intelligence in modern governments. It was more like a government slush fund, used for many purposes.

- Intelligence.
- Bribes to important figures to get their vote in Parliament, although this died out in the early 19th. century.
- Pensioning off people who knew embarrassing things about the monarch, the Royal family, or the government of the day: several of Charles II's mistresses were paid from the Secret Service budget, as were a few of George IV's.
- Bribes to foreign government officials to get them to support treaties. Talleyrand got this largesse a few times.
- In the 18th. century, was used for electioneering.
- Also used to bribe press during the 18th. and Early 19th. Century.

So what use was postal interception, anyway?

- Caught people plotting treason, was used as evidence in some criminal trials.
- Letters between ambassadors and their governments were opened, let British leaders know what was going on.
- Provided evidence of collusion between domestic and foreign figures, or absence of such. Broad interception of letters going to ships during the mutinies at Spithead and Nore in 1797 showed the former had nothing to do with France, and the leaders of the latter were somewhat sympathetic to the French Revolution and had connections to the United Irishmen. French spy network in England also had mail intercepted, which facilitated intelligence operations on the Continent.

So what use was postal interception, anyway?-part 2.

- Mail packets were trusted, and foreign governments sent letters by them, sometimes in preference to the packets their own mail service provided. This was crucial at times for countries like Russia, Spain, and parts of the Ottoman Empire.
- Compared to other potential intelligence gathering organizations, the Post Office was cheap.
- Postal establishments abroad provided excellent cover for other intelligence activities, facilitated smuggling of information back to England.



Giuseppe Mazzini

Circa 1850

- Mazzini became involved in radical Italian politics in his late teens.
- Happened to be passing by a senior Carbonari member in jail, was tapped on the shoulder and appointed the man's successor.
- Arrested a few times, then exiled.
- Exile was a big break for him-left him a senior figure in the movement after most others were jailed or executed.
- Had his mail intercepted early on, wrote to his parents under the name of a female cousin.
- Provided support and direction to other radicals, sometimes money and equipment.
- Activities would probably be called terrorism today.
- Had strong anti-clerical views..almost exclusively against the Roman Catholic Church, though.

- Mazzini was exiled in 1831, went to France, then to Switzerland.
- Arrived in England in early 1837, would stay until 1848.
- Spent a good deal of his life in England, would later say it was his real home.
- Made a lot of prominent friends: radicals like Thomas Slingsby Duncombe, authors like Thomas Carlyle.
- Continued his radical activities.



## The Bandiera Brothers

Associates of Mazzini, planners  
of a guerrilla raid

- The Bandiera brothers were Austrian naval officers, sons of an Admiral who'd played a major role in suppressing an earlier uprising.
- Mazzini jumped at the chance to work with them.
- Plan was to depart from Corfu, land in Calabria, inspire peasants to revolt.
- Lots of leaks, tons of informants among Bandiera friends, one informant actually went on the raid.
- Peasants thought the Bandieras were Turkish pirates, notified authorities.
- Informant led authorities to Bandiera camp.
- Both Bandieras executed, most of their group killed or imprisoned..except for the informant.



- Mazzini flabbergasted.
- Various claims as to how he became suspicious his mail was being opened.
- Decided on various methods to test how his mail was opened.
- Figured out it took two hours for his mail to be opened and sent on.
- Decided to talk to his friend Thomas Slingsby Duncombe.

- Duncombe raised the issue in Parliament on June 14, 1844.
- Sir James Graham admitted intercepts, but prevaricated a bit.
- Lots of grumbling in Commons and Lords about this: "odious spy system of other countries," "mouchard," tied into shots against Peel's police.
- Some sharp replies from Graham in Commons and Wellington in Lords-both pointed out that the Postal Act explicitly gave that power.
- Graham made some statements about Mazzini that led to big public brouhaha and letter from Carlyle to the Times of London defending Mazzini.
- Dickens, among others, put snarky comments about Graham on all his letters for a few months.
- Graham had to apologize to Mazzini, convened a Secret Committee in Lords and Commons to look into the issue of mail interception.

## THE PEOPLE'S POST BOX; —

**CONTAINING**

## A Letter for the Country!

GIVING A FULL DISCLOSURE OF THAT EXTRAORDINARY AND WELL EXECUTED

# PLOT,

(With the Names, Residences, and Description of the Plotters)

THROUGH THE MEANS OF WHICH WAS DISCOVERED THE ATROCIOUS SYSTEM  
ADOPTED IN THE

**" SECRET OR INNER OFFICE "**

OF THE

# General Post Office

Of indiscriminately Violating Private Letters,

WITHOUT ANY LEGAL WARRANT FOR SO DOING; INCLUDING

- Not the first Parliamentary investigation into perustration: earlier one in 1742.
- Unlike the 1742 investigation, this one was thorough and report was public.
- House of Lords committee produced a four page report.
- House of Commons committee produced a 116 page report, including copies of proclamations going back to 1252.
- Duncombe not pleased-he wanted to control the investigating committee.
- When it was done, Duncombe did admit he was wrong about mail opening being "un-English."
- Committees also produced reports showing Mazzini was an item of British government attention as early as 1833.

- While it is uncertain what exactly was passed, Austrian government was told about the content of Mazzini's letters.
- Two other people living in the same building were Polish exiles: their mail was opened shortly before and during Tsar Nicholas I's visit to London in 1844.
- Committee revealed that Lord John Russell, who'd savaged the Peel government, had authorized mail interception when he was in government.
- Some argument about whether or not Home Secretary had authorization for general warrants.

- Issue kept coming up in debates in 1844-1845.
- Duncombe flat out accused the overnment of ratting out the Bandieras on February 18, 1845. But he didn't get much support for that.
- Duncombe tried to push a new Post Office bill that would make perlustration illegal: this failed.
- Committees did not reveal that mail was intercepted from Duncombe, Daniel O'Connell, and Cobden, among others.
- Committees did reveal that diplomatic mail had been intercepted.
- Despite still having the legal power, the goverment shut down the Private Office, the Secret Office, and the Deciphering branch, and pensioned off all personnel.

- Even though the office was shut down, few believed it. Mazzini claimed it was happening all through his time in the UK, and Marx and Engels firmly believed their mail was being opened.
- Mazzini started using a covername for all his letters: this came out in Parliament in 1864, when it turned out that letters to Mr. Fiore were passed on to Mazzini by Jams Stansfeld, MP.
- Palmerston made some noises during the Orsini affair that make me think he wanted to restore this (and he'd been a keen user), but the fall of his government ended that.
- Some letters were intercepted in the mails..mostly related to pornography prosecutions. But this was ad hoc.
- The first warrant for the interception of a telegram was given in 1875. Again, ad hoc, and no establishment behind it.

## Aftermath, Part 2







- Mazzini used the scandal to raise funds, dined out on the story for the rest of his life.
- Mazzini's reputation changed after the 1848 revolutions, the Orsini affair, and the Greco scandal. But then he died..remembered mainly as an exiled hero: last Hansard reference to him is from 1997.
- Sir James Graham felt that he would be remembered mainly for the scandal. He was right.
- During 1868 discussions over postal service taking over telegraph, MP asked how anyone could trust their telegrams to the Post Office after Mazzini scandal.
- Really wasn't that much coverage of this in US and Canada: mainly reprints of what the Times of London was printing. But some citations in US law reviews about the issue.



# Things to Ponder












- Some intelligence gathering did go on between 1844 and 1909, but uncoordinated, amateurish, and was often a secondary duty at best. No centralized direction to speak of, and efforts tended to end when people involved moved on to other things.
- Often asserted that this hurt the conduct of British policy, but I found nothing in diaries or journals agreeing with this. It was not a major subject of discussion.
- Scandals occurred in France and Austria around this time as well, but their Black Chambers came back within a decade at most.
- Indian administration separate from main UK-mail intercept did occur there, but how much?
- Scandal happened at the height of the era of classical liberalism: almost certainly influenced aftermath.

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