

Red Scare

Conservative peer and historian **Lord Lexden** recalls the *Daily Mail's* damaging 1924 campaign against the Labour Party, culminating in the forged Zinoviev letter



Grigori Zinoviev

The *Daily Mail* never changes its politics. A century ago, the paper was no less stridently right-wing than it is today, perhaps even more so since the rather dim first Lord Rothermere who owned it in the early 20th century backed every diehard cause that came along, no matter how crazy.

In October 1924, the *Mail* set out gleefully to help wreck the Labour Party's chances of success in a bitter, hard-fought election called by the first ever Labour government. Ramsay MacDonald had led it for nine months with considerable skill in a particularly difficult hung parliament with Labour in a hopeless minority. He proved that the party was a powerful, responsible, left-wing force able to run the country's affairs well without trying to put it on the path to socialism.

That did not stop its Tory opponents, and their press friends at the *Mail* above all, from attacking it viciously as a dangerous menace to civilisation in league with the Soviet Union. MacDonald himself provided a helping hand. He was his own foreign secretary, and a very effective one. His impressive plan for a more stable Europe, in which unresolved tensions after the First World War would at last be calmed, included making treaties with the government in Moscow, seven years after the blood-soaked Bolshevik Revolution.

One of the treaties involved a government guarantee for a financial loan from British banks, which would assist the recovery of the Soviet economy and open up trade links with Britain. The other political parties agreed that relations with the Soviet Union needed

to be put on a better footing, but they denounced MacDonald's brave initiative.

By grave misfortune, the proposed loan coincided with a badly mishandled domestic crisis. Having announced that the acting editor of Britain's main communist publication, *The Workers' Weekly*, was to be prosecuted for sedition, the attorney general reversed his decision and abandoned the case. Was this not proof that Labour was communism's accomplice? Its enemies relished making the charge. MacDonald lost a vote of confidence in the Commons on 8 October. There could hardly have been a worse moment for the inevitable general election.

The *Mail* was at the forefront of the unrelenting vilification of Labour orchestrated by Conservative Central Office throughout the ensuing three-week campaign. Day by day, the paper printed "an outstanding Conservative campaign poster released today from that party's headquarters". Evil-looking ruffians were depicted eyeing up British assets. The paper's political articles were predictably inflammatory. Readers were told that MacDonald's government wanted "to use British taxpayers' credit and cash for the purpose of financing a gang of thieves and murderers who have usurped power in Russia [and] wish to destroy the British empire and our civilised system of credit". No slur was beyond bounds. On 10 October, the paper claimed that six cabinet ministers "had been induced to accept Russian jewels concealed in chocolates".

On 25 October, four days before polling, the *Mail* brought its destructive work to a climax with one of the greatest newspaper scoops of all time. "Civil war plot by socialists' masters," a huge banner headline screamed. Lurid details were laid out below it. "Moscow orders to our reds. Great plot disclosed yesterday. 'Paralyse the army and navy!' And Mr MacDonald would lend Russia our money! Document issued by Foreign Office. After *Daily Mail* had spread the news."

In this way the Zinoviev letter, which was to be the subject of speculation and controversy for

years to come, burst upon the world, with official confirmation of its authenticity apparently prised out of the Foreign Office by the *Mail's* unrelenting pressure, justifying all the paper's dire warnings of the previous weeks. The letter created the greatest sensation that has ever occurred during a British election campaign.

No one in Britain or anywhere else ever saw any sign of the actual "red letter", as it came to be known. What the *Mail* (and many others as well) acquired were copies of a telegram, marked "very secret", which reached the headquarters of MI6 in London on 9 October, the day parliament was dissolved, from its officers at Riga in Latvia. The telegram contained the English text of a letter, dated 15 September 1924 and addressed to the central committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) by Grigori Zinoviev, president of the executive committee of the Comintern, the Soviet propaganda body charged with the task of fomenting revolution across the world.

The red letter instructed the CPGB leadership to get their sympathisers in the Labour Party to "strain every nerve" to ensure that the Anglo-Soviet treaties were ratified. The British comrades were also told to step up "agitation-propaganda work in the armed forces" and make ready for the coming of the British revolution.

The sensational revelations reached all parts of the country quickly. The *Mail* was by far Britain's most popular newspaper at that time, selling nearly two million copies daily. With rare generosity, the editor of the *Mail* shared his copy of the letter with all his Fleet Street colleagues on the day before he published it. The desire to hurt the Labour Party took priority over all else. On 25 October it was impossible to pick up a newspaper without reading the amazing story "unequalled in all the history of general elections", as the *Mail's* editor put it immodestly. The newly established BBC provided no election coverage in 1924, but no one then relied on it for their news anyway.

Was the red letter genuine or a forgery? Argument broke out at once. Zinoviev himself insisted that he had not signed the letter, now universally ascribed to him. The official Soviet representative in London dismissed it as "an impudent forgery". The Bolshevik government used its usual brutal methods to search for a subversive element in their ranks who had used Zinoviev's name. No one confessed. The Bolshevik ministers concluded that "the whole affair had been devised by the leaders of the extensive network of White Russians who still hoped to overthrow the Bolshevik regime". They were close to the truth.

In Britain the Labour Party was naturally incandescent. It had no doubt that the letter had been fabricated to complete the campaign that had been conducted so vengefully against it. Labour candidates were reduced to despair. "The people lost confidence in us; the women were frightened; speakers felt paralysed."

Labour's outrage was increased by Conservative Central Office's collusion with the *Mail*. Ramsay MacDonald said it was "a most suspicious circumstance that a certain newspaper and the headquarters of the Conservative Association [CCO] seem to have had copies of the letter at the same time as the Foreign Office". That was not

quite right. MI6 sent a copy to the Foreign Office on 9 October; CCO did not acquire one until some days later. But the essential point was correct: CCO worked with the *Mail* to inflict the maximum damage on the Labour Party.

How did CCO get a copy? The secret services, which were stuffed with fanatical opponents of Communism, worried stiff about Labour's treaties with the Soviet Union, did not keep the letter secret. And they insisted it was genuine. One former member of MI5, rejoicing in the German-sounding name of Donald im Thurn (but as British as they come), kept a diary in which he recorded how he alerted CCO to the letter's existence, extracting a promise of a reward of £10,000 from the party's treasurer, the first Viscount Younger of Leckie. He thought he deserved a knighthood too, and pressed CCO to get it for him before his sudden death in mysterious circumstances in 1930.

This former spy was unable to furnish a copy of the letter. That was not a problem for Major Joseph Ball OBE, the third most senior serving MI5 officer, who had well-established contacts at CCO. The following year he began a new career as the Conservative Party's



Ramsay MacDonald

director of publicity. Could he have provided a copy of the letter as a kind of job application? No document that incriminates him has so far come to light.

The Conservative Party got the triumph for which it had worked so assiduously by fair means and foul at the election on 29 October 1924. With 412 seats, it had the biggest majority it ever obtained standing on its own without coalition allies. But it did not humiliate Labour, as it and the fanatics at the *Mail* had

hoped. The party emerged with 151 seats, down 40, but with 33 per cent of the vote (just one point below the share which brought Keir Starmer a stunning victory a century later) and a million more voters than at the previous election.

The Tories won their triumph because the Liberals collapsed, losing 118 seats. The red letter helped drive nervous Liberal supporters into the arms of Tories. Labour established itself firmly as the second party of the state at the 1924 election.

Labour was right about the Zinoviev letter too. In 1998 Robin Cook as foreign secretary in the Blair government instituted a thorough inspection of all the relevant files. The Russian government also opened its archives. The full and detailed research produced the following conclusion by the cautious Foreign Office historian: "The Zinoviev Letter is unlikely to have been genuine but may well have been forged by Ivan Pokrovsky [a well-known White Russian spy] with the knowledge if not active assistance of British intelligence officials in Riga."

It was the spooks who ensured that the Zinoviev letter became marvellous Tory propaganda at the general election a century ago.

All 107 of Lord Lexden's past contributions to *The House* can be found on his website, alistairlexden.org.uk. His most recent publication is *Horace Farquhar: A Bad Man Befriended by Kings* (2023)

