The Hanoverian connection: British intelligence and counterintelligence as recorded by spymaster Thomas Pelham-Holles, 1st Duke of Newcastle, against the Jacobites

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The Hanoverian connection: British intelligence and counterintelligence as recorded by spymaster Thomas Pelham-Holles, 1st Duke of Newcastle, against the Jacobites

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Abstract

This article considered the historical precedents for the second "special relationship" which England enjoyed with another country, namely England and Hanover relied heavily on postal interception and code-breaking, much of it based in Hanover, to thwart French military and diplomatic efforts on behalf of the Stuarts, Britain's ousted Catholic dynasty. It is demonstrated that as a direct result of the dynastic connection, Britain and Hanover maintained this highly important intelligence alliance throughout the 18th century, with tentacles into Sweden. In spite of intelligence being tainted by its reputation as "dirty work" at the time, in his various government positions, Thomas Pelham-Holles, 1st Duke of Newcastle (1693–1768), excelled in putting it to good use, especially to keep the Jacobites in Britain — supporters of the Stuart dynasty, who had been deposed in 1688 — and their French allies at bay.

The consequences of the Hanoverian succession in terms of intelligence have been little examined over the years, despite the important role it played. This is surprising because Britain's involvement in European affairs was considerable after 1714, when George I became the first Hanoverian king of the united Great Britain and Ireland. However, one should remember that there was a tendency among the aristocracy and gentry not only of Britain but also of the whole of Europe and America to view intelligence as a dirty job well into the 20th century. An unspecified ambassador was said to have written in 1785 to the British Secretary of State with respect to this unsavoury aspect: “I abhor this dirty work, but when one is employed to sweep chimneys, one must black one's fingers.”

Be that as it may, this attitude did not prevent the imminent Whig politician Thomas Pelham-Holles — 1st Duke of Newcastle, Secretary of State from 1724 to 1754, and British Prime Minister from 1754 to 1756 — from dedicating himself to its arts. His private papers, extending to some 300 volumes now in the British Library in London, offer a vast mine of fascinating material, with no less than a third dedicated to the intelligence information thereby gleaned.

The Jacobites, the ousted rival dynastic house to the Hanoverians, and their French supporters were the principal focus of his intelligence attentions. To this end, he made use, above all, of bribery (of both high and low) as well as of the employment of secret agents, ciphers, and “invisible” writing. Urine, in particular, was useful as it becomes visible only upon heating, but lemon juice also served the purpose.

As a result of his endeavours, he penetrated the Jacobites, who threatened the overthrow of the House of Hannover, through the use of “Pickle the Spy” (otherwise known as Alistair Ruadh MacDonald) and the Rotterdam merchant Richard Walters. In England, he was aided by the Hanoverian John Ernest Bode, as he was known in his adopted country, noted for his ability to forge seals on behalf of the Secret Office from 1732. Interestingly, his descendants carried on his work for their adopted country for more than a century, until 1844, by which time Hanover had gone its own way as the ascent of Queen Victoria to the throne was not permitted by the Sallic law which reigned there. One native born Englishman also provided much assistance in this case. He was, on the surface of it, a most unlikely candidate: Edward Willes, the future Bishop of Bath and Wells. He and his family played a significant role in the long-established Deciphering Office, which continued its function until 1844, scrutinising and deciphering, in particular, diplomatic correspondence, which is now found to be in the Public Record Office.

Then as now, all the major European countries took similar measures and expected the like of their counterparts. Therefore, the deliberate dispensation of misinformation also played a major role in intelligence activities. Not surprisingly, because the King of England was also the Elector of Hanover, intelligence activities were carried out, in particular, at intelligence headquarters in Nienburg. Thus, this was the second special relationship — that is SIGNIT, (signals intelligence) alliance – between Britain and another country, the first being with the House of Orange, in Holland, in the late 17th century, and the third one in our own time, since the Second World War, with the United States. As of now, mutual trust was sometimes in short supply: it would seem, for example, that in the late 18th century, the Prince Regent (later George IV) did not reveal to his British ministers all the information that he was provided from the interceptors and decipherers in Hanover. They, therefore, commissioned their own interceptions and decryptions, a practice that continued until the death of the next and final Hanoverian king of Britain and Ireland, William IV.

Newcastle’s correspondence confirm that France was the ultimate focus of his concern — supporting, as it did, the Jacobite pretensions to the British throne — and that it was necessary to get the support of its allies. This was, of course, the time of the War of the Austrian Succession which involved many European powers, each with their own agenda. On 17 September 1741, Andrew Stone wrote on behalf of the Duke of Newcastle to the Duke of Richmond — his close confidant at court — on this matter, stating,

There is nothing particular with regard to the progress of the French Armies in Germany. The last letters from Hanover, dated about ten days ago, say that Mr Maillebois (a marquis and marshall in the French army who conquered Corsica in 1739) if He continued his March, might be upon the Frontiers of that Country in about three weeks from that time. The Danes, after making some Difficulties, at last, agreed to pass the Elbe [...]

Denmark, it should be noted, was a perennial enemy to Sweden, which — in turn, from the days of the Thirty Years War — was one of France’s closest and most subsidised allies, the Catholic-Lutheran divide notwithstanding. Against this background, therefore, the purpose of Secretary of State John Carteret’s policy on succeeding Walpole was to raise the subsidy to the Empress Maria Theresa of Austria, to abandon the neutrality of Hanover and to incorporate Hanoverian troops into the British military.

Newcastle accompanied George II and Carteret to Hanover in 1743. Back at home, the Duke of Richmond was Newcastle’s only trusted confidant at the royal court. There he played a crucial role

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2 Timothy J. McCann, The Correspondence of the Dukes of Newcastle 1724–1750 (Lewes, UK: Sussex Record Society, 1984), 73, 75.
in keeping Newcastle informed both of the conduct of the war and of the political intrigues surrounding the appointment of Henry Pelham-Holles to succeed Wilmington as First Lord of the Treasury.

On 30 November 1742, Newcastle wrote to Richmond of the results of his intelligence about the shifting political constellations which extended as far as Moscow:

Sweden in the height of their good humour with us, declaring the D. of Holstein successor to their Crown, whilst Denmark lately sold to France, is arming against this French step in Sweden, and the Czarina setting up another candidate to the Crown of Sweden, & on that condition offering us her friendship. This I conclude will be scarce understood by you, but I can’t explain more by letter, & I beg you would not attempt to explain it to any Body else.\(^3\)

It should be remembered that King Augustus Frederick was the son of Christian August, Prince of Holstein-Gottorp, as well as the father of King Gustaf III of Sweden, hostile to both Russia and Denmark.

If that was the focus of intelligence on the macro level, on the micro level even the appointment of a simple country parson could have perceived political implications relevant to intelligence. On 1 December 1742, Richmond wrote to Newcastle, re the disposal of two ecclesiastical livings:

it is in a corner of the County where a clever Jacobite parson might do us a great deal of mischief. The present incumbent (Robert Styles Launce), to give him his due is a Jacobite, but he is so eternally drunke with rum brandy that he does us no harm.\(^4\)

Then on 6 December 1742, the issue of Jacobite propaganda was again brought into sharp focus. Newcastle wrote to Richmond:

there is a Book lately published, called “The Case of the Hanover Troops,” which endeavours to prove that from Queen Ann’s Death to this day, the late King, & the present King have had no view in all their Measures, but to serve & aggrandise the Electorate of Hanover, at the expense of Great Britain, & concludes, that the only Distinction is, Englishman, or Hanoverian or in other words, King George or ye Pretender.\(^5\)

The background to this was that George II was said to be deeply preoccupied with the defence of Hanover and was therefore keen to transfer his Hanoverian troops from Flanders to the Rhine-land. At the same time, though, bearing in mind the risks of a Jacobite uprising, aided by a French invasion, the risk to Britain was increased. So, in 1741, when French military forces under Maillebois threatened Hanover, George II felt obliged to sign a treaty of neutrality with France with respect to Hanover.

By now, it was clear that Hanoverian troops were, in any case, not popular in Britain. On 9 December 1743, Richmond wrote to Newcastle:

I have said enough to you about the Hanoverians & I am stronger than ever in the same opinion. I think you would hardly carry it in the House of Commons (their employment, that is), & I am very sure our troops never will, nor never can serve with them, & moreover, I myself am convinced they are bad troops, so I hope in God you will not take me to be for them; if you do, you will lay me under the greatest difficulty. […] I hope no time will be lost in applying for others, Prussians would be the best of all, but Saxons are better than Hanoverians.\(^6\)

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3 Ibid, 93.
4 Ibid, 93–94.
5 Ibid, 95.
6 Ibid, 130.
By 13 September 1744, matters in Europe had deteriorated and Newcastle wrote to Richmond:

The news from Holland rather worse, & from other Parts not better.[...]
The Elector of Hanover is specifically named, & will be desired to join in the Treaty with the Elector of Saxony, & to furnish either Troops or Money. [...] I wish I could send you any certain good news from Moscovy.  

The intelligence acquired, however, brought in some positive results: for one, the French Marshall Belle-Isle had been captured in the Electorate in December 1744. Once removed to England, though, his status became the subject of dispute as he had been seized in the midst of a diplomatic mission to Prussia. Therefore, he was hardly a prisoner of war and, as a result, he was released by exchange in August 1745.

Intelligence from Scotland was also worrying. On 6 January 1745, Newcastle wrote to Lord Chesterfield, Viceroy of Ireland and the author of the famous letters to his son:

The landing of Lord John Drummond, the little assistance that has been sent from Dunkirk to Scotland, the small number of Irish and French officers that have attended the Pretender’s son in Scotland and England, are appearances which I could easily account for without concluding that France had seriously entered into the Pretender’s cause. But all our advices (and those which cannot be intended to deceive us) have for some time past represented the party to be taken in the strongest manner, that the Court of Versailles a besoin de bride plutôt que des éperons, that at present it was cent contre cinquante in favour of the house of Stuart; that the volunteers were coming in every day at Paris for the croisades, that Mr d’Argensen (Foreign Minister of France after Carteret’s fall in November 1744) in his discourses with the Pensionary’s emissary declared that they did not know who was King of England; that Prince Charles avançoit au trône d’Angleterre; that they could not treat with England; that it must be decided who was King. And all these menaces and gasconnades are realised by the actual departure of the Pretender’s second son (later Duke of York), the Duc de Richelieu, the Prince de Turenne, the Duc de Monbason, General Buckley en volontaire, etc., for Dunkirk, numbers of small vessels at different times assembled at Dunkirk, Calais and Boulogne, and particular days for their departure named. And I think there can be no doubt but, if the rebels had continued in England advancing towards London, and our army been at a distance from the capital, the Duke de Richelieu would have attempted to make us a visit before now. And, though I rather think from the condition we are in to receive them and from the number of ships we have at present at sea, and from the Pretender’s flight, that their design may be at present suspended, yet I am still of opinion that they keep it up and shall not be surprised if we hear of them, and that soon, on some part of the coast tho’ perhaps not so near London as was at first apprehended.

On 8 June 1745, Stone was able to write to Richmond:

A Messenger, last Night, from Hanover, and the Dutch Mail, which came in about the same time, brought a Confirmation of the melancholy news received on Tuesday last, of the Victory gain’d by the King of Prussia over the combined Army in Silesia.

This was the Battle of Hohenfriedburg fought on 4 June 1745, which so glorified Frederick the Great as a warrior-king.

Newcastle was able to intercept dispatches from Scheffer, Swedish envoy to France, sent to the Danish minister, Count Bernstorff. Hardwicke wrote to Newcastle on 29 December 1745 that some of these intercepted dispatches, in turn, had been intercepted by the French, through the seizure of

7 Ibid, 152.
9 McCann, Correspondence of the Dukes of Newcastle, 166.
a Dutch fishing boat carrying them, because of which he felt that the original interceptions might have been based on falsified information deliberately provided by the French. Be that as it may, it was clearly four years later that Britain, with Hanover, had failed to keep France in check. Indeed, little had changed: on 7 September 1749, Newcastle lamented to Richmond about France [...] renewing their Subsidiary Treaties with Denmark, & Sweden. ¹⁰

It was left to Friedrich Carl Baron von Hardenberg, the Hanoverian Minister of State, to cope with these affairs in 1750. As the latter half of the 18th century progressed though, the Jacobite threat to the Hanoverian dynasty receded and ultimately ceased.

During the American Revolution, British and Hanoverian intelligence was focused on the United States and, interestingly, Russia. In this context, it was bribes which played the major role, endeavouring, in 1778 and 1779, in preventing Catherine the Great from declaring armed neutrality, which would hinder the effectiveness of the British navy in searching ships aiding the rebellious colonies with war material, as well as in penetrating the entourage of the American envoy to Paris, Benjamin Franklin. Then, in 1788, the Dutch were bribed with some £200,000, thereby successfully securing their support against the French and obliging parliament to vote a supply of extra money for such future purposes. Both intelligence interceptions and bribery were here to stay as means of achieving national security. That said, it was the successful intelligence and counterintelligence initiatives of Pelham-Holles and his Hanoverian spies which helped to ensure that the Jacobins were kept at bay and ultimately defeated. Therefore, when Prince Charles Edward Stuart died, in the same year, the most serious threat to Hanoverian Britain was long dead and buried and the latest French one was being contained.

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¹⁰ Ibid, 289.