<u>Donald im Thurn</u>

Extracts from the book *The Zinoviev Letter*, by Lewis Chester et al., J.B. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia & New York, 1968. – courtesy of Hilary Richardson

London life in the ‘twenties might have been made for conspiracy. The Great War had left an imprint on the society as well as on the economy. New strands had been woven into the fabric of the city. Two of them, in particular, formed a connecting thread between the many elements which developed an interest in the Zinoviev letter.

The first was MI5. MI5 had been founded by a single officer in 1909, largely as an experiment in counter-espionage. It was an experiment which quickly proved its worth, and, when war broke out, rapidly expanded in size. By 1918, MI5 had 850 employees. It had attracted a patchwork assortment of every type of man into the war effort, and once a man has been in intelligence he can never entirely escape from it. When the war ended, many, naturally, drifted back to the universities, to business, to the City. But, equally naturally, they did not all lose touch with their old agency, still less with their old friends. The job of any intelligence agency is to keep eyes and ears in every quarter which might prove remotely fruitful. MI5 did not lose this opportunity to maintain its contacts. The result was that in the 1920s London contained a quite disproportionate number of people with a taste for intelligence and some experience in its arcane ways. They knew one another, they knew the system, and some of them knew the Director of MI5, Col. Vernon George Waldegrave Kell. Kell, a veteran of the Boxer campaign, was the founder of the agency. In 1924 it was discreetly announced that he had retired from the War Office. In fact, this was simply another playful buff. Kell was still running MI5 when the Second World War began, and he was certainly to prove a significant figure in October 1924.

The other potentially conspiratorial element which the European upheaval gave to European society was the émigré community – in particular to White Russian émigrés. After Berlin and Paris, London was the most favoured stopping-place for refugees from Bolshevism. There was the usual quota of disinherited aristocrats but also a number of energetic traders. All were bitterly opposed to the Bolshevik regime, and to any move which endowed it with the cloak of diplomatic legitimacy. Many believed that they would return, and they were not averse to any undercover politicking which might hasten that day. The MacDonald Government, being among the first Western powers to grant recognition, was anathema. Anything which might damage it would enjoy their full approval, especially if it damaged the Bolsheviks at the same time.

As it happened, there was at least one man in London who united both these elements in himself. Conrad Donald im Thurn was both a former MI5 agent and a director of one of the émigré commercial concerns, the London Steamship and Trading Corporation. Im Thurn was one of thoseagents who had not lost touch. And he was an Englishman among the Russians who shared their hatred of Bolshevism, and, by extension, Socialism.

The curious Old German name was deceptive. The im Thurns were, like many assimilated European families, more English than the English. The original family seat was at Schafhausen, near Lake Constance, but Donald’s father had set up the family business in London at the turn of the century. Donald himself had been sent to Radley. The family was already mildly distinguished. By 1924 it had produced a Governor of Fiji (Sir Everard im Thurn), and a successful sailor who was later to get a Mediterranean command (Admiral John im Thurn). At school Donald was noted for the sterling British quality of being able to throw a cricket ball ‘harder, straighter and farther than many men who play first-class cricket.’

Im Thurn, like so many people, got into MI5 by accident. Before the war he worked in an estate agency in Hampshire. Bad health prevented him from signing on for active military service. In August 1914 he was leading a quiet family life in Bishops Waltham. His wife and children were at the seaside, in Boscombe. One Sunday, according to a possibly romanticized account of his entry into the secret service later given by his wife, as he was driving back from Boscombe, he saw a motorcyclist by the side of the road who had been floored by one of the anti-motorist devices still common at the time, a wire stretched from tree-trunk to tree-trunk. The motorcyclist turned out to be a military dispatch rider. Im Thurn left him to an ambulance, and himself carried the despatches to their destination, the G-o-C Southern Command. That officer, impressed by his enterprise, noted his name, and in due course im Thurn was asked to carry out a dangerous mission carrying despatches to Belgium. From this, a move to MI5 was, in the amateurish way that intelligence recruited people 50 years ago, a natural step. (Their amateurishness was symbolised by their use of Girl Guides as headquarters messengers in London during the war – although it could be argued that there was some method in their madness: the patriotism of the Girl Guides is, after all, unquestionable.)

Im Thurn enjoyed his time in MI5. He was a conventionally brave, middle-class Englishman, and obviously a patriotic one. The adventurous life, in the country’s cause, appealed to him, and there can be little doubt that when the war ended and he returned to private life, he missed the sense of belonging to an obscure but important group of patriot gentlemen. He turned to business in London, and soon became involved in a variety of companies run by Russian émigrés. Their main business was ships – principally the ships of the Russian Volunteer Fleet, freelance cargo vessels, some of which had been held in England after the 1917 Revolution on the grounds that they belonged to an unrecognised and potentially hostile power.

In October 1924 the elements of Donald im Thurn's past career, coupled with a piece of pure chance, contrived to involve him in an intelligence coup of greater magnitude than anything he ever handled for MI5. He got wind of the Zinoviev letter. What is more, he got wind of it 48 hours before the permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office.

(*The Zinoviev Letter*, pp. 70-72).

In March 1929 im Thurn fell seriously ill. He had never been an outstandingly fit man. In the war he had missed active service for health reasons; this was the main reason why he ever fund his way into MI5. The doctors were never absolutely certain what was wrong. It was some sort of illness, which his daughter, a doctor, later diagnosed as Hodgkin's Disease. [Guy] Kindersley visited him several times, and never found out what the exact complaint was. One of the more lurid tales of the time, born of romantic ignorance, was that he had been poisoned by Bolshevik agents. This can now be totally discounted.

In a year he was dead. Mystery pursued him to the end. On 21 March, the night of his funeral in Somerset, his house in Eaton Terrace was empty. That night it was broken into, by people who searched only his desk and clothing. If they were searching for light on the Zinoviev letter, they were almost certainly disappointed. He had long before made sure that none of his confidential documents were kept at home. Everything, if it was anywhere, was at his office in St. Mary Axe.

Three days after the death of Donald im Thurn, his wife received a letter which was seen, at least by Kindersley who inspired it, as a conscientious recompense for the knighthood he did not get. It said:

Dear Mrs. im Thurn,

Though I only had the pleasure of meeting your husband once, may I offer you in all sincerity my truest sympathy? He was a man who was always ready to give himself to the service of his country.

I am,

Yours sincerely,

(sgd) Stanley Baldwin.

(*The Zinoviev Letter*, p. 183)