

The Spin Doctor and the Nazis

By Tim Luckhurst

As the suspect approached the western side of Carlton House Terrace in Westminster on the afternoon of Wednesday 23rd November 1938, his MI5 tail noted that he wore a Homberg hat. He was 5'9" tall and of medium build. Sporting a dark grey suit with narrow-cut trousers, he was blue eyed (with a slight squint in his right eye) and had dark hair and a fresh complexion. He wore a light grey tweed overcoat and walked with his feet turned out. The Foreign Office was intrigued. This man was not one of their diplomats. So, who was the man in the homberg, why was he making visits to the German Embassy and who was his contact there?

MI5 could answer all of these questions. They had a source inside the embassy as well as field agents to follow discreetly and observe meticulously. The security service had been watching the mystery man for some time. Nevertheless, their answers, supplied to Sir Alexander Cadogan, Permanent Undersecretary at the Foreign Office, on November 29th 1938 came as a shock. The suspect was George Steward, the Prime Minister's personal press officer and a colleague so dedicated to Neville Chamberlain that Cadogan feared Steward might be conducting private negotiations with the Nazi regime on his boss's behalf.

Now, detail made available in secret intelligence files released to the national archives, adds much to our understanding of this most controversial episode in the history of relations between the British Press and Neville Chamberlain.

Steward spent the hours between 1.15pm and 3.50 pm on Wednesday 23rd November 1938 in discussion with Dr Fritz Hesse, Press Attaché at the German Embassy. MI5 had learned of the meeting in advance when their source in the Embassy told them 'Hesse was to see a representative of the P.M.' Their initial reaction was to have Hesse watched closely 'to see whether their informant was lying or not'. Plainly the informant was reliable. He or she also supplied the text of a report Hesse sent to Hitler's Foreign Secretary, Joachim Von Ribbentrop, summarising his discussions with Steward.

Dr Hesse believed Steward had offered a dramatic improvement in Anglo-German relations that would greatly please the Nazi elite in Berlin. His report reveals that the man Hesse referred to as 'my contact with the Prime Minister' offered concessions which, Hesse told Ribbentrop, 'would have immediately the

greatest effect on public opinion in England and would serve as the basis for a general Anglo-German understanding'. Hesse believed the grounds now existed to achieve 'the happiest and most far-reaching effects for the relationship between the two countries.' He concluded that 'Great Britain is ready, during the next year, to accept practically everything from us and to fulfil our every wish'.

Steward's secret visit to the Embassy was not his first. MI5 had been following him for a while. But the meeting during which he was identified took place in November 1938, just weeks after Chamberlain signed the Munich Pact handing most of Czechoslovakia over to German aggression. His press officer's astonishing attempts to advance not just peace, but active partnership in international affairs between Britain and the Nazi regime, came at the high point of appeasement. In March 1939 Hitler would demonstrate the worthlessness of the Munich agreement by seizing the last remaining portion of Czechoslovakian territory. Until then Steward, like his boss, was riding high. Indeed, his secret meeting with the Nazi diplomat may have tasted additionally sweet because it came in the immediate aftermath of victory over his most dangerous rival.

Rex Leeper of the Foreign Office News Department was determined to obstruct appeasement. Chamberlain considered him rebellious and disloyal. And the Prime Minister had reason to distrust this Australian-born graduate of Melbourne Grammar School and New College Oxford. Determined to counter the pro-appeasement briefings that poured from Downing Street into the ears of newspaper proprietors, editors and correspondents, Leeper had set up his own rebuttal operation. Until Chamberlain's short-lived triumph at Munich gave him the authority to close down the Foreign Office as a bastion of opposition to appeasement, Leeper had run a slick operation. It was designed to beat the one run on Chamberlain's behalf by George Steward and Sir Joseph Ball, Chairman of the Conservative Research Department. Each of these men was determined to cajole newspapers into accepting and promoting their political priorities.

Newspapers mattered in the late 1930s. Nearly 80% of households took one of the popular national dailies, the *Daily Express*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Mail*, *News Chronicle*, *Daily Sketch* or *Daily Herald*. Middle class families would often buy a quality broadsheet such as the *Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Scotsman* or *Yorkshire Post* as well. And, in his relationship with these powerful and ferociously opinionated titles, Neville Chamberlain was a thoroughly modern politician. He hated journalists, but he recognised the power of mass circulation newspapers and yearned to control them. In his excellent, *Twilight of Truth: Chamberlain, Appeasement and the Manipulation of the Press*, Richard Cockett has described how, between 1937 and 1940, the high priest of appeasement curbed the hostility

of British newspapers towards Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy and converted most of them to active support.

Chamberlain himself maintained a friendship with Lord Kemsley, owner of the *Sunday Times* and *Daily Sketch*. He was also close to Geoffrey Dawson, Editor of *The Times* and a zealous appeaser. Among my favourite photographs of the era is one depicting Dawson deep in conversation with Chamberlain on the tarmac at Heston airport in West London as the Prime Minister prepared to board his flight to Munich. Lord Astor of the *Observer*, needed no persuasion. He and his wife, the society hostess Nancy Astor, regarded Chamberlain as a prophet. Steward and Ball helped him with these newspapers and with the mass market *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *News Chronicle* and *Daily Telegraph*. James Margach, lobby correspondent of *The Times*, observed acidly that ‘from the moment he [Chamberlain] entered Number 10 in 1937 he sought to manipulate the Press into supporting his policy of appeasing the dictators.’

Much of his success was due to George Steward’s brilliant manipulation of the parliamentary lobby. As a group of senior political journalists with privileged access to Westminster and Whitehall, the lobby had existed since 1855. Steward set out to use it in a new way. The old tradition whereby respected members of the lobby could talk freely to MPs, ministers and civil servants appalled him. By using such contacts a good reporter might find and report a range of competing opinions. Steward aspired to present appeasement as the settled will of a united cabinet and the ideal way to secure British interests.

To achieve his ends, George Steward concluded that all significant information about government policy must reach lobby correspondents through his lips or those of a loyal minister. And, by making regular, scheduled lobby briefings the key source of news, he tamed many of the most powerful correspondents. If they listened and reported what he told them without attribution – as lobby rules required – they would remain privileged insiders. That their readers would be conned into imagining these ostensibly factual insights into Government thinking were unchallenged truth was, of course, the whole point. And Steward was good at it. By the time Chamberlain most needed support from political journalists, Steward’s remodelled lobby worked so well that loyal ministers were often happy to brief the correspondents themselves. They knew their words would be presented as authoritative and that the rules on attribution meant they could not be held accountable for what they said.

What really got under Steward’s skin was that Rex Leeper, the upstart colonial at the Foreign Office, was almost equally adept. Leeper had gathered around him a loyal coterie of diplomatic correspondents to whom he offered a bespoke service

on lobby terms: lots of insider information but no-attribution. Among those who listened attentively were F.A. Voigt of the *Manchester Guardian* Vernon Bartlett of the *News Chronicle* Victor Gordon-Lennox of the *Daily Telegraph*, Norman Ewer of the *Daily Herald* and Charles Tower of the *Yorkshire Post*.

Leeper showed these correspondents secret diplomatic cables and analyses carefully selected to make the case against appeasement as emphatically as possible. In this respect, Leeper was no less selective than Steward. He would show his correspondents truly sensitive material, but only if it would help the cause. One veteran correspondent called these journalists 'Leeper's pets'. But they were not quite as meekly obedient as Steward's disciples. When their newspapers declined to publish stories that went too blatantly against the line as preached by Downing Street, several of Leeper's correspondents offered them to the private, anti-appeasement newsletters then circulating. These alternative outlets, such as Claude Cockburn's *The Week*, achieved real influence among opinion formers precisely because they were prepared to challenge the stifling orthodoxy about appeasement promoted so avidly by George Steward.

And Rex Leeper did not toil alone. Until the end of 1937 he was supported by Sir Robert Vansittart, Cadogan's predecessor as Permanent Under Secretary at the Foreign Office and a passionate opponent of appeasement. Vansittart ran an intelligence operation to obtain news about the activities of the Nazi regime in Germany. He used material his agents supplied on German rearmament and the growth of concentration camps to brief like-minded MPs including Winston Churchill. Vansittart encouraged Leeper to take similar risks.

By the time of Steward's clandestine meeting with Hesse, both Rex Leeper and Sir Robert Vansittart had been forced out of their frontline jobs at the Prime Minister's insistence. But a draft of the report Hesse wrote to Ribbentrop after their long meeting on November 23rd 1938 contains powerful evidence that George Steward still did not trust the Foreign Office to support Chamberlain's policy. Nor was he prepared to forgive his erstwhile enemies. Steward told his Nazi friend that their proposed Anglo-German agreement 'should not be negotiated through ordinary diplomatic channels, but settled direct between the Fuhrer and Chamberlain, in which case complete secrecy on the English side could be reckoned with until its completion.' Clearly, Steward remained determined to cut the Foreign Office out of any deal. He imagined that Anglo-German amity would burnish his beloved Chamberlain's reputation as the hero of the age.

Secret intelligence documents, culled from the key point of liaison between the Foreign Office and Britain's intelligence services, show that Steward also offered

the Nazi diplomat a chilling vision of future cross-party and newspaper support. Hesse wrote that Steward told him: 'he would vouch that such a declaration would also be used by the Labour Party to make a fundamental declaration of friendship to Germany and also that the English Press would fundamentally change its attitude'. Hitler was disproportionately sensitive about anti-Nazi opinion in British newspapers. He imagined it expressed government policy.

Dr Fritz Hesse was a Nazi diplomat anxious to impress his masters and to advance his career. But there is no reason to doubt that George Steward made the offers he described. Steward worked zealously to advance the cause of appeasement throughout Chamberlain's premiership and saw all who challenged his master as enemies of the national interest. The battle he fought against Rex Leeper was as rancorous and as personal as any fought between Alastair Campbell and Gordon Brown's spin doctor Damian McBride. George Steward was the first person to do a job comparable to the one modern spin doctors such as Joe Haines, Alastair Campbell and Bernard Ingham would fill. And he exercised similar power at a uniquely sensitive historical moment. We know how highly Chamberlain valued his services.

In the recently released documents, a treasure trove of communications between the Foreign Office and Britain's intelligence services, is a self-typed document prepared by Sir Alexander Cadogan, Vansittart's replacement at the Foreign Office. In it, Cadogan debates the pros and cons of confronting the Prime Minister with MI5's evidence about George Steward's clandestine meetings with Hesse. Cadogan worried that Chamberlain 'Would probably think that his policy of appeasement had been torpedoed by the wicked anti-German Foreign Office'. Nevertheless, the new Permanent Undersecretary concluded that Chamberlain must be told. If the negotiations proposed by Steward were to proceed 'they can only result in discomfiting the moderates in Germany, in confirming the extremists in power, and in some bogus settlement which will be the beginning of the end of the British Empire, chloroformed as it will be by a totally false impression of security'.

Briefed by Cadogan, Lord Halifax, the Foreign Secretary, confronted Chamberlain with MI5's report. Chamberlain managed to appear 'aghast at the news', but his subsequent conduct did nothing to suggest that the Prime minister disapproved of his press officer's activities or disowned his approach. George Steward's job was secure. He remained at Neville Chamberlain's side until Winston Churchill took office in May 1940.

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The files referred to are from the Permanent Undersecretary's Department, an important point of liaison between the Foreign Office and the Intelligence services. They may be accessed via <http://www.secretintelligencefiles.com/The-Collection/Overview> or in The National Archives.