Spy Scandal

When Igor Gouzenko, a cipher clerk at the Soviet Embassy in Ottawa, defected in 1945, his disclosures about Russian espionage rattled more than one western capital. Suddenly, the incipient Cold War got colder.

By Reg Whitaker

Fred Rose in court. A communist MP from Montreal, the only communist ever elected to Parliament, Rose was convicted of espionage following the 1945 defection of the Russian embassy clerk, Igor Gouzenko. It was the beginning of the Cold War.

The evening of Sept. 5, 1945, found Canada's capital at peace. Ottawans strolled the streets or lined up for the cinema. The war was over. It was a month since Hiroshima. Little did anyone suspect that over at the Soviet Embassy, a handsome Victorian mansion in a fashionable residential area of the city, a young cipher clerk was preparing to drop another bomb on an unsuspecting world.

Working feverishly in the embassy's secret code room, he amassed over 100 documents, most of them reports handwritten in Russian. He stuffed them in his jacket and fled. Soon after, he burst into the offices of the Ottawa Journal and accosted a startled night editor with an excited cry: "It's war! It's war! It's Russia!"

Failing to convince the editor in his agitated, heavily accented English, the man fled back into the night. Over the
next day and a half he was to turn up at various places, including the Justice Department, sometimes with his wife and infant son in tow. But he was seemingly unable to interest official Ottawa in his excited story of Soviet espionage, or to gain political asylum.

The following night, while he and his wife hid in an adjoining flat, men from the Soviet Embassy broke down the door of his apartment. The Ottawa police intervened, followed quickly by the RCMP. Igor Gouzenko had successfully defected to Canada. To the government, he passed documents implicating Canadians in espionage against their country under the direction of the Soviet military attaché, Col. Nikolai Zabotin. With Gouzenko’s defection came one of the first shots fired in the Cold War. But it was five months before the echoes of that shot reached the public and the world at large.

The State Strikes

It was in the pre-dawn hours of Feb. 15, 1946, that the Canadian state struck. Squads of narcotics agents, temporarily on loan to the RCMP Intelligence Branch, gathered silently outside the homes of a dozen civil servants. Their instructions were to force entry at exactly 6 a.m., arrest the suspects, and scoop up any files, notebooks, documents and books which might serve as evidence.

Nine men and two women were brought to the RCMP barracks on the eastern outskirts of Ottawa. Two more men followed within days. They were held — incommunicado, without charge, without counsel — for interrogation. They were then brought before a royal commission of inquiry and ordered to testify. All this was possible under the draconian powers of the War Measures Act, invoked by authority of a secret order-in-council known only to Prime Minister Mackenzie King, two of his cabinet ministers and a few senior civil servants.

The evening of the arrests, King read a 250-word statement to the press indicating that Canadian civil servants had been detained on suspicion of disclosing secret information to a foreign power. He did not mention Russia, but reporters quickly ferreted out the information elsewhere. The next day, newspapers around the world began a sensational run of headlines about Soviet spy rings, stolen atomic secrets, and communist treachery.

The Cold War was on, and for a brief moment, Canada was at centre stage. Attention would soon shift to the great powers, and it would become apparent that Canada had been merely an accidental set for a scene in a drama in which the country would play a peripheral role. But for the moment, Canadians were both excited and alarmed at the unaccustomed attention.

Pointing the Finger

Within a few months of the original RCMP roundup of suspects, a series of
The Man with the Bag on His Head

Igor Gouzenko was big news around the world when he defected. To many Canadians, he became the heroic figure who chose freedom over totalitarianism, and alerted the Western world to the threat of Soviet Communism. Hollywood did its part in promoting this image, shooting a movie in Ottawa starring the dapper Dana Andrews as Gouzenko.

But Gouzenko turned out to be an enormous headache for the Canadian government. He was not an easy man to deal with. He expected protection, but quickly alienated his RCMP guards, to the point where the RCMP commissioner soon insisted that he wished his force to be rid of the responsibility of guarding the defector.

Gouzenko and his family went into hiding, living under assumed identities for decades. Despite two best-selling books he wrote, contracts from magazines, movie rights, and a pension provided by an admirer, Gouzenko was always short of money. He would keep going back to the government for more.

Claiming that he remained an assassination target for the Soviet secret service, Gouzenko took elaborate precautions to protect his identity right up to his death in 1982. When he appeared in public under his own name, it was always with a bag over his head: This became his unmistakable trademark to Canadians.

He also took to suing virtually everyone who wrote about him. To publishers and writers, these lawsuits were intimidating. Even if they felt their case was sound, many preferred to settle to avoid the steep costs of prolonged legal action. Here was a strange way for Gouzenko to celebrate freedom of expression in his chosen country.

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reports was produced by a special royal commission under Justices Robert Taschereau and R. L. Kellock of the Supreme Court of Canada. These reports detailed a picture of widespread Soviet espionage, employing Canadians who acted mainly out of sympathy with the Soviet communist system. Communism, it was alleged, was at the root of the treason.

The only sitting communist MP, Fred Rose, was charged and later convicted of espionage. Another leading Communist Party official, Sam Carr, was later convicted of passport offences associated with the spying charges.

The commission's first interim report was personally delivered by Lester Pearson, then under-secretary of state for external affairs, to Winston Churchill. This was just before the great British wartime leader, with U.S. President Harry Truman at his side, delivered his famous March 1946 warning to the West at Fulton, Mo.: “From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent.”

Subsequent royal commission reports were widely distributed and read, not just in Canada, but in other countries as well. Their message was loud and clear: Communists in Western nations constituted a fifth column, they were agents of Soviet aggression and expansionism.

The Five-Month Gap

Soon, the search for the “enemy within” would turn into a full-scale witch-hunt in the U.S. It was led by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI, the House Committee on Un-American Activities, and Sen. Joseph McCarthy who gave his name to irresponsible smear tactics (McCarthyism). Canadians would later recoil in some revulsion at the American excesses of the so-called McCarthy era of the late 1940s and early 1950s, but it was the Canadian government that first gave official legitimacy to the idea that the Cold War