7 The World Youth Festival in Prague, 1947

THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT'S COUNTEROFFENSIVE AGAINST THE WFDY

Most members of the British government could not forgive themselves for their confused reaction to the World Youth Congress in 1945. Ernest Bevin and Herbert Morrison, Philip Noel-Baker and Hector McNeil were just some of those who were now intensely suspicious of the WFDY and the IUS. For the past two years the Foreign Office had tried to counter the WFDY by setting up a rival non-communist body – the future World Assembly of Youth (WAY – see Chapter 9 below) – and a conference had been called for August 1948 at Westminster to set this in motion. The Foreign Office was scandalized by the refusal of the NUS to take part:

In company with two or three other communist-penetrated British youth organizations which are members of the 18–30 Conference, it voted against participation in the August International Conference and will not therefore be represented on the British delegation. Instead it has pinned its flag to the WFDY mast and is supporting the Conference of Working Youth at Warsaw in August.¹

Sir Stafford Cripps and Chuter Ede, however, still supported the WFDY, and (as President of the Board of Trade and Home Secretary, respectively) they carried enough weight for the cabinet majority to proceed with caution.

The question of whether the WFDY should be admitted to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) therefore had to be thrashed out in cabinet. The ministers had before them a memorandum drawn up by Philip Noel-Baker, the Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office.² In the brief history of the WFDY that formed the introduction to the memorandum, Noel-Baker left little doubt about his own convictions. He was less interested in whether the WFDY should be recognized by ECOSOC than he was in describing the essence of this communist organization:

I annex a brief summary of the history of the Federation. It will be seen that the Federation has every appearance of a creation of the Soviet

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¹ J. Kotek, Students and the Cold War © Jöel Kotek 1996
Government for their own political purposes. In fact it seems to be a clear example of the increasing tendency of the Soviet Government to create, or penetrate, international bodies of an apparently harmless character for the purpose of spreading communist ideas and propaganda. In practice that means that they are used for propaganda against Great Britain. In this case the target is the well-chosen one of youth, to whose conversion the communists always devote particular attention.3

Noel-Baker did not lack courage in making this presentation. His memorandum was after all going to be read by at least eleven ministers who had been involved, in one way or another, in the creation of the WFDY: eight of them had agreed to sponsor the World Youth Council, including the Home Secretary, Chuter Ede, and indeed Noel-Baker himself; two others (no less than the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary) had sent messages of support; and of course there had been the key role played by Sir Stafford Cripps. But Noel-Baker pulled no punches:

In the spring of 1945, the World Youth Council informed the Foreign Office that it was hoping to call a Conference in August and requested facilities for visiting delegates. The secretary of the World Youth Council was Mrs Kutty Hookham, a member of the Communist Party, and the chief British delegate was Margot Gale, who was regarded by the party leaders as one of their best 'under-cover' contacts. This request was originally turned down on the strength of a War Cabinet decision of June 1942.... However, in August 1945 the Cabinet reversed the decision and the World Youth Conference was held in London in November 1945 and established the World Federation of Youth.4

Noel-Baker clearly had access to the best information, almost certainly from MI5, for who other than counterintelligence could have told him about these hidden links? Despite a few minor errors,5 he went on to give an accurate summary of the beliefs and goals of the WFDY.

The concluding recommendations of the memorandum were uncompromising: not only was the WFDY to be barred from ECOSOC, but a counter-federation should be formed as soon as possible. However, the cabinet minutes of 29 July 1946 show that there had been resistance:

In discussion it was urged that, whether or not the Federation was under communist control, it was inappropriate that an organization which had no functional basis and merely claimed to speak for the youth of the