7
Security Aspects of the Nordpol Affair

It would be impossible to write an account of SOE’s Security Section without addressing the organisation’s greatest operational disaster; the penetration of its organisation in Holland by the Abwehr. The ‘Nordpol’, or ‘Englandspiel’, affair has achieved post-war notoriety and attracted the attention of conspiracy theorists who find it hard to believe that a failure of such magnitude could have occurred. Yet little attention has been given to the Security Section’s involvement in the investigation when allegations of penetration in Holland were raised, an examination of which casts a fresh perspective on what has otherwise become a well-known episode. More detailed consideration of MI5’s involvement in the aftermath of the affair, in the investigations into the two agents who escaped from German custody, John Bernard Ubbink (‘Chive’) and Pieter Dourlein (‘Sprout’), is similarly worthwhile; the subsequent detention of the two men caused a certain amount of tension between SOE and MI5.

The Security Section’s attention was brought to the situation in Holland as a consequence of a message received from the field by SIS on 10 June 1943. The message, supposedly from P.J. Six, Chief of Staff of the Dutch Orde Dienst (OD) resistance organisation, read,

150 for the 10th. For Colonel de BRUYNE. Eight parachutists including DOULIN and DRAKE were arrested weeks ago. Code key- word ‘Friend MARIUS’ is known.1

Although the message – which eventually reached SOE on 23 June – was obscure, there ‘was just enough in it which was known to be accurate to give rise to anxiety’ (a number of SOE agents had been given ‘I am a friend of Marius’ as a password to a safe house). The message, along with others received from the same transmitter, led SIS to express ‘serious
doubts’ about both SOE’s Chief Organiser ‘Bill’ (K.W.A. Beukema toe Water) and his reception committees. However, while the Head of the Dutch (N) Country Section, Seymour Bingham, conceded that one interpretation was that Bill ‘may be under the control of the Germans’, he attacked the messenger, pointing to the lack of evidence that the set that had transmitted the message was actually in the hands of the OD:

Some six months ago ‘C’ smuggled two wireless sets via Sweden to ‘X’ in Delfsijl [sic], who had been sending interesting military information. ‘X’ was unable to operate these sets but notified ‘C’ by his usual route when he had managed to give one to the Radio Chief of the O.D. in Holland. The final disposal of the second set is unknown to us, but queries about is seem to embarrass ‘C’ considerably. It is not known to me whether there is any other proof except ‘X’s’ message that set number one is in fact in the hands of the OD.

Bingham argued that it was likely the set was, in fact, being operated by the Germans. In order to clarify the position, he requested a ‘thorough investigation by an unprejudiced authority’.2

On 25 June, a meeting was held between Bingham and Charles H. Seymour, Head of the SIS Dutch Section, at which Cyril Harvey of the Security Section was also present. Harvey recorded the deadlock that ensued: ‘S.I.S. considered Bill to be under German control or at any rate very seriously compromised, whereas S.O.E. considered the O.D. wireless transmitter to be thoroughly unreliable and possibly under German control’.3 As such, it was agreed that ‘the facts should be examined dispassionately and independently in S.O.E. and in S.I.S. by some persons not concerned with operational side’, and that having done so the examiners ‘should meet and compare notes and see whether they could arrive at any agreed conclusions’. Harvey was appointed as the SOE examiner. He duly investigated the case (Leo Marks recalls being questioned by Harvey about agents’ codes), and compiled a report entitled ‘Bill and the O.D.’ which was circulated on 9 July.4 In a letter to Senter, he noted that ‘I understand from N. that someone in S.I.S. is now examining the O.D. transmitter on their behalf, from the security angle, and I take it that in due course my report will be sent to S.I.S., and their report will reach me.’5 While Harvey’s report highlighted a number of areas of concern, he found no reason to conclude that Bill was under German control, and some reason to support Bingham’s suspicion that the OD wireless set had been compromised. As his report was based upon SOE material, this was hardly a surprising conclusion. Of greater