



## The Gouzenko Affair and the Cold War

### Soviet Spies in Canada

On the evening of September 5, 1945 Igor Gouzenko, a cipher clerk for the military attaché, Colonel Nikolai Zabolotin of the Soviet embassy in Ottawa, left the embassy carrying a number of secret documents. Gouzenko tried to give the documents to the *Ottawa Journal* and to the Minister of Justice, Louis St. Laurent, but both turned him away. Frustrated and fearful, he returned to his Somerset Street apartment on the evening of September 6 with his wife and child and appealed to his neighbors for help. One of them alerted the Ottawa City Police while another took the Gouzenko family in for the night. Meanwhile, officials from the Soviet embassy forced their way into Gouzenko's apartment. When Ottawa City Police arrived on the scene, there was an angry exchange and the Soviets left without their cipher clerk or the stolen documents.

On the advice of the Undersecretary of State for External Affairs, Norman Robertson, Gouzenko was taken by the city police to RCMP headquarters on the morning of September 7 for questioning. Once there, he officially defected. More importantly, he turned over the documents that he had taken from the Soviet embassy to the RCMP. These papers proved the existence of a Soviet spy network operating inside several government departments in Canada and in the British High Commission in Ottawa. The Soviets also had a spy network in the joint Canadian-British atomic research project to obtain secret atomic information from Canada, Great Britain and the United States.

### An International Affair

Within a few days the British and Americans sent agents to Ottawa to assist the RCMP with its investigation. Prime Minister Mackenzie King recognized the gravity of the situation, but reacted cautiously. King discussed the issue personally with Prime Minister Attlee of Great Britain and President Truman of the United States. The three leaders agreed to coordinate a series of arrests, both in Canada and in Britain, some of which had to be delayed in order to get all suspects at one time. Eventually 12 suspects, both Britons and Canadians, were arrested.

The affair became public early in February 1946. Drew Pearson, a celebrated Washington columnist, told his radio audience that Prime Minister King had advised President Truman of a Soviet spy ring operating in Canada. Pearson's revelations triggered an immediate Canadian and British reaction.

### The Canadian Government Takes Action

On February 5, 1946 Prime Minister King informed his Cabinet about the Gouzenko case. Ten days later, after the first arrests were made, King informed Canadians of the creation of the Royal Commission to Investigate the Facts Relating to and the Circumstances Surrounding the Communication, by Public Officials and Other Persons in Positions of Trust of Secret and Confidential Information to Agents of a Foreign Power. Known informally as the Kellock-Tashereau Commission, after the two Supreme Court judges who headed the inquiry, the commission was given a wide mandate and extraordinary legal powers.

Some Canadians, such as the Emergency Committee for Civil Rights, were troubled by the Commission's use of in camera sessions. There were also fears that the basic civil rights of Canadian citizens would be infringed upon.

### **The Impact of the Gouzenko Affair**

The Gouzenko affair had a clear impact on Canadian public opinion, particularly perceptions of the Soviet Union. Feelings of solidarity towards a wartime ally dissipated and overt anti-Communist rhetoric began to surface. Many Canadians, including RCMP inspector Clifford W. Harvison, Progressive-Conservative Party leader George Drew and the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, feared that Communists were planning to overthrow western democracies; the Gouzenko affair provided evidence for their cause. Other Canadians, such as Tim Buck, leader of the Communist Party of Canada, sought to downplay the impact of the Gouzenko defection and present a more positive view of Communism.

Gouzenko's statement and the ensuing Royal Commission provided ample justification for being suspicious of the Soviet Union and Stalin. For Canadians the affair came to symbolize the commencement of the Cold War.