Fighting Fire with Propaganda: Claud Cockburn's *The Week* and the Anti-Nazi Intrigue that Produced the 'Cliveden Set,' 1932-1939

by Ari Cushner

"The public nervous system may be soothed by false explanations. But unless people are encouraged to look rather more coolly and deeply into these same phenomena of espionage and terrorism, they will make no progress towards any genuine self-defense against either." — *Claud Cockburn*¹

"Neville Chamberlain is lunching with me on Thursday, and I hope Edward Halifax... Apparently the Communist rag has been full of the Halifax-Lothian-Astor plot at Cliveden... people really seem to believe it." — *Nancy Astor to Lord Lothian*²

In 1932, *London Times* editor Geoffrey Dawson sat at the desk of his former New York and Berlin correspondent, Claud Cockburn. A grandson of Scottish Lord Henry Cockburn, the twenty-eight year old journalist had been born in China while his father was a diplomat with the British Legation during the Boxer Rebellion. Dawson attempted to dissuade Cockburn from quitting the *Times*, and he was sorry to see such a promising young newsman shun his aristocratic roots in order to join with the intellectual Left.

After repeatedly trying to convince his fellow Oxford alumnus to reconsider his decision to resign, Dawson finally admitted defeat and sarcastically remarked to Cockburn that "[i]t does seem rather bad luck that you of all people should go Red on us."³ Dawson had no way of knowing how hauntingly prophetic those words would prove to be. Five years later, the strongly anti-communist newspaper editor's words would come back to haunt him with a vengeance that neither man could have likely predicted.

On October 23 and 24, 1937, Nancy and Waldorf Astor, the Lady and Lord of Cliveden Manor, hosted guests at their Thames River estate in Buckinghamshire, England. The guests included powerful individuals publicly identified as pro-appeasement supporters of the Third Reich, including Nancy Astor's close friend Lord Lothian (Philip Kerr), British

Ambassador to Germany Nevile Henderson, and Geoffrey Dawson, whose presence at Cliveden made perfect sense given that the Astors owned the London Times. On November 19, 1937 Lord Edward Halifax, a representative of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, met with Herr Adolf Hitler and his entourage in Berlin.

Claud Cockburn was by that time affiliated with the Communist Party and had recently returned home after having covered the Spanish Civil War for The Daily Worker under the alias Frank Pitcairn. In addition to his journalistic responsibilities on the Spanish front, Cockburn recalled having served the Republican government shuttling between Madrid, London, Paris, Geneva, and Gibraltar, conducting as he put it “a mixed job of propaganda and espionage.” Meanwhile back in Britain, Cockburn was becoming famous within elite political circles for the highly sensational mimeographed anti-fascist newsheet he wrote and published as The Week.

On November 17, 1937, the very day that Halifax arrived in Germany, Cockburn’s The Week verified the accuracy of an earlier report in the Evening Standard by stating that “[t]he principal purpose of the Halifax visit to Berlin was to discuss a proposed Anglo-German bargain.” The Week also added that under the proposed terms of the upcoming negotiations, “Germany would offer a ten-year ‘Colonial truce’ to Britain in exchange for a free hand to attack countries in Eastern Europe.” Then, apparently in possession of highly sensitive, if not classified information, Cockburn added that “[i]n point of fact the suggestion did not come from Berlin. It came from London.” While influencing public opinion, such tales of pro-Nazi intrigue on the part of the British elite made Cockburn’s work both reviled and revered throughout Europe and the United States.

Five years after having fled the conservative ranks of the Astor-Dawson London Times, Claud Cockburn implicated his former employers as part of a powerful clique of aristocrats unofficially conducting diplomacy with the Third Reich out of Cliveden Manor, effectively circumventing the authority of the Foreign Office. “The plan as a concrete proposal first got into usable diplomatic shape,” wrote Cockburn, “at a party at the Astors’ place at Cliveden on the weekend of October 23rd and 24th.” Cockburn described this cabal as having included Dawson and “that little knot of expatriate Americans (Lady Astor was originally from Virginia) and ‘supernationally’ minded Englishmen which for years exercised so powerful an influence on the course of British policy.”

5 Claud Cockburn, A Discord of Trumpets, 298. Offering further elaboration on his intelligence work in Spain, Cockburn wrote that “[i]n the Spanish Civil War I was what, if one were inclined to pomposity, might be called a section leader of the counterespionage department of the Spanish Republican Government dealing with Anglo-Saxon personalities. My job was principally to vet applications by British and Americans for visas to enter Republican Spain.” See note 1 for reference.

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Perhaps taking some pleasure in scandalizing his former editor, Cockburn described the anatomy of a sinister conspiracy “with Lord Lothian, the Astors…The Times and its editor, Mr. Geoffrey Dawson (né Robinson), at the heart of it.”7 Yet neither the November 17 story nor a follow-up the next week drew much attention.

Then on December 1, 1937, Cockburn changed his approach and decided, as he put it, to title a “whole story ‘The Cliveden Set’ and to use this phrase several times in the text. The thing went off like a rocket.”8 The Cliveden Set sensation had begun. With the press, the public, and the elite of both Europe and the United States beginning to take rapid notice, Cockburn ran a story in the December 22 edition of The Week, noting that “the financial power of the Anglo-American set whose intrigues have centered at Cliveden is as extensive as their social ramifications and is greater than their political influence.” At the same time, Cockburn also referred to the “Cliveden-Times entourage” as Britain’s “other Foreign Office,” and proclaimed a “resounding defeat” for the Cliveden Set when the government officially announced that no deals had been struck during the Halifax-Hitler meeting.9

By giving a clever name to this influential cabal of elite Nazi collaborators, Cockburn turned the “Cliveden Set” into a household name, while creating a powerful counter-propaganda weapon in the international campaign against Fascism.10 For instance, British newspapers such as Reynolds News ran sensationalized reports describing the Cliveden Set as “BRITAIN’S SECRET RULERS.” Evening Standard cartoonist David Low satirized the group as the “Shiver Sisters,” whose motto was “Any sort of Peace at any sort of Price,” and featured one cartoon with “Nancy taking the [Hitlerian] salute from the Cliveden Porch.”11

Thanks to Cockburn, general outrage over the actions of the Cliveden Set grew furious, and forced Nancy Astor and her fellow alleged conspirators to begin issuing public denials. During an April 1938 speech to Scottish Liberals, for instance, Lord Lothian referred to a widespread story about the intrigues of the so-called Cliveden Set, said to be pro-Fascist, to exercise malign and sinister influence over the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister. The whole thing is

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10 Cockburn explains that “I think it was Reynolds News, three days later, which first picked up the phrase from The Week, but within a couple of weeks it had been printed in dozens of leading newspapers, and within six had been used in almost every leading newspaper of the Western world. Up and down the British Isles, across and across the United States, anti-Nazi orators shouted it from hundreds of platforms. No anti-Fascist rally in Madison Square Garden or Trafalgar Square was complete without denunciation of the Cliveden Set.” Cockburn, Crossing the Line, 19-20.

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a mare's nest originally invented by the communist editor of the *Daily Worker* [Cockburn] and spread in pamphlets issued by the Communist party. There is no such Set. There has to the best of my knowledge never been a meeting of the supposed principals to discuss foreign policy.¹²

Lothian’s pitched denial reveals the intensity of the controversy that erupted during this tense historical moment, as Europe and the world sat on the brink of war. Furthermore, defensive proclamations, such as Lothian’s claim that the Cliveden Set was “invented” by Cockburn as part of a Communist plot, helped to establish very particular terms of debate that to this day continue to constrain historical inquiries into the subject.

Almost all those who have written about the Cliveden Set have focused on the question of whether, or to what degree, Claud Cockburn fabricated his stories about the pro-Nazi conspiracy among British elite. Unfortunately, this suspiciously narrow focus on whether or not the Cliveden Set ever existed obscures a great deal of historical complexity, and ultimately, a much larger and more significant question.¹³ Cockburn himself coyly contributed to this misguided debate when he wrote of the “discovery—or invention, as some said—by *The Week*, of the famous—or notorious—Cliveden set.”¹⁴ Similarly, Lord and Lady Astor’s son Michael fuzzily recalled that “[i]t really was Claud Cockburn who created, or exposed [the set] (because I am still not certain in my mind which is the applicable term).”¹⁵

In reality, this is much ado about semantics. Cockburn was both an inventor *and* discoverer of the Cliveden Set, as he popularized the use of

¹³ While it would be difficult at this point to fully allege a concerted effort to whitewash the deeper implications of Cliveden by centering debate on a misleading question, the uniformity of the scholarship is striking. While some of the literature gives a fairly decent account of Cockburn and *The Week* in general, most authors who address Cockburn’s reporting on the Cliveden Set usually do so in a fashion similar to Norman Rose’s chapter titled “The Cliveden Set—Discovered or Invented?” Norman Rose, *The Cliveden Set: Portrait of an Exclusive Fraternity* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), 169. A number of these types of queries appear in biographies of Lady Astor, such as Christopher Sykes’ chapter “The Cliveden Set,” which he begins with the assertion that “[t]here is only one important question to be asked or answered about the subject of this chapter: did the Cliveden Set exist or not? Was there a conspiracy which conducted its intrigues and machinations under the roof of Lord and Lady Astor’s...country house; or was this one of those mass delusions...?” Christopher Sykes, *Nancy: The Life of Lady Astor* (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1984), 425. Sykes and Norman Rose each come to similar conclusions, that a Cliveden Set cabal was essentially “myth” (Sykes) and “conspiracy theory” (Rose) even though Rose managed to write an entire book on the topic, the only one of its kind to date. Ironically, Rose does not advance scholarship on the Cliveden Set much more than D.C. Watt did when he dismissed the whole episode as having been “invented” by Cockburn, who in the process somehow “convincing President Roosevelt!” of the group’s existence. Donald Cameron Watt, *How War Came: The Immediate Origins of the Second World War, 1938-1939* (London: Heinemann, 1989), 127.
¹⁴ Cockburn, *Crossing the Line*, 17.

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certain nomenclature that came to generally symbolize the intentions and actions of an identifiable group of individuals. If he were still alive, Cockburn might perhaps agree with at least two authors who contend that this discourse on the discovery versus invention of the Cliveden Set is "decidedly pointless" and, indeed, a "red herring."

Scholars have focused their attention on surface details, a situation that has prevented examination of Cockburn's role in an elite collective that neutralized the power of pro-appeasement British aristocrats. Coburn and his cohorts conducted their efforts through an anti-Nazi counterpropaganda network that exposed the Cliveden Set's machinations.

It is therefore necessary to re-examine the Cliveden Set episode in the context of the fierce pro/anti-Nazi propaganda warfare that swirled throughout European capitals between 1933 and 1939. Such a reevaluation of the meaning and relevance of the Cliveden Set reveals that Claud Cockburn was no lone communist crank with a typewriter and spare time on his hands, as many authors would have readers believe. Quite the opposite is true. Cockburn was a highly connected and rather brilliant member of the liberal intelligentsia, with experience in the arts of espionage and counter-espionage. His wife Patricia once stated that Claud "saw the propaganda battlefield of London as crucial in the struggle to contain the forces of Nazism threatening Europe." Cockburn's use of The Week to publish damning information about the Cliveden Set was a product of this "propaganda battlefield." The precision or veracity of the information Cockburn reported is ultimately of secondary importance.

While much has been written about the conspiracies of pro-appeasement and pro-Nazi British sets, cliques, and cabals, far less has been written about their opposition's counter-conspiracies. Yet, as it happens, Claud and his wife Patricia left a number of clues that shed light on the nature of the anti-Hitler coalition in which Cockburn and The Week played such a significant role. For instance, Cockburn relied on varied sources and associates for intelligence reports about the dinner party subterfuge that took place at Schloss Cliveden. The most prominent of these sources was the former foreign editor of The Times, Vladimir Poliakoff, who according to Cockburn was "a supporter of what was called the Vansittart line—the notion that by a friendly policy towards Mussolini it might be possible to split the Axis and isolate Hitler." Cockburn further recalled that Poliakoff "was fervent in denunciation of those powerful personalities in England who, on the contrary, saw in Hitler a potential bulwark against Bolshevism and thought friendship with the Nazis both possible and desirable."

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Revealingly, Claud Cockburn referred to Poliakoff as the person "who had first, perhaps inadvertently, provided the information that led to the discovery" of the Cliveden Set, though Patricia Cockburn claimed there was an even earlier informant. The editor of The Week continued to describe Poliakoff in cryptic terms, noting that "[t]he vigour of his campaigns and intrigues against such [pro-appeasement] elements was naturally heightened by his knowledge that some of them [his enemies] lost no opportunity to convince everyone that he himself was a hired agent of Mussolini." Yet in spite of his suspicion, or perhaps conviction, that Poliakoff was not on the level, Cockburn still concluded that "[h]is sources of information from anti-Nazi factions in the British and French Foreign Offices were thus first-rate, and the stories that came from them had that particular zip and zing which you get from official sources only when a savage intramural departmental fight is going on." This, it would appear, is a clue about the fight between government factions that produced the deliberate leaking of sensitive information to members of the press.

Indeed, a battle raged between the head of the British Foreign Office, Sir Robert Vansittart, a leading advocate of the anti-appeasement faction, and the pro-appeasement officials clustered around William Cadogan. When Vansittart was pushed aside in favor of Cadogan, Cockburn wasted no time in blaming the intrigue on the Astors and their Cliveden collaborators. While actual events were surely more complicated than Cockburn led his readers to believe, he was nonetheless highly knowledgeable of the Foreign Office’s inner workings, and had excellent inside sources. If Cockburn misrepresented or otherwise deliberately distorted what he knew about Vansittart’s departure, it is likely that Cockburn acted as a propagandist in concert with others who opposed any compromise with Hitler.

Vansittart was a master intelligence operator with his own extensive network of anti-Nazi information gatherers and distributors, which included Cockburn’s associate, Vladimir Poliakoff. At the same time that he ran this private group of anti-German spies, informants, agents, and operatives, Vansittart dealt officially with Sir Vernon Kell and Stuart Menzies, directors of Great Britain’s counterintelligence agencies, MI5 and MI6. Among the members of Vansittart’s private spy team were Otto Katz, a Czech who worked for Stalin, and two men, Guy Burgess and Wolfgang zu Putlitz, later revealed to be double agents working for both the British and the Soviets. Burgess later became known as one of the infamous “Cambridge Spies” who infiltrated deep inside elite British circles on behalf of the Kremlin as the Soviets prepared for war with Germany. It is highly significant, in terms of The Week’s position in this

18 Cockburn, Crossing the Line, 17; Cockburn, The Years of the Week, 231.
19 Cockburn, Crossing the Line, 17.

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anti-German alliance, to note that each of these anti-appeasement Vansittart operatives—Katz, zu Putlitz, and Burgess—had some connection to Claud Cockburn.\textsuperscript{21}

Certainly, given his experience as a propaganda and espionage operative in Spain in 1937, it is not unimaginable that Cockburn officially aligned with the anti-appeasement Vansittart faction. Patricia Cockburn noted that Claud’s firm stance against Italy’s Benito Mussolini made a formal partnership with Vansittart impossible, but did indicate that Cockburn was able to establish a line of communication with Vansittart and received a small amount of clandestine support from his network.\textsuperscript{22} At the same time, it is nearly impossible to discern the true nature of Cockburn’s relationship with both British and Soviet intelligence agencies. However, Cockburn and the principal members of the Cliveden Set at one time belonged to the same community of Oxbridge intellectuals who composed the ranks of both British and Soviet secret intelligence organizations during the 1920s and 1930s.

According to his son Patrick, Cockburn apparently “observed from the start that MI5 was keeping a close eye on his activities. He rightly assumed that they opened his mail and listened to his telephone calls.” It appears, based on Patrick’s assessment of his father’s file, that Cockburn first came under scrutiny during a 1924 trip that “Claud and [his Oxford classmate and lifelong friend] Graham Greene took as students to the Rhineland, then occupied by British and French forces. The purpose was to study local conditions and write about them on their return.” Patrick Cockburn added that “[t]hey were regarded with suspicion by British intelligence because they failed to obtain visas and carried a letter of introduction from the German Foreign Office in Berlin to the German authorities in Cologne.”\textsuperscript{23} Adding to the cloud of uncertainty hanging over this statement is the fact that Graham Greene later became a noted novelist and, as it turned out, a covert agent of MI6. Did he, perhaps, recruit his friend Claud Cockburn? Did Claud recruit Greene?

Cockburn spoke fluent German and developed many high-level sources during his stint in Berlin as correspondent for The Times. He arrived in New York during the summer of 1929, staying just long enough to cover the stock market crash and make contacts on Wall Street before resigning in 1932. While it is unclear whether or not he was ever formally recruited by British intelligence, he would surely have been a likely candidate to be approached both by the Queen’s Secret Intelligence Service and, given his communist leanings, by Soviet Intelligence.


\textsuperscript{22} Cockburn, The Years of the Week, 231-232.

While Cockburn was in Spain, he made connections with Mikhail Koltzov, the Foreign Editor of Pravda and an agent of Stalin who later appointed him as the Russian newspaper’s London correspondent.24 Cockburn’s records of these relationships are replete with cryptic insinuation. For instance, he recalled how Koltzov, shortly before being shot and killed in Moscow, satirized what the Communist authorities would say before they purged him. Koltzov imagined the authorities asking him whether “you deny, citizen Koltzov, that in Prague on the date in question you received British currency from the well-known British Intelligence Agent Cockburn?”25 It is curious that Cockburn chose to relate such (dis)information, yet he does so extensively.

With reference to the spy Otto Katz, who he had initially met in 1932, Cockburn wrote that “[s]ome time after the Communists took power there [in Prague], he was tried and hanged as a foreign agent. In his final confession he said he would have been loyal and true had he not been politically seduced and guided years ago by that particularly sinister organizer of Western Intelligence services, Colonel Claud Cockburn.”26 Katz, as has been documented by historians as well as Cockburn, had been a principal aid to Willi Muenzenberg, head of the Comintern’s Western European Department for Agitation and Propaganda (Agitprop). Katz, who often operated under the alias André Simone, was actually assigned by the Kremlin to spy on his boss’ powerful media empire. According to one historian writing about Katz, “[w]hen Katz was executed in Prague in 1952—accused of being a British and Zionist agent—no one raised the slightest protest.”27

With respect to Katz’s implication of him to Czech authorities, Cockburn boasted wryly that “[t]he statement made quite an impact in Prague, and several dozen people were arrested, and some of them tortured, for just having known me at one time or another.”28 Similarly, when describing what he did upon fearing that Mikhail Koltzov had been disappeared, he stated that he “visited M. Maisky, then Soviet Ambassador in London, and asked his advice...I wrote and he wrote, but no reply was ever received.”29 Cockburn added, almost as an afterthought, that “[i]t occurs to me now that quite a lot of people were probably arrested and jailed or shot just for getting a lot of letters from me. It would have been Stalin’s idea of being on the safe side.”

Meanwhile, Cockburn did not shy away from addressing the subject of his unknown status as a British, or perhaps Russian agent. He once wondered “that while the U.S. Senate was listing [Cockburn] as among

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24 Cockburn, Crossing the Line, 14.
25 Cockburn, The Years of The Week, 259.
26 Cockburn, A Discord of Trumpets, 307.
27 Penrose and Simon Freeman, Conspiracy of Silence, 191.
28 Cockburn, Crossing the Line, 31.
29 Cockburn, Crossing the Line, 16.
the world's most dangerous Reds, the Reds in Prague had [him] listed as an organizer of the Western Intelligence Services.\textsuperscript{10}

Of course, there is a good chance that Cockburn was being tongue-in-cheek when making these and related comments about those who thought he was a spy. At the very least, he was the type of journalist whose connections put him under constant suspicion of being a spy. It is also possible that Cockburn acted at times unwittingly as an agent of British or Soviet intelligence, and perhaps both. The distinct possibility certainly exists that he was at one point knowingly engaged in espionage for Britain's MI6 or the Soviet secret police.

Another clue in this respect relates to The Week's apparent immunity to government suppression. Patricia Cockburn addressed the suspicion that Claud aroused among some of his Eastern European comrades, by leaving the door open for a number of possibilities.

Claud, quite familiar enough with Communist thinking by this time, was quite aware that some simple and rigid minds saw in this immunity of The Week a sinister significance. It was obvious that The Week was being secretly protected by M.I.5 for devious and noxious purposes of its own. Long afterwards I asked him whether he had not found it embarrassing to be constantly in company with people some of whom supposed him to be a spy of the Intelligence Service. He denied that it had been embarrassing. 'After all,' he said, 'if I had...suffered the same type of police persecution and espionage as they have, I should draw the same conclusions that they do. I would very much rather go tiger-shooting with a man who is over-suspicious, even of me as his fellow hunter, than one who is over-credulous, as most of the Left in Britain seem to be.'\textsuperscript{31}

Thus, Cockburn was not only indifferent to being under suspicion, but maintained a type of healthy paranoia that made him prefer the confidence of those suspicious of him.

It is therefore not surprising that his loved ones were not above at least rhetorical suspicion. Cockburn recounted in his autobiography how he met his future third wife Patricia in 1939, after she had just returned from "a long trip" to Ruthenia, Czechoslovakia where "the anti-Nazis and the pro-Nazis, Russians red and white...thought she must be the original beautiful young spy woman everyone had read about and should be on guard against. They put her in jail."\textsuperscript{32} Patricia's own words seem to support this suspicion, at least partially, in her statement that she offered a

\textsuperscript{10} Cockburn, Crossing the Line, 8.
\textsuperscript{31} Cockburn, The Years of The Week, 98.
\textsuperscript{32} Cockburn, Crossing the Line, 11.

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Foreign Office official “some information” she had about Ruthenia upon returning.33

It is now well-known that during the 1930s the Soviet Union recruited spies from among the British liberal intellectual elite at Cambridge University, including the infamous Cambridge Five, a ring of students who worked for the Russians and infiltrated British Intelligence through the Foreign Office and MI6. One of these powerful spies, Kim Philby, was on the Spanish front taking orders from Moscow while ostensibly covering the Civil War for The Times. It is highly likely that he came into contact with Claud Cockburn at this time.34 Furthermore, the radical propagandist and editor of The Week did, for certain, have a rather close connection with Guy Burgess, another of the Moscow-London double-agent spies recruited through Cambridge.

It is also possible that Burgess had some involvement in the Cliveden Set episode, either as a source for Cockburn’s original reports or as a subsequent intelligence asset. Like Kim Philby, Burgess penetrated the ranks of various elite conservative circles such as the Anglo-German Fellowship,35 whose members intersected the Cliveden Set, and also the followers of the British Fascist Oswald Mosely, Nancy Astor’s “old friend” and a guest at Cliveden.36 More to the point, Cockburn himself acknowledged having known Guy Burgess in an article he wrote shortly before his death in 1981, “Spies and Two Deaths in Spain,” printed in 2004 by his son, Alexander. Cockburn began his article by asserting that

[b]efore he was revealed as a central figure—perhaps the mastermind—of the Burgess-Maclean-Philby spy scandal, the rapscallion Guy Burgess used sometimes to join me at a table in one of the bars of the House of Commons and, in the course of conversation, proclaim that he was an agent of the Soviet Government. This would come out in a drink-slurred roar, clearly audible to, for example, Ernest Bevin, Foreign Secretary, towering massively at the bar, as well as to any other politician or newspaperman in the place.37

Further contact likely occurred between Burgess and Cockburn at some point between 1933 and 1939 at the Café Royal, where Cockburn prominently conducted his business as editor of The Week and Burgess stopped in for supper at a time when he evidently was infiltrating both the

33 Cockburn, The Years of The Week, 12.
35 Costello, Mask of Treachery, 301-302.

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anti-Hitler “Churchillian” Conservatives and the “pro-Hitler right wing of the Tory party.”\(^{38}\) Thus it is clear that Cockburn was a well connected, well-informed journalist. His contacts ranged from throughout various European capitals to inside the intrigues of London and 10 Downing Street.

In this context, there are a number of diplomats, spies, freelance intriguers, or others within the anti-Nazi coalition who could have been Claud Cockburn’s original source for The Week’s November 17, 1937 report that the Halifax trip to Berlin had been planned at Cliveden. While it is debatable whether or not the meeting at Cliveden were as instrumental in orchestrating the informal diplomacy as The Week claimed, the Astor-Lothian-Dawson cabal was implicated in a propaganda battle that made objective truth subservient to the Popular Front’s need to build public support for resistance to German and Italian Fascism.

Thus, while it would be nearly impossible to determine how much of Cockburn’s intelligence on the Cliveden Set was based in reality, that is not the most important point for scholars to debate. It is clear that his reports about a pro-appeasement conspiracy hatched at Schloss Cliveden were not wholly untrue, yet the various parties involved would surely have at times embellished, distorted, and manipulated the information about what occurred at Astor manor.

Given that The Week functioned as a vehicle for stories that were too provocative for major newspapers, Cockburn received tips that inevitably turned out to be planted nefariously by propagandists or provocateurs. Cockburn even described how the process worked.

> When it was seen what kind of stories The Week uniquely would handle, all sorts of people—for motives sometimes noble and quite often vile—would approach The Week to draw its attention to the most extraordinary pieces of more or less confidential information. Sometimes it came from frustrated newspapermen... More often such confidences were the outcome of obscure financial or diplomatic duels. They would come, for instance, from the councilor of an Embassy who was convinced of the wrongheaded policy of the Foreign Office and the Ambassador and wished, without exposing himself, to put a spoke in their wheel.\(^{39}\)

Cockburn then reiterated that the fierce interdepartmental split between pro- and anti-Nazi factions of the Foreign Office produced an environment in which such intelligence “leaks” were made possible, adding that “[i]n the 1930s naturally produced a situation favorable to this type of development.” He continued insinuatingly that “[u]nder the

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\(^{38}\) Costello, *Mask of Treachery*, 300.

\(^{39}\) Cockburn, *A Discord of Trumpets*, 255.

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frightful overhanging menace of Hitlerism, there roamed through the capitals of Western Europe people who were half saint and half bandit."\(^{40}\)

In this atmosphere of heightened intrigue and propaganda warfare, the Foreign Office, or another source that sought to intentionally plant information discrediting the pro-appeasement faction, likely leaked the untruths that found their way into the pages of *The Week*. Reports of the Halifax mission having been planned at Cliveden were, perhaps, an example of the Vansittart faction using stories about the Astor-Lothian-Dawson clique to embarrass Hitler's appeasers in the Foreign Office.\(^{41}\)

If Vladimir Poliakoff was not the original Cliveden tipster, then it is possible that others such as Katz, zu Putlitz, or Guy Burgess, all of whom were connected with Vansittart, first gave Cockburn information about the Clivedenite's involvement in orchestrating the Halifax-Hitler meeting.\(^{42}\)

All of these figures had reasons for planting a "false confidence" as part of their psychological warfare against their pro-Nazi enemies. For that matter, Cockburn had his own reasons for bending the truth to fit his propaganda campaign, especially if he were a paid espionage operative.

The known activities of the Cliveden Set damaged the reputation of aristocratic British appeasers enough, whether or not it was they who sent Lord Halifax to Germany. It is also clear that Cockburn was unlikely to have randomly fabricated or invented reports about Cliveden without a strategic reason to do so. Thus, regardless of such details, the most important result of the infamous November 17, 1937 edition of *The Week* was the emergence of the phrase "Cliveden Set." Once the label stuck, it became a highly potent discursive weapon that not only severely damaged the reputations of Dawson, the Astors, Lothian, and their associates, but also questioned the credibility and legitimacy of the appeasers in the Foreign Office, thus eventually weakening their influence.

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\(^{40}\) Cockburn, *A Discord of Trumpets*, 255. Patricia Cockburn elaborates on this concept when relating a conversation with Stefan Litauer of the Polish New Agency, one of Claud's original sources of information for *The Week*. She wrote that "[t]here was always the possibility someone, some time, was going to plant a supposedly confidential story with the object of getting it wide publicity. As everyone knows, the whole purpose of a person who says 'don't tell this to a soul' is to ensure that the story be immediately spread far and wide. There were certainly members of this group who did implicitly trust one another not to play this game knowingly. On the other hand, there was always the possibility that one or other might himself have been the victim of a planted 'confidence'. Mr. X, representative of the X-land press, might have been told a very interesting story by the Counsellor of the X-land embassy not because it was true, but because it was a lie which the X-land government wished to have generally believed. And the X-land government rightly thought it more likely to be believed if it appeared to be a leak, than if it had any smell of officialdom about it. That, of course, happened. But, as Litauer pointed out, if one came to the conclusion that one's friend X had been the victim of such a false confidence, that itself was of interest. It helped one to find out what the X-land government was up to." P. Cockburn, *The Years of The Week*, 46.


\(^{42}\) On the connections of Katz, zu Putlitz, and Burgess to Vansittart, see Nommon Rose, *Vansittart: Study of a Diplomat*, 137-138.
As one of the many radical leftwing propagandists engaged in the battle against mid-twentieth century Fascism, Claud Cockburn was a combatant against various British interest groups that supported Hitler. The rotating cast of characters implicated as members of the Cliveden Set between 1933 and 1939 belonged to a loosely affiliated consortium of pro- appeasement lobbyists that included members of organizations such as the Anglo-German Fellowship, British Union of Fascists (B.U.F.) and a “rabidly pro-Nazi” group known as “The Link.”

In addition to his association with the Clivedenites, Lord Lothian was one of the many prominent members of the Anglo-German Fellowship. The creator and head of the B.U.F., Oswald Mosely, was a close friend of Nancy Astor, and he was known to have visited Cliveden on more than one occasion. Another guest of the Astors was one of Mosely’s “silent partners,” Sir Henri Deterding, the head of Royal Dutch Shell Oil, whose 1976 biography was titled The Most Powerful Man in the World. Another such powerful Cliveden visitor alleged to have been involved in pro-Nazi, anti-Communist intrigues was Sir Montagu Norman, director of the Bank of England. The United States Ambassador to England, Joseph Kennedy, was another noticeable and frequent guest of the Astors with a conspicuous pro-Hitler image problem. However, to be clear, Lady Astor also entertained many non- appeasers.

More important is the fact that the British government under Stanley Baldwin and Edward Halifax appeased Hitler because they and an interlocking coterie of elite power brokers saw an interest in at least preventing a war, if not also supporting the Nazis. Lord and Lady Astor, Lord Lothian and Geoffrey Dawson were not unique in their pro-German and pro-Fascist tendencies, but they were unusual in their ability to exercise a highly visible and meaningful amount of influence on government policy. Thus, the Cliveden Set label was attached to those high-profile elites perceived to be Hitler supporters. Even if their actions did not substantively influence Chamberlain’s decisions, their identification and label as Britain’s “other Foreign Office” certainly impacted policy.

What mattered was the perception that the Cliveden Set wielded power, and the ongoing Popular Front propaganda campaign facilitated the dissemination of imagery that characterized the Astor-Lothian-Dawson set as an elite pro-fascist cabal. In this respect, the cover illustration of Patricia Cockburn’s The Years of The Week is especially revealing. Beneath an image of German soldiers saluting a swastika, a complacent English gentlemen holds in front of him a copy of The Times with a headline reading “Hitler: New Peace Initiative.” Next to him a

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44 See Normon Rose, The Cliveden Set: Portrait of an Exclusive Fraternity.
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horrified, middle-class couple read a headline from The Week: "Hitler To Invade." They glare at the cover with a look of righteous indignation. In the struggle between the factions of pro- and anti-appeasement among the British elite, Claud Cockburn became the antithesis of Geoffrey Dawson, while The Week in many ways functioned as counterweight to the pro-appeasement reportage of The Times. Further scholarship may one day fully unravel the complexities of how Cockburn received his information, and also uncover which coteries or factions helped him expose the Cliveden Set. Such research would likely shatter the existing paradigm of inquiry into this sordid, cloak-and-dagger historical affair.

Attempting to untangle the mysteries surrounding The Week's unique and suspicious role in publicizing the Cliveden Set thus reveals a much grander constellation of issues about the use and abuse of modern power, especially war-making, and suggests alternative perspectives through which one might analyze and comprehend the present political landscape. The Cliveden Set episode and The Week's role in combating British Nazi appeasers invites a prescient set of implications relating to agents of espionage, propaganda, and intrigue. The nature of contemporary governmental structures under the global capitalist system is such that think tanks, secret societies, registered lobbyists, and elite cabals often exert more influence over decision-making than do constitutional bodies.

At the same time, Anglo-American intelligence agencies and their pervasive culture of secrecy in the name of national security represent a serious threat to the fabric of democratic institutions. New York Times reporter Judith Miller's front-page stories about Saddam Hussein's "weapons of mass destruction" in the buildup to the 2003 United States invasion of Iraq, for instance, is propaganda that would make even Claud Cockburn blush.45

45 Miller, who was imprisoned for 85 days in 2005 for refusing to reveal her source to federal investigators in the infamous Valerie Plame "CIA Leak Case" resulting in the trial of I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, claimed that she had been given "security clearance" while embedded with troops in Iraq (see http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9730308). While the Pentagon predictably denies that such access is ever given to reporters, it is worth considering the evidence of United States intelligence agency's direct sponsorship of domestic journalism as discussed by Carl Bernstein in "The CIA and The Media," originally published in Rolling Stone on October 20, 1977 (See "How America's Most Powerful News Media Worked Hand in Glove with the Central Intelligence Agency and Why the Church Committee Covered It Up," http://tmh.floonet.net/articles/cia_press.html). According to Bernstein, this clandestine intelligence operation started at the beginning of the Cold War under the command of then director Allen Dulles involving outlets including the New York Times, CBS, and Time Inc.