



JOINT SERVICES SCHOOLS FOR LINGUISTS 1951-60

National Servicemen preparing for
war as Russian linguists

by Dennis Mills
April 2013

The communications intelligence work of Bletchley Park and its Y stations during the 1939-45 war is deservedly well known, but what happened next in relation to the threat from the Soviet Union has received much less attention. Even as early as 1944 the Joint Intelligence Committee of the Chiefs of Staff had begun to consider the gross shortage of Russian speakers in Britain, and by 1948 British intelligence operations, having been run down after the war, were expanding once more. The communists took over Czechoslovakia in 1948, Hungary in 1949. The exploding of the first Soviet atomic bomb in 1949 caught Western intelligence by surprise and the Korean war began in June 1950.¹

The first large scale initiative in language training was a response to the need for about 200 Russian interpreters to join the staff of the Allied Control Commission in newly occupied Germany. In 1945-46 Professor Elizabeth Hill ran some six-month courses in Cambridge for these servicemen. Small numbers of interpreter students were also taught during the same period at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies in the University of London, when 24 service personnel, 20 men and four women, attended part-time courses. A similar scale of activity carried on into 1950-51 when there were 39 service students including two women learning a range of east European languages on a part-time basis.²

In 1949 an inter-service committee under the Ministry of Defence began to study ways and means of setting up courses for very much larger numbers of national servicemen. As a consequence of the outbreak of the Korean War, an extension of the National Service Act was rushed through Parliament in September 1950 to increase the period of training from 18 months to two years. A long period of Russian language training then became possible, followed by some useful intelligence work by those who qualified as translators. The committee's objective became the creation of a reserve of men who could be mobilised in

case of hostilities, and in November 1950 a target of about 4,100 by 1954 was adopted.³ Meanwhile an initiative by the Air Ministry in 1949-52 comprised four one-year courses for 30-40 *regular*, as opposed to *conscript*, servicemen at RAF Kidbrooke, in south-east London. The students were mainly airmen, both officers and men, but also a few from the Army and the Navy. Some were already experienced W/T (wireless telegraphy) operators.⁴



Students of the autumn 1951 (first) intake. Photo taken at JSSL Bodmin, summer 1952, oral group, instructor Dani Bondarenko, Ukrainian, courtesy of John Miller (Army), on the far left. Navy students all belonged to the purposely-formed Coder Special Branch.

This photo is taken from John's book, *All Them Cornfields and Ballet in the Evening*, 2010 (Kingston-on-Thames, Hodgson Press), p.23.

In March 1951, after much debate the inter-service committee started to take executive action, leading to the commencement of courses in October 1951. They had in mind lower and higher grade linguists corresponding to the terms 'translator' and 'interpreter', the former to be perhaps 65-75 per cent of the total. Joint Services Schools for Linguists run by the Army were established at Bodmin in Cornwall from October 1951 to Easter 1956; at Coulsdon Common near Croydon from February 1952 to August 1954; and at Crail in Fife from Easter 1956 to March 1960.⁵

Evidence has been found of 24 intakes altogether from 1951 to 1959. Bodmin and Coulsdon started by taking in 300-360 men at three points in the year, approximately 1 October, 1 February, 1 August, with roughly equal numbers from each service. Among the national servicemen in these early courses there was also a scattering of RAF regulars. Owing to Treasury economies, the pace had to be slackened in 1954 when one intake was probably abandoned altogether and the intake size was reduced to about 100-150 until the summer of 1956. Following this, there was an intake of the original size at Crail in November 1956, but the levels fell again in 1957. The last five intakes, after the Navy had stopped sending men, were down to only about 25 men, a dozen or so each of soldiers and airmen.



Bodmin 1954, with two grammar class instructors, Brian Hawkins on the left and Josef Godlevski, Polish. Hawkins went on to be a long standing instructor at JSSL Crail, later at the Defence School of Languages at Beaconsfield.

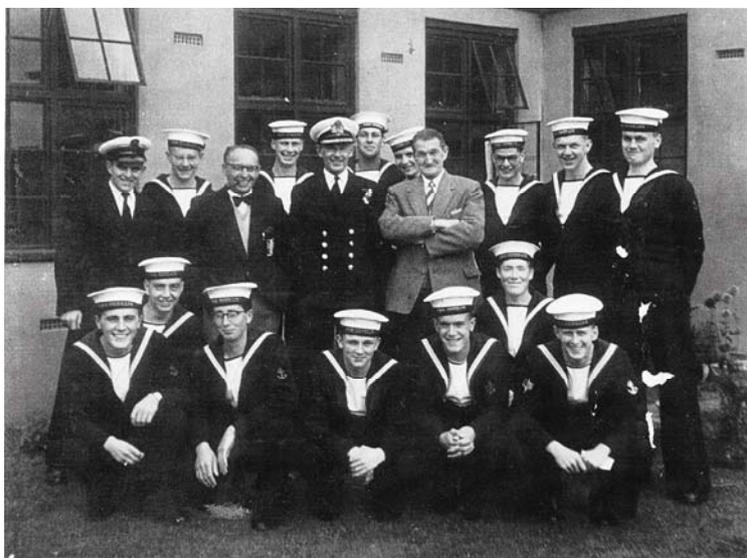
Courtesy of John Mitchell (RAF), extreme left second row.

The exact number of students sent to JSSLs has possibly not survived, but some estimates are available, starting with the ‘upwards of 5,000’ suggested by Elliott and Shukman.⁶ The present author has used two different but broadly congruent methods to offer an alternative suggestion of rather more than 4,000. Tentative use of planning sources in the National Archives indicates 4,182, very close to the original target; whilst a combination of the more reliable of the figures in those sources and a consensus of student recollections leads to a figure of 4,270. Both of these numbers look exact, but they are nothing of the kind, yet both point to the conclusion that Elliott and Shukman’s figure is much too high and ‘about 4,200’ is probably a better estimate.

It is more important to say that the planning target was eventually reached before the abolition of national service would, in any case, have forced a different strategy on the services. Had Crail closed two years before its demise in 1960, in terms of numbers it would have made little difference, but in terms of cost it would have supplied the Treasury with the best possible economy measure. In this late period Crail was also running Polish and Czech courses, but only for a handful of students.

Interpreter JSSLs were set up at the University of Cambridge, administered for service purposes by the RAF, and in the School of Slavonic and East European Studies in the University of London, administered by the Navy. Unlike the service-run JSSLs, however, they were run academically by civilians, Professor Elizabeth Hill at Cambridge and Dr George Bolsover as principal of SSEES, with Ronald Hingley as the course director followed by Bryan Toms. In October 1951 these schools both took men straight from initial service training on to Course A lasting one year, followed by a military Russian course at Bodmin

lasting about five months. For subsequent interpreter courses, men were selected at the first major progress test after 6-8 weeks of tuition in the service-run JSSLs. Course T, which started in October 1957, was the last interpreter course.⁷



The supplementary group of *interpreter* students at Crail, December 1957, with (L-R) Mr V Diakovski (Russian), Commander Maitland-MakGill-Crichton (i/c, Navy students) and Prince (knyaz = lord) Volkonski (Russian). By this date coders were dressed as seamen, and this group had been promoted to leading coder special. After passing the course, promoted to midshipmen.

Courtesy of David Talks, with glasses on front row.

These courses have often been described as superior to the contemporary degree courses so far as linguistic knowledge was concerned, leaving aside the study of Russian history, literature and culture, although these aspects of Russian studies were by no means neglected. Oral proficiency was particularly high. At the end of their courses most interpreters obtained Civil Service Interpretship certificates. After that the Army probably sent most of their interpreters to the Intelligence Corps depot at Maresfield in Sussex to take the course on interrogation techniques. Some of them finished off their national service as privates in the units from which they had gone to JSSL, but at least one became a sergeant in the Intelligence Corps. In their 'spare time' up to demobilisation, some of the Navy interpreters also went to Maresfield and/or on to a variety of jobs for a few weeks or months according to how long after call-up they had gone to JSSL. Some of these jobs were quite unrelated to their interpreter training. The scanty evidence available suggests that the RAF did not give their interpreters further training after the Civil Service exams, but were promoted to Pilot Officer on demobilisation.

The JSSLs were very successful despite tensions between the military commandants at the service-run schools and the academic staff, especially in the early years. Many of the translators, who received all their language training at a service school, gained A levels in

Russian, frequently finding the language papers much easier than the service end-of-course exams.



F Course at JSSL Cambridge, central part of the photograph of staff and students at our 'Passing Out' ceremony, held indoors at the Mill Lane lecture theatre owing to bad weather, April 1954.

Front row (L to R): Brigadier E K Page (principal at Coulsdon 1954, Bodmin 1954-56, later at Crail) Wing Commander Edgar J Harrington (principal at Bodmin 1951-c.1953), Flight Lieutenant A Heath-Bullock, Professor (later Dame) Elizabeth M Hill (principal, JSSL Cambridge), and Marshal of the Royal Air Force, Lord Tedder (Chancellor of Cambridge University).

Row 2: Dr Jan Horvath, Princess Natasha Naumova, Mr Alexei Plyushkov, Mme Alexandra Hackel, Mr Vladimir Saulius.

Row 3: Mme Chernysheva, 2nd Lt L Gemson (instructor, passed C course), Mr Goodliffe, Mr Boris Ranevski, Mr Cameron, Ms Doris Mudie (Liza Hill's companion), Mr Courtney Lloyd, Princess Elena Lieven (later Lloyd).

Courtesy of Peter Robbins (Army).

There was enough drop-out in the first three intakes to have caused the inter-service committee to revise its target date. However, the overall drop-out rate on translator courses was probably below five per cent, about level with university first degree rates in the same period.⁸ The interpreter courses were much more demanding, even allowing for the higher marks obtained by their entrants at the first major progress tests. Interpreter drop-out rates

were substantial at first, for instance, 17 out of 60 entrants to the London course in January 1953, but also appear to have improved over time, and the overall rate may not have exceeded 10 per cent.

The success of the JSSLs might be ascribed to four main factors. Firstly, the selection procedures, amateurish, haphazard and chaotic as they were, succeeded in finding among the mass of national servicemen a sufficient proportion of intelligent young men, usually with good linguistic qualifications at O level or *equivalent*, but more often at A level as well. Many were to go on to university after national service and a significant minority had already taken first degrees in various subjects before call-up.



Coulsdon 1953, a grammar class of the fourth intake outside a double teaching hut, with 20 students present and their civilian instructor, Mr Sandon. To distinguish Army from RAF students look for the khaki shirts – they are the soldiers. Anomalously, the Navy students were wearing Army gaiters on the orders of Lieut-Colonel Black, the commandant.

Courtesy of Bill Musker (Navy).

Secondly, high levels of enthusiasm for their work among the many east European instructors were often combined with charisma acquired during their previous lives in Tsarist Russia or the Soviet Union. Typically, they were newcomers to Britain, but had been jobless and dispirited and were willing to work for the mean rates of pay of temporary civil service posts.

Thirdly, their students responded with a keenness reinforced by a strong desire not to be returned to their units (in the case of the Army and RAF students) or re-categorised to another branch (in the case of the Navy students). They had looked forward somewhat miserably to a largely wasted two years, but instead found themselves being taken into an almost entirely unknown, exciting intellectual world. Frequent progress tests were also important incentives to do one's homework thoroughly.

Fourthly, but most importantly, inspirational leadership by Prof (later Dame) Elizabeth Hill is to be applauded. It was she who understood from pre-war experience in Cambridge the importance of oral practice. She also had enough contacts in the Russian and related diasporas to find appropriate instructors and possessed the organisational skills to deploy them to the greatest advantage. In her 1945-46 courses she divided the students into classes of 25-30 in which they were taught by a relatively small number of British graduates in Russian studies combined with native Russian speakers or bi-linguists who had a good knowledge of grammar and perhaps some teaching experience.



Coulsdon, 1953, oral group, instructor Oleg Kravchenko, Ukrainian. This group was part of a grammar class taught by Peter Meades, an instructor who had been on Liza Hill's 1945-46 Cambridge course as an artillery sergeant, later in Germany using his Russian.

Courtesy of Laurie Fox (Navy), middle of front row.

An *equal* amount of time was spent in smaller groups of eight or nine students (sometimes less) led by fluent Russian speakers who, strictly speaking, were never supposed to address their groups in English. Reading aloud, question-and-answer work, dictation and written interpretership were all practised in the service-run JSSLs, often complemented by singing, the recitation of poems and the telling of colourful stories from their former lives.

The Cambridge method was adopted to great advantage in all the JSSLs, with variations on the original according to local and personal circumstances. In particular the allocation of 50 per cent of contact time to oral work was strikingly different from the usual way of teaching a foreign language at this time. There was healthy competition between the JSSLs at Cambridge and London, as SSEES had also acquired considerable expertise in its field. After the national service courses finished, interpreter courses for regular servicemen at defence establishments kept up the supply on a lesser scale for various languages. One such establishment is that at Beaconsfield (Bucks) which later became known as the National

Defence School of Languages and recently (2012) has been scaled down and has become part of the UK Defence Academy.⁹

Translators who passed their courses were then trained for monitoring Soviet military radio traffic, mainly from locations in West Germany.¹⁰ The Government Communications Headquarters trained the Army personnel, whilst the Navy personnel joined their RAF colleagues in secure accommodation at the Applied Languages School. Initially this was located at RAF Wythall near Birmingham, moving first to RAF Pucklechurch in Gloucestershire, later to RAF Tangmere in Sussex.

When JSSL Crail closed, at least some of its equipment and staff was transferred to Tangmere, where the unit was named the Joint Service Language School (JSLS). There regular personnel of the RAF and Navy received both their general language training and related radio training. The RAF had been anticipating such a transition for at least a couple of years by encouraging or requiring those who volunteered for the JSSL courses to take three-year regular engagements instead of doing two years national service.

¹ R. J. Aldrich, *The Hidden Hand: Britain, America, and Cold War Secret Intelligence*, 2002 (Woodstock and NY, Overlook Press) *passim*; and his *GCHQ. The Uncensored Story of Britain's Most Secret Intelligence Agency*, 2010 (London, Harper Press), especially pp.68, 100, 103, 107-8; also Peter Hennessy, *The Secret State: Whitehall and the Cold War*, 2002 (London, Allen Lane Penguin Books), chapter 1.

² Elizabeth Hill, *In the Mind's Eye: the memoirs of Dame Elizabeth Hill*, 1999 (Lewes, The Book Guild Ltd) pp.230-36; James Muckle, *The Russian Language in Britain: a historical survey of learners and teachers*, 2008 (Ilkeston, Bramcote Press), pp.120-21. This is an excellent general survey, pp.120-36 in particular, including further information on pre-JSSL initiatives. My thanks to Lesley Pitman, Librarian at SSEES, for the London data.

³ Surviving minutes of this committee are in the National Archives, TNA/ADM 6331-34. See Tony Cash and Mike Gerrard, *The Coder Special Archive: the untold story of Naval national servicemen learning and using Russian during the Cold War*, 2012 (Kingston-on-Thames, Hodgson Press, available online) and Dennis R. Mills, 'Signals Intelligence and the Coder Special Branch of the Royal Navy in the 1950s', *Intelligence and National Security*, vol. 26 (5), October 2011, pp.639-55.

⁴ Much information of this kind has come from about 100 former Russian linguists of all three services and many different intakes, to whom the author is most indebted. Some of the RAF personnel are members of the RAF Linguists' Association, <https://sites.google.com/site/raflingassociation/home-page>

⁵ On Crail see Graham Boiling, *Secret Students on Parade: Cold War Memories of JSSL*, 2005 (Crail, Plane Tree); on Coulsdon see Maurice Berrill, 'Moscow in Surrey: Recollections of Coulsdon Common Camp and the not-so-secret classrooms of the Joint Services School for Linguists,' Bourne Society, *Local History Records* (journal of the Bourne Society), vol. 68, August 2011, pp.2-15 and Dennis R. Mills, 'The training of linguists for war, Coulsdon, 1952-54', *Local History Records*, part I in vol. 73, November 2012, pp.3-13 and part II in vol. 74, February 2013, pp.3-12. No comparable account has been found in print about JSSL Bodmin, but John Miller included his own recollections of being in the first intake there and of intelligence work in the War Office in a book that is mainly about his life as a journalist in Moscow over many years: *All Them Cornfields and Ballet in the Evening*, 2010 (Kingston-upon-Thames, Hodgson Press, available online).

⁶ G. Elliott and H. Shukman, *Secret Classrooms: a Memoir of the Cold War*, two editions, 2002, 2003 (London, St Ermin's Press), p.42 of the second edition.

⁷ The interpreter courses, especially from the perspective of the Army and RAF students, have been well described by Elliott and Shukman, *Secret Classrooms*.

⁸ Some problems at Coulsdon were recorded on pp.216-17 in Donald MacDonell, *From Dogfight to Diplomacy: a Spitfire pilot's log, 1932-58*, edited by Lois MacDonell and Anne Mackay, 2005 (Barnsley, Pen and Sword Aviation). MacDonell's remarks about poor teaching and high drop-out support the recollections of some Navy students of the August 1952 intake. This book is the only memoir of a JSSL principal so far found.

⁹ Muckle, *Russian Language in Britain*, pp.178-81 and information from Robert Avery, Principal Lecturer in Russian.

¹⁰ See for the Army, Jeremy Wheeler's History project on www.langeleben.co.uk (chapter 10); for the RAF, Leslie Woodhead, *My Life as a Spy*, 2005 (London, Macmillan) and for the Navy, Dennis Mills, 'One third of us might have been Wrens', *East-West Review* (journal of the GB-Russia Society), vol. 11 (2), 2012, pp.5-9.