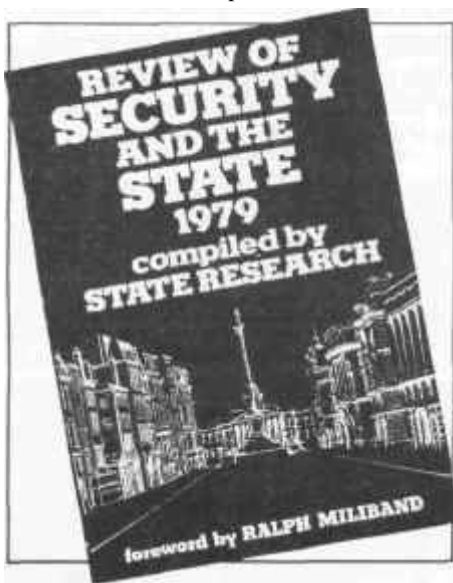


Reviews

STATE RESEARCH REVIEW OF SECURITY AND THE STATE 1979,

Julian Friedmann 153p £10.00



There was a spell in 1979 when *State Research* thought it might go out of business. The Tories' new measure to adapt the Official Secrets Act to provide a more modern, finely tuned tool of repression contained full and deliberate power to criminalise research or reproduction of material — however public — which had anything to do with the security or intelligence services, or their supporting partners, the Special Branch. The proposed new Protection of Official Information Act - now defunct - would also have enabled officials to demand the surrender of books, writings or any other material of this sort, on

pain of imprisonment. It was, if a regime in desperation needed it, an Act of burning books.

The work of *State Research* — reporting on the police and military, repressive law, internal security and espionage — fills a void somewhere between radical militancy and liberalism, and aims to satisfy both constituencies. This country, unlike the United States, has as yet no tradition of agencies for the independent scrutiny of the state, no freedom of information, no meaningful separation of powers away from the executive. Other US vices aside, there is at least little liberal trust of the Washington establishment. Dozens of small research and pressure groups — for example the Campaign to Stop Government Spying, or the *Covert Action Information Bulletin* — have campaigned against the government's repressive agencies.

In Britain in general, liberals vacillate and compromise (as often as not from positions of ignorance) on issues of privacy and personal rights; many militants accept their proper role as a subversive one, and brook no great alarm or take any great notice of the detailed acts of intrusion or repression. I do not like either view.

The British state — all states — are increasingly technologically armed with tools of surveillance and control, interrogation and repression. One of the most helpful developments which the 1979 *Review* reports is that the technological developments do not — yet — indicate that struggle is futile. The British Army intelligence report on Northern Ireland terrorist trends, which leaked to the IRA, is a superb example. Despite more than one third of the population on computer file, endless daily harassment and almost martial powers, the Army is not winning, it is not in sight of winning, and *it does not think that it can win*. The Shah's big battalions did not help him either.

But such straws in the wind are no cause for complacency, nor do they mitigate individual suffering through repressive political and economic regimes. What *State Research* has been trying to do, methodically, is document as much information as comes out, and is useful, about the state's sinews of power. Some conclusions are clear already from this research.

The Special Branch — the political surveillance arm of the police — are continually growing in strength. There are now 1259 officers on this work — the Special Branch has increased on a scale, in size and deployment, unprecedented in its history. They work to monitor subversives — widely defined to include anyone aiming to 'undermine' the present version of parliamentary democracy 'by political, industrial or violent

means'. When one includes in this trawl the recently revealed additional notions of 'potential subversives and connected persons', it is clear that their work will be governed not by what some parts of the population might regard as legitimate concern for public safety or whatever, but by their own arbitrary and generally far right wing perceptions of what political currents they dislike. In fact, no form of independent social organisation — even nursery groups — seems guaranteed to escape their surveillance, though the closest and most detailed files are obviously reserved for the militants and the activists of the left.

State Research have fostered a series of debates in parliament about the role of the Special Branch, successfully eliciting more data each time, and widening awareness of the political activities of the police. The vague and arbitrary definitions used to justify their work attract increasingly wide criticism.

The 1979 *Review* also recounts the one occasion when they scored well against Goliath. The use by the Ministry of Defence of troops to break the firemen's strike was quite illegal, as Army regulations forbid the intervention of troops in anything but a 'limited' and 'local' emergency, without parliamentary approval. Retrospectively the Ministry of Defence changed the rules in the Queen's Regulations.

A shabby story, but one that is a reminder that wholly arbitrary power has not yet been granted to the executive, however minimal our actual democracy. *State Research* in 1979 continues to prick the libertarian conscience and feed the militant with necessary facts. Like all dictionaries and digests of current affairs, it contains much that has been seen elsewhere, much that not everyone needs, and occasionally errs. But it does a vital and methodical job that no one else is trying to do.

Duncan Campbell