Glasgow Historian provides ‘smoking gun’ for BBC Torture Investigation

BBC Radio 4’s investigative series *Document* recently made a programme about Britain’s use of torture in the Second World War. Its investigation centred on the career of Edinburgh University professor, Alexander Kennedy. In 1960 Kennedy made a speech at the Royal Institution on the subject of ‘brainwashing’. He discussed techniques for using sensory deprivation and ‘truth drugs’ to break a prisoner. Kennedy’s words stirred a controversy in the press and parliament, culminating in the then prime minister, Harold Macmillan, denying to the House of Commons that Britain had ever indulged in such techniques.

The programme makers did not believe Macmillan. They contacted Simon Ball, Head of the Department of History, for help. Earlier this year Ball published *The Bitter Sea: The Struggle for Mastery in the Mediterranean, 1935-1949*. The *Bitter Sea* drew heavily on recently-released documents about Britain’s ‘hidden hand’ in the wartime Mediterranean. Ball was able to identify Kennedy as a member of SIME – Security Intelligence Middle East. This little-known intelligence agency was a joint venture between the armed forces and the Security Service, MI5. SIME’s job was to prevent German and Italian subversion in Egypt and the rest of the Middle East. Its existence and activities were hinted at in Agatha Christie’s novel, *Death on the Nile*. Ball provided the *Document* team with the document they needed. At the beginning of 1943 Dick White, later head of both MI5 and MI6, visited Cairo and wrote a critical report on Kennedy. ‘The necessity,’ White wrote, of reforming interrogation practice, ‘was brought home to me by the handling of the case of Elie Haggar, an important German spy arrested in the Middle East while I was in Cairo.’ White continued:

> There being no proper facilities for this man’s interrogation he was kidnapped and hidden in a villa belonging to SIME in Cairo. While there his interrogation was guided largely by Major Kennedy, the psychological adviser to SIME. Amongst other methods, employed by Kennedy, certain drugs were used to induce Haggar to confess. As might have been expected, the only result was that Haggar became mulish and indifferent to his fate and contracted pneumonia. The extraction of a confession took a fortnight and was, even then, not fully and satisfactorily achieved. ... With this example before me I suggested to all the officers concerned that this was not the best way to interrogate a spy. I pointed out the necessity for method and discipline in the work of interrogation, the corollary to which was the possession of a proper interrogation centre, staffed by trained interrogators.

Document was broadcast on Radio 4 on 16 November 2009. Simon Ball can be heard talking about his research on the programme, now available on BBC i-Player.