

Romeo Spy
John Alexander Symonds

This is a free download at <www.johnalexandersymonds.com>.

On what basis can one review a book? I wonder, because I haven't read this properly: I've skimmed it and noted some sections. Much of it is territory I am not competent in and I have little idea how one would try and check many of Symonds' claims in this. Nonetheless, this is very interesting and probably important. There are a lot of striking leads in here, none of which are good news for the police or MI5; so it's not too surprising that he has been largely blanked by the major media, even though they are fascinated by spies and Symonds is the only British citizen to act as a KGB agent and return to tell the tale.

Symonds was a detective in London in the late 1960s and early 1970s, at the time when the Metropolitan Police was seriously corrupt in places, and, on his account, riddled with Freemasonry.¹ Bits of the Met joined forces with the then illegal porn industry, regulating it essentially: deciding who would take the token busts required, managing its relationship with the legal system. Symonds describes a world in which very large sums were changing hands and many senior careers were potentially in jeopardy. Symonds got tangled up in this and in 1972 he was about to go to court to face minor bribery charges – which he denies – when he decided he was going to be stitched-up by the system, and left the UK. Almost casually he allowed himself to be recruited by the KGB and then spent 8 years as an agent of theirs. He describes his peripatetic life trying to seduce female employees or the wives of employees of NATO officials. But not UK citizens: he says he refused to work against British interests. (I have no idea whether or not to believe much of this.)

When the Soviet empire began to fail, Symonds became embroiled in KGB bureaucratic politics not unlike those which forced him out of the Met. He bailed out, returning to the UK. He went to MI5 to confess his work for the Soviets but was turned away; they didn't believe him. Symonds says MI5 rang the Met, were given the Met line – Symonds is a fantasist – and believed it. It was only in 1992 when the

¹ On the Masons see pp. 22-24, 31, 39, 65-6 and 96 in particular.

world noticed that Symonds was mentioned in the *The Mitrokhin Archive*, the book based in part on documents copied from KGB files smuggled to the West by an archivist, that he was taken half seriously.

On first skim these are the bits I noted.

'After sentencing I had just six weeks to serve so, after a brief spell at Durham, I was sent to Rudgate open prison near Newcastle, where I became acquainted with Joe Kagan, who offered to make contact with the KGB for me, and then finally was transferred to Ford open prison for release.' (p. 298)

Joe Kagan was a friend of Harold Wilson's and also of a KGB officer in London. This is the first claim I have seen that Kagan was more than just a businessman.

'My exposure as a key KGB agent for eight years, as disclosed by *The Mitrokhin Archive*, at least served one purpose, which was to embarrass MI5, the organisation that had failed to take me seriously, but when I read the pages describing my exploits, my jaw dropped and my blood pressure rose. Much of the information in the account could not have come, as alleged, from the KGB's archives, and in the text it was hard to distinguish between what was really Mitrokhin's own version, and what had been inserted by his editor, Christopher Andrew.' (p. 305)

'However, my doubts about the veracity of Mitrokhin's version increased when I learned that of the thirteen footnoted source references to me, all from more than forty paragraphs devoted to me in 'Volume 5, Chapter 14' of the defector's notes, none were available for independent scrutiny, either in their original form or as photocopies. Then there was the issue of the chronology described in Mitrokhin's account. According to his version, I had marched into the Soviet embassy in Rabat to offer my services, but that was untrue. Did this assertion appear in the KGB file or in Mitrokhin's notes, or was it supposition on the part of Professor Andrew?' (p. 310)

'Then I had been recruited as the KGB's "first British Romeo spy" and "posted to Bulgaria" to cultivate suitable targets, with "the wife of an official in an FRG government department" as my "most important sexual conquest". In reality, of course, I had met Nina

entirely casually, while I was recuperating from malaria, and the idea that I had been deployed to seduce her was laughable. But again, was this material reproduced faithfully from Mitrokhin, or was it another example of Dr Andrew joining up the dots and drawing a completely false picture? (pp. 311/2)

'The other incidents described by Andrew were equally misleading, and his version had me blundering around Australia, whereas I completed the mission without any mishaps. With one finger in the source notes, and the other following the text, I read that I had been a corrupt detective "in the pay of criminals such as south London gang boss Charlie Richardson", and that while awaiting trial I had gone "into hiding for several months" and then had used a false passport in the name of John Freeman, supposedly my "girlfriend's mentally handicapped brother" to flee abroad, finally approaching the KGB at the Soviet embassy in Rabat in August 1972. Every detail of Mitrokhin's version was an absurd travesty, and I certainly was never in hiding before I left for Morocco. Indeed, I had been in constant contact with my colleagues at Camberwell police station who, with typical generosity, had arranged a regular whip-round for me, organised by Colin Crisp. Several officers, including Michael Smith and Peter Lang had been frequent visitors at my house, and of course during those two and a half years awaiting trial I had also been in direct touch with my co-defendants, Robson and Harris. Although I had briefly known Eddie Richardson as a young man, of course, I had absolutely no connection with the Richardson gang beyond working on the edge of the police investigation, like many hundreds of other Met detectives. Of course I did obtain the Freeman passport, but not until long after my departure from England, a journey for which I had used my own passport. As for Barbara's brother being mentally handicapped, the idea is absurd. He spent twenty years working for British Rail and then had another career with Westminster City Council, a total of forty years of exemplary service without a single day of sick leave, and certainly no mental problems. (p. 312)

'For good measure, Dr Andrew claimed that my photo in the Freeman passport application had been 'authenticated by the

mistress of a member of the Richardson gang'. Was this embellishment in Mitrokhin's files, or had it been added by Dr Andrew?' (p. 313)

Symonds does not tell the reader that Andrew's sources could only have been MI5 or MI6: perhaps he thinks it too obvious to state.

'Another bizarre assertion was that I had "made the dramatic claim that Denis Healey, the Secretary of State for Defence, regularly bribed Chief Superintendent Bill Moody of the Met 'to smooth over certain unpleasantness'". Once again, this was sheer invention, only on this occasion I could see how it might have been possible for some ignorant KGB officer to have confused DS Harley's name with that of the Labour politician, although I thought it unlikely. In any event, the context was completely wrong, although I do admit that in Moscow I often sounded off about the injustice I had suffered at the hands of Moody and his cronies. Certainly Moody was corrupt and was shown at his trial to have been bribed by many, but as far as I knew there had not been any politicians involved. Nevertheless, this example strongly suggested that poor transliteration may have been a factor in building a ridiculously inaccurate account of my activities. No wonder that Mitrokhin himself had been so disappointed with the eventual publication. He had wanted his life's work to be an unchallengeable history of Soviet misdeeds, not a compendium of inaccurate tales of espionage.' (p. 314)

Symonds' account ends with this devastating final paragraph.

'In retrospect, nobody emerges from the Mitrokhin affair with much credit. The BBC and *The Times* competed against each other to see who could renege on their agreements first; MI5 tried every slippery trick to conceal Dame Stella's stunning incompetence; Alpass tried to protect his former MI5 colleagues and then caved in to pressure brought by SIS on behalf of the BBC; senior civil servants conspired to keep their ministers in the dark and played Robin Cook off against Jack Straw. Michael Howard complained he had never been told of the project, while Straw insisted he ought to have been informed much earlier; Rington and Lander retired with the grateful thanks of the nation, Warner received a knighthood, while King and Butler

joined their Lordships' House. All of this would be funny if it was not so tragic, and as I read and reread the *The Mitrokhin Inquiry Report* I was struck by one of the key items contained in the Intelligence and Security Committee's central questionnaire, which was never answered. It was to be found in point three out of a total of five principal issues to be addressed: "Why was Symonds not taken seriously when he offered his services in 1984/5?" Obviously the Committee was not completely serious when it posed this question, because it never asked me.'

Robin Ramsay