

Murder in Cairo
Solving a Cold War Spy Mystery
Peter Gillman and Emanuele Midolo with Leni Gillman
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Andrew Rosthorn

This book is not to be missed. It has taken 48 years and two generations of *Sunday Times* reporters to get quite close to finding out who ordered the killing of David Holden, their chief foreign correspondent.

The name of the gunman who fired a single 9mm bullet into Holden's back on December 7, 1977, has never been revealed.

The reporter's body, stripped of identification, turned up next morning at the side of a road near Cairo airport. His red Samsonite suitcase and his typewriter were found in the boot of a stolen, battered and abandoned Fiat 128.

The authors of *Murder in Cairo* are Peter Gillman, who joined the paper in 1971, and Emanuele Midolo, who joined in 2020. Gillman compiled a 1978 internal report for Harold Evans, a tireless and peerless editor who deployed six reporters for six months after the murder, sued the CIA for information in New York¹ but had to admit in his 2009 memoir:²

We were plunged into many mysteries in my fourteen years as editor of the *Sunday Times* . . . the most profound was right there in our own office.

Eight telex messages concerning David Holden's travel and hotel plans, his flight from London to Damascus, taxi to Amman, taxi across the Allenby Bridge to Jerusalem and fatal evening flight from Amman to Cairo, had been taken from the *Sunday Times* wire room in Gray's Inn Road. There were many suspects, in an office still staffed by men chosen as reporter/spies by Ian Fleming, foreign manager of Kemsley Newspapers between 1945 and 1959.

Suspicion eventually centred on Donald McCormick, a part-timer who had worked with Fleming in Naval Intelligence during the war and, under the pseudonym Richard Deacon, published nearly 60, often unreliable, books on

¹ <<https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/539/678/2151476/>>

² Harold Evans, *My Paper Chase*, (Little Brown, New York, 2009)

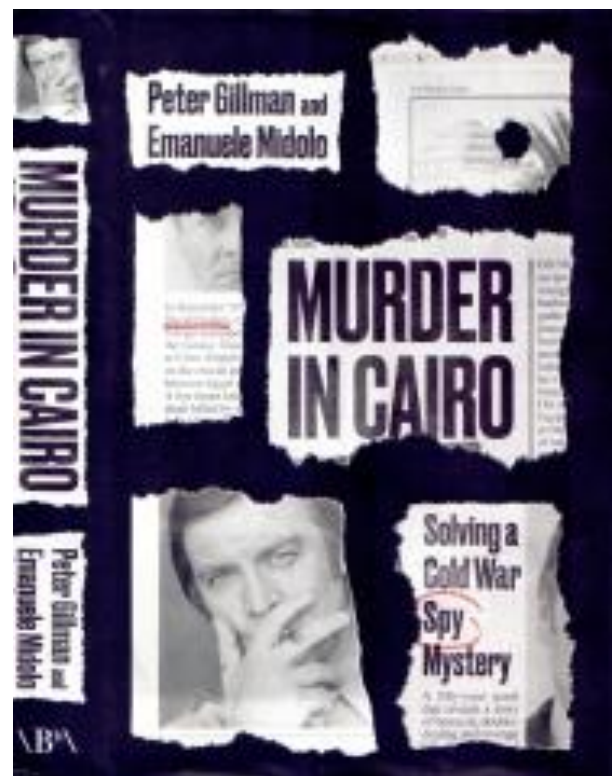
'controversial topics on which verifiable evidence was scarce'.³

A former telex operator related how he had been grilled by an MI6 officer about Holden's last telexes. Later, McCormick told him some telexes relating to Holden were missing. 'Christ! Is there a spy in the department?' the operator asked. McCormick laughed, adding that 'half the foreign desk' were spies. McCormick asked him to hand over copies of future telexes. The operator concluded that he was the 'mole' who was tracking the movements of the inquiry team.⁴

Decades later, in a private club in Mayfair, Emanuele Midolo approached the son of King Faisal of Saudi Arabia. Prince Turki bin Faisal Al Saud had run Saudi intelligence from December 1977, 'only weeks after Holden was assassinated', until the prince 'resigned as head of the Saudi secret service ten days before the 9/11 attacks' in which 14 Saudis hijacked American airliners in a plan devised by the Saudi, Osama bin Laden.

Prince Turki's uncle, Kamal Adham, 'Turkish-born, with blond hair and blue eyes' had preceded him as head of Al Mukhabarat Al A'amah. Adham had bank-rolled the former spy Anwar Sadat, the third president of Egypt who expelled thousands of Russian military advisers before his surprise attack on Israel to re-capture the Sinai Peninsula in the Yom Kippur War of 1973.

As the tide turned against the Soviet Union, Sadat and his vice-president Hosni Mubarak allowed Jim Fees, the CIA station chief in Cairo, and Leroy 'Swede' Svendsen, a US air attaché, to dismantle a Soviet MiG-23 variable geometry fighter at the remote Beni Suef airbase, load its parts into one of the biggest aircraft in the world, a Lockheed Galaxy C-5A, and deliver them for re-assembly and testing at the notoriously secret USAF 'Area 51' base at Groom Lake in southern Nevada. The MiG-23 was found to be faster than any tactical



³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald_McCormick>

⁴ *Murder in Cairo*, p. 286

fighter in the US inventory.⁵ The C-5A left Egypt, unseen by Soviet satellites, six weeks before the murder of David Holden.

In November 1977, two weeks before the murder, Sadat made an epic visit to Jerusalem to meet the Israeli premier and address the Knesset. The subsequent Camp David peace accords, brokered by the US president Jimmy Carter in 1978, earned Sadat and Menachem Begin the Nobel Peace Prize. Pushing the Russians out of Egypt and bringing in the Americans was overseen by Kamal Adham.

Adham was also mediating between Cairo and Washington, smoothing the talks with plenty of cash for Egypt – some say up to \$200 million a year. He made it clear to Sadat that he would have the full backing of the Saudi royal family if he leaned towards the US. As a result, Sadat became 'as staunchly anti-communist as the Shah and the Saudis'.⁶

Midolo wanted to ask Prince Turki about 'the so-called Safari Club, a coalition of foreign intelligence services based in Cairo that would run anti-Soviet operations in Africa.'⁷

Turki had mentioned the Safari Club in a 2002 speech at his old university in Washington DC. Prince Turki and the future US president Bill Clinton had both graduated from the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University in 1968. Turki told the Americans:

In 1976, after the Watergate matters took place here, your intelligence community was literally tied up by Congress. It could not do anything. It could not send spies, it could not write reports, it could not pay money. In order to compensate for that, a group of countries got together in the hope of fighting Communism and established what was called the Safari Club. The principal aim of the club was that we would share information with each other and help each other in countering Soviet intelligence worldwide, and especially in Africa.⁸

Gillman and Midolo have co-written *Death in Cairo* using the third person. There are echoes of Dashiell Hammett:

⁵ <<https://www.10percenttrue.com/post/have-pad-the-cia-s-first-mig-23-flogger>>

⁶ *Murder in Cairo*, p. 326

⁷ Named after the Mount Kenya Safari Club, a Kenyan resort owned by arms dealer Adnan Khashoggi. See <https://wikispooks.com/wiki/Safari_Club>.

⁸ *Murder in Cairo*, p. 328

Turki was often in London and Midolo had heard that he could sometimes be found at 5 Hertford Street, a private members' club in Mayfair known as 'London's most secretive club', where visitors have since included George Clooney, Leonardo DiCaprio, Mick Jagger and Meghan Markle.

As Midolo walked into the club, Turki had finished dinner and was retiring to a private room for drinks with some friends. Midolo introduced himself. Turki, seventy-nine, was impeccably dressed, with a pinstripe grey suit and red tie, sporting a tightly-clipped goatee. He looked tired, but his blue eyes, like his uncle's, were alert and intense. He spoke with a slight accent and was very courteous.

As they stepped into the room, with large armchairs and logs cracking in a fireplace, champagne was served but the prince did not drink.

'How come no-one has written a book about the Safari Club?' Midolo asked. He didn't want to spook him by asking about Holden straight away.

'Oh, bits and pieces have come out in various books,' Turki replied with a smile. 'The Egyptian journalist Mohamed Heikal has written about it in his book about Iran.'⁹

With consummate skill, according to this account, Midolo eventually 'laid all his cards on the table and told him that he thought Holden was a spy, that the Egyptians most likely knew it and that was the reason he was murdered.'

Turki's mention of Mohamed Heikal, editor of *Al-Ahram* for two decades, *éminence grise* of President Nasser, author of books in 'fluent, elegant English' and the man who had uncovered the Safari Club,¹⁰ allowed the authors of *Murder in Cairo* to cut to describing an afternoon tea in Devon, taken by Peter Gillman and his wife Leni¹¹ as guests of Celia Adams, widow of Michael Adams, a BBC and *Guardian* Middle East correspondent. Adams had been detained in Egypt with David Holden during the 1956 Suez Crisis. They were friends in Beirut later. Celia Adams remembered

Michael's obsession with Holden's fate, to the point where each time he interviewed someone about Egypt, he would ask them what they

⁹ *Murder in Cairo*, p. 329

¹⁰ <https://wikispooks.com/wiki/Safari_Club>

¹¹ Peter and Leni Gillman, *Collar the Lot!* (London: Quartet Books, 1980)

knew about him. During Michael's final visit to Cairo, which she dated to the late 1990s, he had a crucial encounter. He called into a hotel where he saw Heikal in the lobby. They had known each other since the 1950s. Now, Celia related, 'they greeted each other, but Heikal was in a great hurry'. He was about to get into a lift when Michael approached him.

'Look, I do want to talk to you.' Michael told him.

'I'm late, sorry, I can't talk,' Heikal said.

'OK, just tell me, who killed David?'

'We did,' Heikal replied and looked down, as the doors of the lift closed. Michael never saw him again.¹²

Gillman and Midolo have not revealed the identity of Rachel, 'a young American journalist' who went to see Heikal on the fifteenth anniversary of the murder:

He raised a finger, intimating her to stay silent, then turned the radio on at high volume. 'Rachel, I liked David very much, but the trouble is, he was much more than a journalist.' Heikal told her, 'This is a case that is closed and can never be reopened. There will never be a solution. It is too important.' Heikal told her that it was 'a state matter'. He added that there would never be a time when the story was safe to pursue. Undaunted, Rachel decided to make some calls, but she hit a brick wall. No one would talk. When she went back to Heikal, he turned the radio on again and whispered: 'I beg you, do *not* pursue this case.'¹³

Heikal, who had been a war reporter at El Alamein in 1942, was jailed by Sadat in 1981 for opposing the peace treaty with Israel but released one month later by Mubarak after the assassination of Sadat.

The 1978 *Sunday Times* investigation found that David Holden, son of the wartime editor of the *Sunderland Echo*, born on November 20, 1924, had suffered badly from polio, diphtheria and scarlet fever before winning a place to read geography at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, in 1943. He was 19 and liable to wartime conscription but an army medical examiner found him to be 'a perambulating museum of past ailments'.

The *Sunday Times* reporters also found that although David Holden had married Ruth Lynam, 37, a former reporter for *Life* magazine, in Kensington on August 24, 1962, he appeared to have had gay affairs with his former history

¹² *Murder in Cairo*, p. 332

¹³ *Murder in Cairo*, p. 335

teacher at the Friends' School, a Quaker boarding school at Great Ayton, North Yorkshire, and Leo Silberman, a promiscuous former Marxist academic¹⁴ born in Frankfurt am Main.

This is where *Murder in Cairo* begins to feel unfair on some of its most interesting characters. To be born Jewish in Frankfurt in May 1915, with your South African father interned in a German camp, in the year before the starvation of the Turnip Winter, was not a winning ticket in the lottery of life for Leo Silberman.

His mother's family firm, L. S. Mayer¹⁵ [1822-1968], was wealthy but the date of Leo's birth meant that at 18 he would have to be sent away to school in Switzerland, when Hitler came to power; and at 20, being unlawfully gay and living in Hampstead, he would need to be secretive and deceptive, especially when attending an anti-fascist rally in Hyde Park on May Day 1934.

Leo's father, Fred Silberman, had managed to get his family and numerous employees to England. The headquarters of their 'empire of kitsch' on Fore Street in London was destroyed in the London Blitz of 1940 but a metal work factory in Tottenham and a handbag division in Islington survived, with two factories making Glen clocks in Dundee opening in 1947. Leo was in South Africa during the war and returned to Liverpool University in 1946.

Leo's younger brother Freddy told Gillman in 1978 that the relationship between David Holden and Leo Silberman had been both 'strong and physical' before 1950.

Freddy's assertion, made without prevarication or embarrassment, provided the first direct confirmation of something Gillman and his colleagues had begun to suspect, namely that Holden was gay or bisexual.¹⁶

Although the authors of *Murder in Cairo* have described the fate of Jeremy Wolfenden, a Russian-speaking *Daily Telegraph* correspondent blackmailed over a homosexual encounter in Moscow, they seem to have underplayed the necessary secrecy under which gay men like Silberman and Holden had to live in England. Until the 1967 the Sexual Offences Act, eight years after the 1959 report by Sir John Wolfenden, father of the blackmailed journalist, the threat of prison loomed. I can imagine that the occasional FBI reports on both Silberman

¹⁴ Silberman's academic ability appears under-estimated by Gillman and Midolo, judging by a posthumous article in *Cahiers d'études africaines* at <https://www.persee.fr/doc/cea_0008-0055_1961_num_2_5_2962>.

¹⁵ <[https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/L._S._Mayer_\(London\)](https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/L._S._Mayer_(London))>

¹⁶ *Murder in Cairo*, p. 76

and Holden, in East Africa and in the USA, were no more than surveillance of gay men rather than spies. But I could be wrong.

There is no evidence whatsoever from Moscow Centre of any service that David Holden or even Leo Silberman performed for the NKVD, KGB or GRU and this fine book shows that Gillman and Midolo did tap all the best sources; the defectors Oleg Gordievsky and Oleg Kalugin, and the KGB colonel Yuri Kobaladze, who was a close contact of Professor Fred Halliday, a notable Irish expert on the Middle East.

Halliday 'was dying' when he is said to have told Roger Hardy, a BBC foreign correspondent, that David Holden had told him back in the 1970s, after they had investigated secret SAS activities in Yemen, that Holden 'was secretly a Marxist and that he was working as an agent for the KGB.'¹⁷

The authors nowhere mention that serious reporting is often a matter of trading information. You often have to give to take. It was part of David Holden's job to drink with Kim Philby in Beirut, help left-wing Fred Halliday on Saudi Arabian politics and write for the CIA-financed magazine *Encounter*.¹⁸

The book is also unfair, in passing, to Sir Anthony Nutting, who was not the British foreign secretary in 1956 when prime minister Anthony Eden told him that he wanted President Nasser to be murdered.¹⁹ Nutting was actually the minister of state at the Foreign Office, who resigned in a brave bid to deter Eden from the 'mad imperial conspiracy to invade Egypt with the French and Israelis'²⁰ in 1956. This diplomatic conspiracy trapped David Holden and Michael Adams in the Semiramis Hotel in Cairo, cost 3,200 lives in two invasions and has become one of the roots of the interminable power struggle that cost the life of David Holden. Holden sent a pencil note to his brother from internment at the Semiramis:

Words fail me in describing just how lunatic it is! You must write to your MP urging Eden's instant dismissal or resignation.²¹

The *Sunday Times* team discovered that Silberman and Holden, who had both

¹⁷ *Murder in Cairo*, p. 365

¹⁸ *Murder in Cairo*, p. 127

¹⁹ Anthony Nutting, interview transmitted BBC Radio 4, October 28, 2006: 'I was horrified to get a telephone call over an open line.... in which Anthony Eden said, "What's all this poppycock you've sent me about isolating and quarantining Nasser. Can't you understand - and if you can't understand it, will you come to the Cabinet and [I'll] explain why - that I want Nasser", and he actually used the word, "murdered"'.
²⁰ Andrew Roth, *Guardian*, February 26, 1999.

²¹ *Murder in Cairo*, p. 96

been resident at Northwestern University at Evanston, Illinois, had both been in Mexico in April 1953, 'notorious as a spying base for the Soviet Union'.

This fragmentary information led Gillman to speculate further on Holden's relationship with Silberman. It was now clear that they were in a committed relationship, albeit punctured with absences and, in Silberman's case, with other sexual affairs. Silberman had shown his leftist political credentials at several stages too. Was Silberman linked to the KGB? If so, had he used their relationship to enlist Holden to the cause? And did they travel to Mexico City to meet KGB agents? Lacking any proof these remained no more than enticing possibilities.²²

Something that looked more like proof came when co-author Midolo found in Paris, in the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*, a paper folder with 73 letters written by Leo Silberman to Louis Saguer between 1935 and 1960, the year that Silberman died of pancreatic cancer at age 46 in London. Saguer, was the pseudonym of Wolfgang Simoni, a Berlin-born Jewish communist who had fought in the Spanish Civil War and in the French Resistance. He was a composer who had assisted Edmund Meisel on the scores of Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* and *October: Ten Days That Shook the World*. He had met Silberman at school in Switzerland in 1933.

By the time he finished reading the letters, some four hours later, Midolo's jaw was on the floor. He had a hunch that the correspondence with Saguer could be important, but he did not expect what was the closest thing to a full confession that Silberman had been a communist fanatic, a Comintern spy, an all-round Soviet agent of influence. Still more shocking was the tireless way Silberman had seduced and recruited young men to the cause. There could be little doubt that Holden, his 'young pet', was one of them. Gillman was right: Silberman was the most important relationship in Holden's life and the key to his murder.

The book offers an approximate conclusion to forty years of research when Midolo and the Gillmans go to meet David Holden's nephew Peter at his home in the Cotswolds in the spring of 2024. They answer Peter Holden's question, 'Why would anyone want to work for the Soviets?'

Whether Holden had been helping the Soviets because he had been blackmailed or because he truly believed it, he had indeed been a victim of the Great Game of espionage. None of the intelligence

²² *Murder in Cairo*, p. 84

services Gillman and Midolo had scrutinised were innocent. The KGB was exploiting Holden to penetrate the Middle East, a dangerous job that cost him his life. The Egyptians had him killed, with his murder cementing their alliance with the Saudis and the Americans. The British had tried to derail the *Sunday Times* investigation and covered everything up, to avoid yet another Cambridge spy scandal. And the CIA still pretended it knew nothing about it.²³

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²³ *Murder in Cairo* p. 412