

The Spy Who Was Left Out in the Cold

Tim Tate

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I have been rewatching *The West Wing*.¹ In one of the early episodes, as some complex foreign policy event unravels, one of the characters wistfully says, 'How I miss the Cold War'. Yes, it was convenient having those clear lines. Thus it was with – can I say this? – the anticipation of nostalgia that I began this account of the defection of the Polish intelligence officer Michal Goleniewski to the Americans in 1961 and the subsequent ramifications. I was not disappointed.

Up to the mid-1950s the US intelligence services had gathered very little reliable information on the activities of their Soviet bloc intelligence opponents. Then an anti-communist intelligence officer, Michal Goleniewski, working with Polish intelligence, began leaking them information. Code-named 'Sniper' by the CIA, he was by far the most important source the US had during the Cold War and exposed a large number of Soviet operations and identified dozens of Soviet agents and officers. After he was forced to defect, a grateful CIA debriefed him for months, lent him to MI5, set him up in a nice, secure flat in New York with his mistress and gave him a large salary. But James Angleton, head of CIA counter-intelligence, was suspicious; and when a KGB officer, Anatoliy Golitsyn, defected and announced that Goleniewski was a false defector, Angleton's doubts were confirmed. At which point it all got very strange and very silly. Tate comments:

'For a man who would shortly ruin dozens of lives and paralyse at least two intelligence services, Golitsyn arrived bearing just twenty-three KGB documents; none had any real value. This threadbare haul was in contrast to the several hundred Minox frames and reams of Soviet bloc secrets that Goleniewski handed over – let alone the thousands he had sent with the Sniper letters.' (pp. 186/7)

At Angleton's instigation, Goleniewski was marginalised and eventually abandoned by the CIA. To which he responded by announcing he was really a member of the Russian royal family, the son of Czar Nicholas. The idea that the

¹ See <<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0200276/>>.

Russian royal family had survived the Bolshevik revolution was encouraged by sections of the American right. Two women had already claimed to be the Czar's youngest daughter, Anastasia – and Goleniewski's claim was taken semi-seriously by some for a while. Then he disappeared.

At which point the book moves into the consequences of Golitsyn's defection and his embrace by Angleton. Some of this story is well known. Following his dealings with Golitsyn, Angleton triggered obsessive hunts for the imaginary 'moles' within the CIA and in MI5, which apparently crippled parts of the organisations for nearly 20 years. Tate retells the story with some new sources and, for the first time I recall, finds a CIA contemporary of Angleton willing to state the obvious explanation for Golitsyn's arrival: he was sent to mess with Angleton's head. If that was the intention, it was the most successful offensive intelligence op in the post-war era. What is not explained is why the CIA's upper management allowed the deranged Angleton to inflict all this damage. On that one thought does occur: Angleton was the Agency's link to the Israelis. Is it possible that this saved him from the boot?

There is one serious point the author does not make: for all the years that parts of the CIA and MI5 were paralysed by the hunt for imaginary 'moles', there were no geopolitical consequences. In other words, what Tate shows in retelling this strange story, is that most of the time spies don't matter. (The obvious exception being Oleg Penkovsky who told the American just before the Cuban missile crisis how few intercontinental missiles the Soviets actually had. Thus the Americans knew the Soviets would back down when the blockade of Cuba was mounted.) Where the Angleton-Golitsyn nonsense *did* matter was in British domestic politics. Angleton's delusions spread to MI5 and thence into the Conservative Party's right-wing, parts of the military and professional subversive-hunters like Brian Crozier and IRD. This produced a network which believed that Harold Wilson was a Soviet agent in a Labour Party which was controlled by the KGB through the trade unions. Ultimately Angleton and Golitsyn helped to give us Margaret Thatcher.

Finally, considering how important Goleniewski was in intelligence terms, and how many books have been written about the intelligence 'war', it is striking – not to say distinctly odd – that this is the first detailed account of the episode.