

Kim Philby: Cad and Bounder?

Kim Philby:

The Unknown Story of the KGB's Master Spy

Tim Milne,

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Few people in the history of espionage have had their public career, achievements, character and private life so thoroughly surveyed and discussed in literature and the media as the British intelligence officer Kim Philby. His story is well-known, but a brief resume might be useful. He was a classic product of the British establishment. Son of the distinguished (and maverick) Arabist, St John Philby, Kim was educated at Westminster and Trinity College, Cambridge. After a spell in journalism (including a stint in Spain, reporting on the civil war there from Franco's side for *The Times*), he was recruited into the British secret service in 1940. He worked full-time for SIS from 1940 to 1951 and won a reputation for being intelligent, competent and clubbable. Between 1944 and 1947 he was head of Section IX of SIS, a department he himself established to counter Soviet operations against the UK. From 1949 to 1951 he was posted to Washington, working as the SIS liaison officer with the CIA and the FBI. He appeared to be destined for a top job in SIS, but was forced to resign in the wake of the Burgess and Maclean defections to the USSR in 1951, as a result of his friendship with Burgess. He was rehired as a part-timer while working as a Middle Eastern correspondent based in Beirut for *The Observer* and *The Economist* between 1956 and 1963, before departing for Moscow himself. Once there, he announced that he had been a Soviet agent since the 1930s.

Philby died over 30 years ago but anyone who Googles his name will quickly accumulate a large pile of stories and references, many being churned out even today. The majority of these are highly critical and condemnatory and if anything their tone has grown more shrill in recent decades.¹ Philby is

¹ This is a typical example: 'Lust, betrayal and reds in the bed: Kim Philby begged his long-suffering wife to join him in Moscow - and then demanded she share him with the partner of fellow traitor Donald Maclean', *Daily Mail*, 21 September 2021 <<https://tinyurl.com/2p84s8d9>> or <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10010977/Lust-betrayal-reds-bed-epilogue-brilliant-Kim-Philby-series.html>>.

portrayed as disloyal to his country, his agents and his colleagues in SIS and as a willing servant of the Stalinist and post-Stalinist USSR. He is accused of leaking prodigious volumes of British and American secrets to Moscow throughout the 1940s. These included a comprehensive breakdown of how SIS was organised, with character sketches of its officers along with descriptions of the posts they held ² and details of Western operations designed to bring 'freedom' to parts of Europe under Soviet influence after 1945, notably the Baltic States, Ukraine (notwithstanding that it was actually part of the USSR at the time) and Albania. He was, apparently, the model for the traitor Bill Haydon in John Le Carre's 1974 novel, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*. Publicity for a two-part BBC 2 documentary about Philby broadcast in April 2014 (based on Ben Macintyre's *A Spy Among Friends*)³ described him as 'a fanatic and a ruthless killer who deceived everyone around him'.⁴ One CIA officer said that 'from 1944 to 1951 . . . the entire Western intelligence effort, which was pretty big, was what you might call a minus advantage. We'd have been better off doing nothing.'⁵ On top of all this, Philby is commonly described as a drunkard and a philanderer who betrayed his wives and his friends, his many private infidelities complementing his political treason. To use an old public school phrase which would have been familiar to Philby, this man was a cad and a bounder. His career not only ruined lives but damaged his country and destroyed the reputation of the British intelligence service for many years to come.

A different picture

Tim Milne, however, has produced a rather different picture of Philby. His version was written in the late 1970s but publication at that time was blocked by SIS. It finally appeared in 2014, four years after Milne's death. It is important since it is the only account we have to be written by someone who was a contemporary (born the same year, 1912), an old friend (Milne and Philby met at Westminster and spent summer holidays travelling around Europe in the early 1930s) and a colleague in SIS. Indeed Milne was recruited on Philby's recommendation and they worked together in Section V (SIS's

² See Nigel West and Oleg Tsarev (editors), *The Crown Jewels: The British secrets at the heart of the KGB archives* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1998), Appendix II.

³ Ben Macintyre, *A Spy Among Friends: Kim Philby and the Great Betrayal* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

⁴ See <<https://tinyurl.com/yeyud6v>> or <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/proginfo/2014/13/kim-philby-his-most-intimate-betrayal>>.

⁵ Bruce Page, David Leitch and Phillip Knightley, *Philby: the Spy who Betrayed a Generation* (London: Sphere, 1977) p. 327.

counter-intelligence department) for the best part of three years before Philby moved to take over the new Section IX. Ben Macintyre places Philby's friendship with fellow SIS officer Nicholas Elliott at the centre of his version of the Philby story, but in reality the latter's oldest and closest chum inside and outside the Service was Tim Milne.

Milne has produced a very readable biography. He writes extremely well, with many humorous touches and deft character studies (he was the nephew of A. A. Milne, creator of Winnie-the-Pooh) and there isn't a dull page in the book. His account of life in Section V of SIS is interesting in its depiction of the department's informality, good relations between staff, and general efficiency. Milne points out that Philby, who rose to a senior position within the Section, had a lot to do with this: he was hard working, easy to work for, unstuffy, understanding, and good company both in the office and the pub. Indeed the Philby who emerges from Milne's narrative is far from the *louche* figure who features in so many studies. He is not a serial adulterer and, while clearly enjoying a drink, is no alcoholic (the closest he came to this was after he defected, a period Milne does not write about). He is a good colleague, a loyal and supportive friend, a loving father, reads widely, appreciates classical music and enjoys cricket. An interesting, intelligent and actually rather decent man emerges from Milne's text, very different from the stereotype. These are not the only points about Milne's narrative which contradict the conventional wisdom. Others concern his career as Soviet spy and British intelligence officer.

First, there is Philby's 'right-wing' period. When biographies of Philby cover this phase of his life, lasting from 1935 until 1939, they point to his seeming abandonment of the Socialism and Marxism which had made him a political activist when a student and then in 1933 taken him to Vienna to fight Austrian Chancellor Dollfuss's violent clerical-Fascist repression of the trade unions and the Left. Philby now presented himself (it is said) as on the Right, somewhat pro-German and, in his *Times* reports from Spain, sympathetic to the Nationalist cause led by Franco. Macintyre writes of 'a lurch from the extreme left (secretly) to extreme right (publicly)'.⁶ This abrupt change of outlook is put down to his Soviet contacts: having been recruited to work underground for the Communist cause on his return from Austria, Philby was instructed to present himself as an establishment figure, in the expectation that this would facilitate his access to influential circles in London and Berlin, especially those likely to be hostile to the USSR. Milne, however, did not pick up any pro-Nazi or pro-Fascist sentiment in Philby during these years (indeed he was strongly anti-Mussolini), noting only that he was politically 'more often on the fence'

⁶ Macintyre (see note 3) p. 43.

than he had been.⁷

Secondly, it was alleged by another of Philby's old colleagues from SIS, the historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, that while working in Section V Philby suppressed reports from German sources suggesting that senior figures in the German Army High Command were at loggerheads with the Nazi Party and that there were important dissidents in the *Abwehr* (the German counterpart to SIS), involved in a struggle against Himmler's efforts to absorb it into the SD, the intelligence section of the SS. It was, in fact, a small SIS sub-section run by Trevor-Roper himself which pointed to these conflicts and argued that peace feelers and expressions of willingness from these quarters to overthrow Hitler should be taken seriously. Philby, however, now (1943-44) a senior figure in the service, blocked the distribution of documents from anti-Nazi figures in Germany such as Hans Gisevius, Otto John and Adam von Trott, as well as papers advancing the Trevor-Roper thesis on the grounds that they were too 'speculative'. In reality, however, (so it is said) Philby's actions were taken in conformity with Soviet determination that any prospect of a peace in the West which would either leave the fighting to continue on the Eastern Front or stop the conflict short of the total destruction of Germany, should be sabotaged.⁸

Milne disputes this. He points out (i) that material from Otto John and his associates did circulate within SIS; (ii) that Philby was in no position to suppress this and would only have drawn attention to himself if he had done; (iii) that if Philby had taken against Trevor-Roper's views (something Milne says he does 'not recall exactly') the whole of Section V would have supported him on the grounds that the SD was nowhere near as large and powerful as the *Abwehr*; (iv) that aversion to treating with German groups apparently willing to move against Hitler was general in London, after the disaster of the Venlo affair in November 1939;⁹ and (v) that anyway it was the Foreign Office where the strongest opposition to linking up with the German opposition could be found, given that it was a 'fixed Allied policy to reject anything that could be interpreted as an attempt to drive a wedge between the Western Allies and Russia'.¹⁰

⁷ Milne pp. 42-3.

⁸ See Page, Leitch and Knightley (note 5) pp. 131-2.

⁹ Two senior SIS officers held talks in the Dutch-German border town of Venlo with what they believed to be figures from the resistance to Hitler. The discussions had centred on a possible end to hostilities and the overthrow of the Nazi regime. In fact the SIS representatives were dealing with the SD. They were kidnapped and taken into Germany, where they spent the rest of the war. Many SIS networks in western Europe were blown as a result of this fiasco.

¹⁰ Milne p. 132.

Thirdly, Milne suggests the extent of the damage to British interests by Philby has been exaggerated. Appraising Philby's work, he argues that between 1941 and 1944 it can be argued that it was in British interests for him to be passing information to Moscow, given that the UK and the USSR were allies and that Soviet scepticism about the genuine good faith and trustworthiness of Churchill and Roosevelt, notwithstanding all their assurances of friendship, could be mitigated by secret intelligence being passed to them by Philby and others, especially if this confirmed that there would be no anti-Soviet deal with the 'anti-Nazi plotters' in Germany. Milne admits that after Philby went to Section IX in 1944, the balance between benefit and harm to SIS shifted so that from this point until 1951 it was 'all harm';¹¹ but even the impact of this has been exaggerated. As head of SIS's anti-Soviet section Philby was not in a position to tell the Russians everything, nor to sabotage every operation against them. Had he done so, he would have incriminated himself and his career would have come to an abrupt halt. If Philby was going to remain of use to the Soviets there were times when he had to use his discretion and keep material from them even if it was 'extremely important'; and indeed he admitted many years later that he had done exactly this.¹² Moreover, there would have been occasions when the KGB failed to act on information provided by Philby, in order to prevent him falling under suspicion of leaking. Milne's book shows, however, that KGB willingness to protect Philby was not evident during the Burgess and Maclean affair: the use of Guy Burgess, who had been staying with Philby in Washington, to spirit Maclean out of the UK and away to the USSR, wrecked Philby's SIS career. Was this incompetence, or, as Milne interestingly suggests, was there a bigger picture, one which made it essential that Maclean and Philby be sacrificed, even if in a very clumsy manner, in order to protect another, more senior informant?¹³

Finally, Milne argues that Philby's use to the Soviets after 1951 'must either have been nil or vestigial' and that his work for them in the Middle East from 1956-63 would not have prioritised reporting on SIS (in any case he was now out of the loop here) but assessments of US and UK intentions in the region, a good subject for an experienced and knowledgeable journalist with an

¹¹ Milne pp. 208-9.

¹² See Genrikh Borovik, *The Philby Files* (London: Little, Brown, 1994) pp. 368-9.

¹³ Milne pp. 230-1, 235; Borovik (see note 12), p. 284

extensive network of well-placed contacts.¹⁴ Overall, his chief value to the Soviets was 'that he was there'¹⁵ and in a position to warn their intelligence about the most important moves against its agents and about CIA-SIS operations in Eastern Europe against the USSR (even if there were times when he felt it impolitic to do this).

Two Philbys

So there are clearly two Philby discourses. There is the conventional wisdom, which continues to generate deeply hostile accounts of Philby, as a man and as intelligence officer. Ben Macintyre's *A Spy Among Friends* (with a dramatised, TV version to be released later this year) is the latest in a long line of rather lurid accounts of Philby's career which stretch back to the 1960s.¹⁶ Milne's book joins the work of writers in the second category such as Genrikh Borovik, Graham Greene, Phillip Knightley, Eleanor Philby (Philby's wife from 1957 to 1968: she died in the USA), Rufina Pukhova Philby (Philby's wife from 1971 until his death) and Hayden Peake.¹⁷ These depict him more sympathetically and tend to refrain from moralising condemnations of his personal conduct and his treachery, generally seeking to explain and place this within the historical context of Philby's lifetime. They stress the depth of his commitment to Communism and to the struggle against Fascism and Nazism, made when these appeared to be on the verge of plunging the world into a new dark age.

The evidence suggests that the sympathetic discourse is a good deal nearer the truth than the hostile one, although it is essential to add the qualification that certainty about the full Philby story remains somewhat

¹⁴ Milne does not attempt to appraise the impact of information Philby may have passed to his controllers about the organization and staff of SIS. However, given that it is not unusual for intelligence officers from different national services to be conscious of each other's roles and identity, it is not easy to see how much harm this would have done SIS and its personnel. For example, David Spedding, one SIS officer 'outed' by Philby, later became 'C', the head of the outfit. (See 'Philby naming names', *Lobster* 16, 1988). All the figures he identified to the Soviets during the war continued to serve in SIS afterwards, some (like Tim Milne and Nicholas Elliott) for many years.

¹⁵ Milne p. 218.

¹⁶ See for example, Laura O'Connor, 'How Britain's most notorious Cold War spy betrayed lifelong friend who never recovered', *Daily Mirror*, 23 January 2022
<<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/how-britains-most-notorious-cold-26021498>>

¹⁷ See for example Borovik (see note 12) *The Philby Files*; Graham Greene's Introduction to Kim Philby, *My Silent War* (London, Grafton: 1988); Phillip Knightley, *Philby: KGB Masterspy* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1988); Eleanor Philby, *The Spy I Loved* (London: Pan, 1968); Rufina Philby (with Hayden Peake and Mikhail Lyubimov), *The Private Life of Kim Philby* (London: St Ermin's Press, 1999); Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville, *Philby: The Long Road to Moscow* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978).

elusive. There can be no doubt that Philby's work for the USSR provided the Soviets with important intelligence. When discussing his career with the Soviet journalist Genrikh Borovik during the 1980s, Philby himself mentioned three examples. One was a survey of SIS's organization and personnel, along with an account of the material it had on the *Abwehr* while he was at Section V. A second was information about the early years of the OSS, the US version of SIS, some of whose staff were posted to London. Section V of SIS worked closely with the OSS, providing Philby with an opportunity to tell Moscow about Anglo-American intelligence collaboration and targets. A third concerned US-UK co-operation on the atom bomb, and the possibility that Washington's possession of this weapon would be used to try and force the Soviet Union to co-operate with American interests after the war.¹⁸ In addition to these can be added the overview Philby was able to provide of Anglo-American strategy and anti-Soviet operations in the Balkans and eastern Europe during the early Cold War years.

This is undoubtedly an incomplete list but does amount to a formidable one. All the same, quite apart from the qualifications introduced by Milne, we now know that there were times when Philby, by design and by accident (so it seems) was not in touch with his Soviet contact at all. He was shocked by the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939. Communication with Moscow became increasingly sporadic until it was broken off for well over a year, partly from disapproval and partly from fear that any information he handed over would find its way to Nazi Germany. (Before he was recruited by SIS in the summer of 1940 he was a War Correspondent with *The Times* reporting from the headquarters of the British Expeditionary Force in France.)¹⁹ There was another gap in 1949-50, after his transfer to Washington to become SIS-CIA/FBI liaison officer: it was 'nine or ten months' before the KGB was in touch with him, a very strange turn of events,²⁰ and the reasons for it are obscure. But as a result, in one of the most tense periods of the early Cold War, Moscow would have received little or nothing from Philby about the progress of the US-UK investigation into the leakage of atomic secrets to the USSR (leading to the arrest of Klaus Fuchs), nor about Anglo-American intelligence relations and

¹⁸ Borovik (see note 12) pp. 191-2.

¹⁹ Borovik (see note 12) pp. 145-7, 153; and see Phillip Knightley's introduction to the book on pp. xi-xii.

²⁰ Borovik (see note 12) pp. 268-71. When in early 1963 Nicholas Elliott confronted Philby about his work for the KGB, he said that SIS knew his old friend had spied for the USSR 'until 1949'. Philby was genuinely baffled by this, but the coincidence of dates with the KGB's 'nine or ten month' disappearance from his life in the same year is interesting.

western attempts to stir up anti-Communist nationalist movements inside the USSR and Eastern Europe.

Secondly, it is clear that a number of Western intelligence disasters attributed to Philby either did not happen at all or, if they did, were not principally the result of interventions on his part. Three examples will make the point, especially since they are all cases used to justify the argument that Philby was responsible for the deaths hundreds of agents working with British intelligence.

Vermehren

The first is the Vermehren affair. This followed from the defection of senior *Abwehr* officer Erich Vermehren and his wife Elisabeth to the Allies early in 1944. It is said to have been 'one explanation for the deep animosity' towards Philby on the part of many intelligence officers.²¹ The Vermehrens, who were Catholics, had been part of an anti-Nazi resistance network which included co-religionists and they handed over to the British a list which identified many colleagues. After the war, officers from MI5 travelled to Germany to try to find these people, but failed to locate one of them. Ben Macintyre provides an account of this episode based on information from MI5 and first told to Phillip Knightley in the late 1980s.²² This was that Philby had handed the names over to his controllers, and that Soviet intelligence had then hunted them down and eliminated them, in order to remove alternative sources of political influence in Germany after the war. The real story is told in a recent article by Nigel West,²³ who found that Vermehren identified six anti-Nazis to MI5. Three of these were executed by the Nazis for their involvement in the 20 July 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler. As for the others, the fate of one, 'a Dr. Willbrandt, is unknown, but the other two, Franz Hander and Ernst Junger, died in 1972 and 1998, respectively, of natural causes'.²⁴ There is no evidence at all that Philby betrayed the group.

Valuable

Secondly, there is Operation Valuable, which ran from the late 1940s until the early 1950s. This was the attempt, co-ordinated by the CIA and SIS, to overthrow the new Communist government in Albania, by infiltrating bands of

²¹ Knightley (see note 17) pp. 109-10.

²² Macintyre (see note 3) pp. 77-87.

²³ Nigel West, 'With Friends Like This', *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence*, vol. 27 (2014), pp. 845-854.

²⁴ West (see note 23) p. 850.

partisans into the country on missions to link up with local resistance networks and perform acts of sabotage. However, most of the people involved were captured and either shot or sent to prison.²⁵ Philby has been routinely blamed for this fiasco. It is widely assumed, and indeed repeated in almost all the literature about him, that he used his position for SIS in Washington to pass to Moscow all the details it needed either to intercept the landings of anti-Communist groups in Albania or round them up once they had entered the country. Hundreds of lives are said to have been lost. This is all rather fanciful. For a start, the Albanian affair started in 1948 when Philby was working in Istanbul and not in a position to know much about it. He did not arrive in Washington until the autumn of 1949 and then had no contact with the KGB for months. It would have been mid-1950 before he would have been able to say much about Albania. What really happened was that at some point Philby told his contact about the Albanian operation and its objectives in general terms. Even if he had had access to detailed intelligence about it, he did not pass this on because to have done so would have exposed him. In his biography of Philby, Phillip Knightley reports that the failure of Operation Valuable stemmed from the penetration of Albanian émigré organizations by the Albanian security service, 'and more than one of these penetration agents managed to be selected for the CIA-SIS operation'.²⁶ Some years after this, in 2013, Knightley told me:

'Of course Philby would not have known the operational details for the Albanian drops and even if he had would not have risked revealing them. By chance some years ago I met the former head of the Albanian counter intelligence in London at a party. I questioned him about the Albanian operation. He claimed that neither Philby nor the KGB had anything to do with the operation's failure and that his service had long penetrated the rebels' ranks. He would say that wouldn't he, but I tend to believe him.'²⁷

Volkov

Finally, there is the Volkov affair. This occurred in 1945 when Konstantin Volkov, Soviet Vice-Consul at Istanbul, indicated to the British that he wished to defect. Accounts of this episode say that Volkov was willing to name 314 Soviet agents in Turkey and 250 working in official and secret organisations in Britain and stated in addition that there were seven KGB sources in the Foreign

²⁵ Knightley (see note 17) pp. 159-61.

²⁶ Knightley (see note 17) p. 161.

²⁷ Email from Knightley, 14 May, 2013.

Office and two 'inside the British intelligence system'.²⁸ Philby, clearly threatened, headed for Istanbul in his capacity as Head of SIS's anti-Soviet Section IX, to meet Volkov. Before leaving London he tipped off Moscow about the would-be defector. By the time he reached Istanbul Volkov had disappeared. It is widely assumed that he was seized by the Soviets and transported back to Moscow, where he was interrogated and executed. The outcome was a source of bad feeling towards Philby in SIS: when he wrote to Nicholas Elliott from Moscow suggesting a meeting in neutral Helsinki, he is supposed to have received a rather contemptuous 'put some flowers for me on Volkov's grave' in response.²⁹

There is little doubt that Philby did tell his controllers about Volkov, or that the latter was removed from Istanbul as a result. Beyond that point things become rather murky. For a start, Volkov's offer of defection included not a list of 250 Soviet agents working in Britain but of 250 British intelligence officers whose identities were known to the KGB. Furthermore, his information about KGB sources was less specific than the history books say: it referred to nine of them within the Foreign Office and the intelligence services but did not specify how many worked in each organization.³⁰ Furthermore, it is not by any means certain that Volkov was executed. Todor Boyadjiev, a now retired senior member of Bulgarian intelligence who became friendly with Philby in the 1970s and 1980s and published a book about him, was told (apparently on the basis of material in the KGB archives) that Volkov was not shot but jailed for ten years and then released.³¹ Whatever the truth about Volkov, all in all it seems clear that some of the more spectacular claims about the impact of Philby's work for Soviet intelligence have been exaggerated, often with the help of the SIS and the CIA. As Phillip Knightley told me: 'It's been standard western intelligence agency practice for a long while that when a penetration agent is uncovered you unload upon him all the blame for every unsolved

²⁸ See West (see note 23) p. 850.

²⁹ 'Was Kim Philby offered escape to Moscow by MI6 agent?', *Daily Mail* 1 March 2014 <<https://tinyurl.com/3wfzwjkr>> or <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2571079/Was-Kim-Philby-offered-escape-Moscow-MI6-agent-New-letter-suggests-Soviet-agent-encouraged-defect-uncovered-master-spy.html>>.

³⁰ See note 29.

³¹ 'In from the cold: a new book reveals the inner world of British spy Kim Philby', Darya Kezina, *Russia Today*, 20 May 2015 at <<https://tinyurl.com/y9k4h9wp>> or <https://www.rbth.com/arts/2015/05/20_in_from_the_cold_a_new_book_reveals_the_inner_world_of_british_spy_kim_p_46205.html> If the story about Volkov's survival is true it is very surprising, unless of course the operation was in fact a KGB provocation to test Philby's loyalty.

scandal.³²

The discrepancy between Philby's real life and the conventional wisdom about him continued during his Moscow years. Western media reported that he was a senior officer in the KGB and had a desk at the Lubyanka. In fact he had no official position in the KGB (although he did receive a generous pension), being regarded simply as an agent. There was no room at the Lubyanka, which he visited only once, in 1977, to give a lecture. Once his debriefing was over and he had finished the memoir which was published in the West as *My Silent War*, he had little to do. He became lonely and seems to have hit the bottle. Anxiety about his mental state led the KGB to decide to use his skills, so that from the mid-1970s, for about ten years, it consulted him on operational matters from time to time and with its backing he established a training programme and seminars for staff who were to be posted to Britain, to help them blend in there.

The truth was that Philby was never fully trusted. Some in the KGB suspected that he (along with Blunt, Burgess and Cairncross) had been a British agent all along, providing the USSR with chickenfeed and disinformation. This went all the way back to the wartime period, when one analyst, Elena Modrzhinskaya, argued that it was incredible that SIS would recruit someone with a known Communist past and promote him to a senior position. Scepticism increased even more when, in answer to repeated queries about SIS plans to mount intelligence operations against the USSR and run agents there, Philby answered that there were no plans and the agents did not exist (at least, up until the establishment of Section IX). During a large part of Philby's time in Section V his controllers were more interested in asking him to fill in forms and write up his life story than in the information he was passing to them. In the end the KGB decided not to abandon dealing with Philby (and the others), not because they had concluded that these people were genuine after all but (i) because they could not conclusively prove that they were double agents; and (ii) because some of the information being provided really was valuable. But the doubts were never completely dispelled.³³

Krushchev and beyond

Philby's conduct in Moscow did not dispel this distrust. His early years there coincided with the Krushchev thaw, when Soviet economic growth was robust and there was more freedom of expression in the USSR than there had been since the 1920s. After Krushchev's removal from office things changed. During

³² Email to me from Phillip Knightley, 14 May, 2013.

³³ Borovik, (see note 12) pp. 210-216.

the last decade of Philby's life the economic progress of the post-war era slowed down and finally ground to a halt. There were obvious signs of poverty on the streets and shortages of some consumer goods. Slowly the political climate became more repressive. Within the Eastern bloc of nations Czechoslovakia, where there had been dramatic moves towards liberalisation during the mid to late 1960, was invaded by Soviet forces in 1968. Dissidents and writers in the USSR who did not toe the Communist Party line as set out by the new, Brezhnev and Kosygin regime in Moscow, were hounded. The work of novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn, which had become available during the Krushchev years, was suppressed. He was expelled from the Writers Union and forced to work in secret. In recent years it has even been alleged that the KGB attempted to poison him.³⁴ Early in 1974, after years of harassment by the authorities, he was deported to West Germany. Another leading citizen, the physicist Andrei Sakharov, known as 'the father of the Soviet H-bomb', was banished from his home in Moscow and sent into internal exile after criticising Soviet nuclear strategy and campaigning for human rights.

Solzhenitsyn and Sakharov were the most famous victims of the post-Krushchev freeze, but there were many other dissidents who lived under a shadow during these years.³⁵ Philby knew much about this, given his KGB connections and his wife's contacts in dissident circles, and it disgusted him. He was appalled by the treatment of Solzhenitsyn, whose work he displayed openly on his bookshelves after it had been banned. He angrily refused to sign official documents condemning dissidents, thought the Cold War a charade and disagreed with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.³⁶ He was frank about these and other issues with his KGB colleagues, telling them 'You would do better to go after the real criminals instead of persecuting dissidents.'³⁷

On top of all this, he became increasingly disappointed with the material reality of Soviet life, noting the contrast between the privations suffered by ordinary citizens, especially pensioners and war veterans, and the affluence and corruption evident in senior Party circles.³⁸ His willingness to speak his mind reinforced the paranoid school of opinion about him in the KGB and led to the temporary suspension of his training sessions and seminars: 'It was

³⁴ Oleg Kalugin and Fen Montaigne, *The First Directorate: My 32 Years in Intelligence and Espionage Against the West* (London: St Martin's Press, 1994), p. 220.

³⁵ See Zhores and Roy Medvedev, *A Question of Madness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).

³⁶ Philby et al, (see note 17) p. 87.

³⁷ Philby et al, (see note 17) pp. 40-6, 86-7.

³⁸ Knightley (see note 17) p. 234; Philby et al (see note 17) p. 54.

claimed that in the opinion of "Senior Management" Philby had "turned into a dissident", was criticising Soviet life, and might even be seeking to leave for the West'.³⁹ He never did, of course, although interestingly when living in Moscow he did remark to his wife Rufina that he 'knew everything' but that he was too old 'to begin everything again'.⁴⁰

KGB suspicions were encouraged by Philby's obvious and persistent Englishness: he listened to the BBC World Service every day, followed cricket (he had a copy of the 1972 *Wisden Cricketer's Almanac*) and had the complete works of P. G. Wodehouse in his extensive library,⁴¹ topped up by mail-ordering from the Cambridge bookseller, Bowes and Bowes, which he had used from the time he had been a student.⁴²

After Philby's death some of his colleagues speculated that he had always had two loyalties: to SIS and to the KGB. He 'could have worked honestly for both sides . . . without being a double agent', effectively using his own judgement and discretion about what to do with the information he possessed. In 2010, the Russia's post-KGB foreign intelligence service unveiled a plaque to Philby at its Moscow headquarters: it depicted him 'as the two-faced Roman god of gates, Janus'.⁴³

Philby's misgivings about the USSR were not new. They flared up from time to time throughout his life: but he never repudiated his commitment to Communism. As a young man Philby had made this not because he wanted to spy for the USSR, nor because he hated his own country (he certainly did not), but because he possessed a keen sense of injustice and saw Communism as the key to fighting fascism and imperialism and building a better and fairer

³⁹ Philby et al, (see note 17) p. 7.

⁴⁰ Philby et al (see note 17) p. 44.

⁴¹ Matthew Engel, 'Notes by the Editor', *Wisden Cricketers' Almanac*, 1994, p. 16 (Guildford: John Wisden and Co. Ltd.); Harry Windsor, 'On Her Majesty's Secret Disservice', *The Monthly*, December 2021-January 2022 <<https://tinyurl.com/2p8r34ft>> or <<https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2021/december/1638277200/harry-windsor/her-majesty-s-secret-disservice#mtr>>; and Jeffrey Meyers, 'Kim Philby's Library', *The Spectator*, 6 August 2011 <<https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/kim-philby-s-library>>

⁴² Bowes and Bowes became Sherratt and Hughes in 1986, a development which led Philby to write to them:

'Thank you for your letter announcing the change of name from Bowes & Bowes to Sherratt & Hughes. I note that your letterhead is still B&B, so I hope that this letter will reach you. To an old conservative gentleman like me, it is rather a shock to hear that a name which I have revered for 57 years is no longer to be.'

⁴³ 'Kim Philby: Spy gets Government Honour', BBC News, 9 December 2010 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11961131>>.

world.⁴⁴ The circumstances of the time when he made this commitment led him to become a Soviet agent. This career did not lead him to become an uncritical supporter of Stalinism and the Party line (in fact he never joined the Communist Party). In the final analysis he saw himself as not as a political man but as a foot soldier in the long struggle to improve the lot of humanity, above all of the underdog, and like soldiers everywhere he did not have to agree with the thinking in his army's High Command.⁴⁵

It is obvious even from a cursory reading of his autobiography that Philby went through some sort of crisis at the end of the 1930s when 'it was clear that much was going badly wrong in the Soviet Union', and considered dropping out of the struggle to which he had committed himself. In the end he decided to stick it out rather than join the ranks of cynical and embittered former Leftists, 'in the confident faith that the principles of the Revolution would outlive the aberration of individuals, however enormous'.⁴⁶ He argued that history had proved him right: 'but for the power of the Soviet Union and the Communist idea, the old world, if not the whole world, would now be ruled by Hitler and Hirohito'. At the end of his life he was hopeful that in Gorbachev 'I have a leader who has justified my years of faith'.⁴⁷ Philby's experience of and disillusionment with life in the Soviet Union notwithstanding, it seems reasonable to assume that he would have considered its dissolution in 1991, just three years after his death, a terrible mistake. The misery and insecurity experienced by the populations of the former Soviet Union in the following decade, along with the geopolitical crisis and revival of Cold War tensions provoked by NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe and the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine all suggest that he would not have been wrong.

The real Philby seems to have been far from the two-dimensional villain

⁴⁴ He told Phillip Knightley that at the age of nineteen he had come to the conclusion that in the UK 'the rich had had it too damned good for too damned long and the poor had had it too damned bad and that it was time it was changed'. See Knightley (see note 17) p. 33.

⁴⁵ This comment was made to me by Kim's son John Philby, to whom he was close, at the reception, held at the offices of publishers Andre Deutsch in London, to launch Phillip Knightley's biography of his father. Philby himself had anticipated it in his autobiography, when he explained his actions by quoting an exchange between the hero and heroine of Graham Greene's 1939 thriller *The Confidential Agent*: she asks him if his leaders are better than the others. He replies, 'No, of course not . . . But I still prefer the people they lead – even if they lead them all wrong.' 'The poor, right or wrong,' she scoffed. 'It's no worse – is it? – than my country right or wrong. You choose your side, once and for all – of course, it may be the wrong side. Only history can tell that.'

⁴⁶ Philby, (see note 17) pp. 27-8.

⁴⁷ Knightley (see note 17) p. 255.

depicted in so many books, newspaper articles and documentaries. Perhaps the full story will never be known but it seems safe to say that Tim Milne's version seems a good deal closer to what facts can be established. All the same, the demonization continues. Why? There are perhaps two main reasons. First, many *soi-disant* 'liberals' in the West, especially in the Anglo-American world, have for decades had a problem with people who make a commitment to an ideological (or religious) cause, even if this is driven by a revulsion against injustice. This scepticism has if anything intensified since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the 'end of history'. Yet those who make such a commitment need not be blind to a cause's intellectual weaknesses nor to crimes and horrors committed in its name. It is likely that Philby would have appreciated the sentiments of Dr Magiot, the Communist doctor in his friend Graham Greene's *The Comedians*: 'Catholics and Communists have committed great crimes, but at least they have not stood aside, like an established society, and been indifferent'.⁴⁸

Secondly, Philby turned against the ruling class of which he was a part: one he saw presiding over grotesque social inequality and chasing after a long-term political and economic deal with Nazi Germany.⁴⁹ It is not easy to see how it could be argued that he betrayed the British *people*, especially in view of his wartime work (for which he was awarded an OBE), and his part both in preventing a US nuclear monopoly and in informing Moscow about Western interventions in the Soviet bloc which were doomed anyway and only likely to result in widespread bloodshed and instability. These were, however, serious offences against the British *State* and those who ran it. Post-war Britain remained an imperial power with a global network of political and economic interests and strategic bases designed to keep them secure. These interests and bases were not directly threatened by the USSR but their stability as British assets was endangered by Communist ideology, while the Anglo-American alliance, established in 1941 and continued after the war, helped to provide Britain with the resources needed to sustain them. In his role as what Milne calls 'a lookout man for Soviet intelligence'⁵⁰ Philby made a contribution to blunting Western attempts to weaken the citadel of international Communism when, in view of his background, education, class and accent, he should have been doing exactly the opposite. It was this failure not only to play the game gentlemen like him were expected to play but to engage in

⁴⁸ Graham Greene, *The Comedians* (London: Penguin, 1970), pp. 285-6

⁴⁹ For an account of this see Scott Newton, *Profits of Peace: the political economy of Anglo-German appeasement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

⁵⁰ Milne p. 212.

covertly subverting it which lies behind his reputation as a cad and a bounder.

The old ruling class from which Philby came was eclipsed for a generation after 1945 but, along with its stenographers in the media, it returned to power in 1979. This it continues to hold, no longer with fantasies of presiding over an 'Empire on which the sun never set' but with delusions of running a 'Global Britain' based on the wealth of 'Singapore on Thames'. As long as it stays in control, with all its mendacity, malevolence and hypocrisy, Kim Philby will continue to be depicted as the Bad Boy, the Flashman of modern Britain.

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