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Was Philby a Phony Spy?

By Tad Szulc

IS IT POSSIBLE that Harold R.A. ("Kim") Philby, the Soviet "mole" in British intelligence and acknowledged superspy of the modern era, wasn't a real Soviet agent after all? So the Central Intelligence Agency would have us suspect.

In a little-noticed affidavit filed in two federal court cases here, the CIA has offered the unlikely notion that the Russians — who have made Philby a national hero, and given him a comfortable retirement in Moscow — still can't be sure that he was a reliable Soviet agent during his long years in Britain's MI-6 (the Secret Intelligence Service), years he spent shoveling western security secrets to Moscow in vast quantities. Either the CIA really harbors doubts about Philby's bona fides, or it has gone to extraordinary lengths to create a misleading impression before two U.S. courts.

The CIA's doubts about Philby appear in two affidavits submitted in federal courts in Washington to justify the agency's refusal to turn over certain historical materials in its files to a lawyer-historian preparing a book on Albania.

In declining to provide the materials, or even to confirm or deny their existence, the CIA argued that the documents would enable the Soviet Union "to ascertain the reliability of its double agent, Kim Philby."

Philby fled to Moscow in 1963 after being tipped that British and U.S. counterintelligence organs were about to grab him. As far as is known, Philby (once a dashing international figure) now lives quietly in Moscow. Aging and almost forgotten, he is said to perform minor Soviet propaganda tasks.

After his defection, he published "My Silent War," a memoir recounting how he had spied for the Russians since 1935. The KGB, the Soviet secret police, supposedly helped him prepare the volume, which was a best seller in the West.

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Western intelligence, which exposed and nearly caught him, never seemed to have any doubt as to Philby's "reliability" as a concealed Soviet operative. He had access to some of the most sensitive U.S. and British intelligence, and to this day it is not entirely clear how much damage he inflicted on the West.

Why, then, has the CIA found it necessary, after so many years, to reopen the Philby controversy? One explanation is that the implied CIA doubts about Philby are part of the secret superpower intelligence wars, in which accounts are never fully settled and books never really closed. Another is that the disclosure is simply part of a straightforward CIA attempt to plead its side of a law suit.

Curiously, the affair was triggered by a former member of the U.S. intelligence community, Marshall Lee Miller. Miller once served in a senior position at the Defense Intellligence Agency and is now a law partner of former CIA Director William E. Colby. In addition to his intelligence and legal background, Miller is a recognized historian specializing in the Balkans and author of a book on Bulgaria.

Several years ago, he began work on a new book, about Albania. In it he planned to describe abortive Anglo-American attempts between 1945 and 1953 to overthrow the communist regime of President Enver Hoxha. According to declassified State Department documents, then Secretary of State Dean Acheson and British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin had agreed in a Washington meeting in 1949 to seek Hoxha's ouster, and for years the Office of Policy Coordination, a shadowy paramilitary organization that was the CIA's forerunner, and the British Special Operations Executive sent Albanian agents into Albania by air and sea.

It is a matter of history that all these attempts failed dramatically, with the agents being captured and executed as soon as they landed. It is entirely possible that these operations were simply badly conducted. But intelligence experts think Philby betrayed them to the Russians.

Philby certainly was in a position to have done the betraying. At the end of World War II, he was a top official in MI-6's Section Five (counterintelligence) and he nearly rose to the post of chief of Secret Intelligence (SIS). He was a member of the U.S.-British Joint Intelligence Committee in Washington, and was fully informed about the secret operations in Albania.

Thus, in 1981, Miller went to the CIA with a request under the Freedom of Information Act for "all information on attempts by the U.S., U.K. and other western countries to infiltrate intelligence agents and potential guerrillas into Albania during the period between the end of World War II and the death of Stalin in 1953, including but not limited to those operations around 1951 apparently betrayed to the Russians by Kim Philby."

It was this request that elicited the startling CIA response, in affidavits explaining the CIA refusal to provide the materials, that any information from the agency's files on this matter would help Moscow establish whether Philby was a reliable Soviet spy. Both the U.S. District Court and the U.S. Court of Appeals in Washington have upheld the agency's refusal to turn over the materials.

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Why are Albanian operations still so sensitive 35 years after they occurred, and why — in this or any other context — did the CIA choose to use the Philby matter in pleadings its case in the courts?

As is normal in all such cases, the CIA has no official comment on the resurgence of the Philby case. In personal conversations, however, persons in Washington highly knowledgeable in intelligence and counterintelligence have expressed total surprise over hints that Philby may have not fully satisfied the Russians that he was a double agent.

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