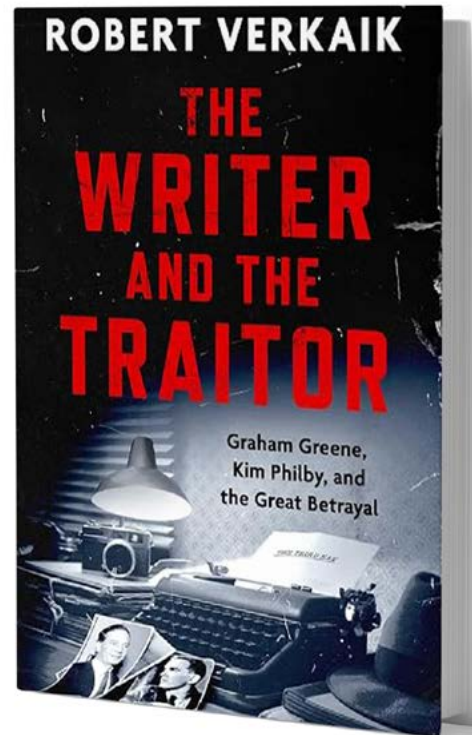


intelligence in public media

The Writer and the Traitor Graham Greene, Kim Philby, and the Great Betrayal

Reviewed Ian B. Ericson

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Reviewer: Ian B. Ericson is the pen name of a CIA officer.



Kim Philby and Graham Greene had much in common. They were scions of the British establishment who discovered far-left politics in college. Each behaved abominably toward their wives and oversaw wildly successful intelligence operations for MI-6 during World War II. They were also, in distinct ways, deeply religious. Greene was a committed, though heterodox, Catholic while Philby adhered throughout his life to the secular faith of communism, remaining devout despite Marxism's endlessly growing body count. They also maintained a long and strange friendship that Philby's public outing as a KGB spy in 1963 seemed only marginally to strain. In his intriguing, yet flawed, new volume, *The Writer and the Traitor*, journalist and author Robert Verkaik examines the Philby-Greene relationship and ponders whether Greene left clues to Philby's treachery in his short story (and film) the "Third Man."

The book does not quite deliver, however. Though Verkaik makes use of some newly released archival material, these tend to reinforce much of what is already known about the two men. In the absence of new revelations, Verkaik often relies on speculation. The result are many assertions that often flounder for lack of evidence.

Verkaik tells Philby and Greene's stories mostly in parallel. Their interactions are noteworthy but limited, and Verkaik mostly does a good job recounting highlights from their biographies. Greene only meets Philby in 1941, when the latter, who had joined MI-6 the year before, participated in vetting Greene's application to join the service. By this time, Greene was 36, an established writer, and looking for a way to participate in the war effort. Philby, recruited by the Soviets in 1934, had worked as a journalist in Spain during the civil war there and used

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The Writer and the Traitor

his superb connections and unique charm to overcome questions about his communist activities while at Cambridge University in the early 1930s and nevertheless gain employment at MI-6.

Philby spent most of the war in England, overseeing counterintelligence operations against the German *Abwehr* on the Iberian Peninsula, and of course keeping the Soviets fully informed. Greene, after a year spent in Sierra Leone countering German espionage efforts in West Africa during the Battle of the Atlantic, took a position as Philby's subordinate at MI-6 Headquarters. The two bonded and Greene would speak glowingly of Philby even decades later. In his foreword to Philby's self-serving (and KGB approved) autobiography, *My Silent War* (1968), Greene would say: "No one could be a better chief than Kim Philby ... he worked harder than anyone and never gave the impression of labor." (139) Philby wrote similar paeans to Greene, saying that working with him was "wholly delightful." (140)

Had Greene reserved his praise for Philby's work against the Germans, perhaps it could have been excused. Verkaik recounts, however, Greene's fulsome praise for his boss in a July 1963 letter to the *Times*, six months after Philby's defection to the Soviets, in which he recalled his former chief "with great affection" (291) and proposed that the true threat to international peace emanated from Washington, DC, and not Moscow.

Greene and Philby's mutual acquaintance with Harry Smolka (aka Peter Smollett), an employee of Britain's Ministry of Information during the war and KGB spy recruited by Philby in 1939, forms the basis of Verkaik's suggestion that Greene knew of Philby's KGB work years before it was uncovered. Smolka served as an informal consultant on Greene's *Third Man* in Vienna in 1948, and Verkaik speculates that Smolka revealed Philby's true loyalties during these conversations. Greene, the theory goes, thus used Philby as the inspiration for Harry Lime, the film's villain played by Orson Welles.

To make his case, Verkaik draws parallels between Lime and Philby, some of which are interesting and others being stretches. Greene's Lime worked at the International Refugee Office in Vienna, which is

close to Philby's work with the Committee for Aiding Refugees from Fascism, also based in Vienna, in 1933. On the other hand, Lime's girlfriend sharing a surname (Schmidt) with a former *Abwehr* agent whose ring Philby and Greene had broken up in Lisbon is less compelling. Verkaik's theory that Greene left clues in his film to help MI-5's mole hunt is far-fetched, and no real evidence explains why the Soviet spy Smolka would tell Greene about Philby and risk his own exposure?

The author use of speculation surfaces in other places. Verkaik cites Philby's role in scuttling a proposed postwar MI-5/MI-6 merger and notes that had the merger occurred it "would surely have been only a matter of weeks before the treachery of Philby and the other Cambridge spies was uncovered." (217) This seems far too optimistic, and Verkaik supplies no evidence. Verkaik also speculates that MI-6 directed Greene to go to the USSR in the 1980s for unexplained operational reasons, but possibly including an effort to coax Philby back to Britain. The mechanics of this absurdity are left to the reader's imagination. Much more likely is that Greene liked Philby and remained broadly sympathetic to the goals of communism.

Factual errors also mar the volume. Verkaik misuses the term "double agent" throughout; Philby would only have been a double agent had MI-6 permitted his contacts with the KGB for operational purposes, which it obviously did not. The Soviets murdered Ignace Reiss in Switzerland, not Moscow. The KGB officers Anatoly Gorsky and Boris Krotenschield were not illegals; they were under diplomatic cover while handling the Cambridge Five in London. Catholics do not worship Saint Anthony, they venerate him. Flora Solomon was not a Soviet spy. Verkaik's speculation that Philby's letter to Greene in 1985 might have been a coded message meant for Anthony Blunt is unlikely in the extreme in light of Blunt's death in 1983. Some of these errors may be minor, but they are still errors.

Mistakes and unsupported assertions aside, Verkaik has produced a work that is still useful in places. Greene and Philby remain two of the most fascinating, if disreputable, characters in the annals of espionage. Verkaik has produced a volume that sheds light on their relationship, though perhaps not as much as he had hoped. ■