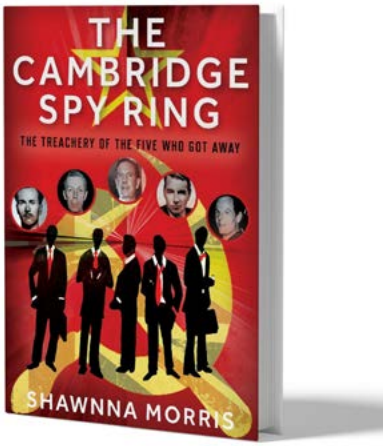
intelligence in public media

The Cambridge Spy Ring
The Treachery of the Five Who Got Away

Reviewed by Ian B. Ericson



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

Perhaps no group of spies has been written about as often as the Cambridge Five. Nearly a century after their recruitment by the KGB and over three decades since the death of the last of their number, they continue to befuddle and fascinate in equal measure. How could such sons of privilege betray their motherland for such a reprehensible cause as Soviet Communism? Alternatively, having once elected to indulge a youthful fancy, why stick with it once the bloody accounting of Stalinism became impossible to deny? Shawnna Morris is more successful answering the first of these questions than the second in her new volume, *The Cambridge Spy Ring*.

The five spies—Kim Philby, Guy Burgess, Anthony Blunt, Donald Maclean, and John Cairncross—were (with the exception of Cairncross) high born, extremely bright, and well on their way to elite positions within a British Empire that spanned a quarter of the globe. They were also swept away by the communist wave that hit Cambridge University in the early 1930s. With the onset of the Great Depression and the rise of Nazi Germany, communism appeared to offer a better path than fascism or feckless parliamentarianism to alleviate the persistent economic dispossession that gripped the industrial world.

Espionage only happens when motivation meets opportunity, however, and the KGB (then known as the NKVD) skillfully exploited the young crop of ideologues. Arnold Deutsch was a Czech-born KGB illegal—a deep-cover operative—who arrived in London in 1934 with the goal of penetrating the British establishment. Deutsch's academic contacts eventually led him to Philby, a recent Trinity College Cambridge graduate who had been active in left-wing circles during most of his

undergraduate tenure. Philby was the first of the five to be recruited. He was also instrumental in filling out the ring, as he provided a list of potential recruits to Deutsch.

Thus began the greatest counterintelligence disaster in the history of Britain, if not the entire West. The damage wrought by the Cambridge Five is well-known and too voluminous to recount here in any detail. Suffice to say, whatever London contemplated in the diplomatic or intelligence realm from the 1930s to 1951, when Burgess and Maclean fled to Moscow, was known to the KGB within a distressingly short period. The KGB made its share of tradecraft errors (like using the Soviet Embassy in Paris as Philby's accommodation address), but it didn't have to be perfect. It just had to be better than British counterespionage. Perfunctory British background checks combined with exquisitely placed Soviet penetrations of British intelligence allowed the KGB to survive a number of close scrapes, including the near-defection of a KGB officer in Turkey in 1945 (Konstantin Volkov) who would have given away the store had MI6 not chosen Philby himself to manage the defection.[a] Philby hastily warned his KGB handler and then indulged in a historic act of foot-dragging that gave the Soviets time to send a squad to Turkey, drug Volkov, and fly him and his wife back to Moscow for speedy execution.

Morris skillfully re-tells the stories of lives lost and money wasted on anti-Soviet operations that were known to the enemy before they began. She also details the lives of the spies themselves, most notably the toll that their double lives took on them and their families. As the noose began to tighten on Maclean in 1950 while he was posted to Cairo, for example, his alcoholic binges became epic. Morris vividly describes property destruction that would have embarrassed Ozzy Osbourne. Clearly at the end of his tether, Maclean was sent back to London to detox, quickly given a clean bill of health, and then allowed back to work on the Americas desk.

This was the pattern. None of the Cambridge Five paid any price for professional incompetence or appalling personal behavior. Whether it was persistent operational failure on Philby's part (none of those teams MI6 and CIA sent into the Eastern Bloc seemed to accomplish their objectives for some reason) or dipsomaniacal outrages from Guy Burgess (drawing an explicit caricature of a senior CIA officer's wife and showing it to her), each member of the ring nonetheless managed to maintain their sensitive positions within the British government.

For all the damage they caused, things could have been much worse had US codebreakers not begun deciphering Soviet messages in the late 1940s. Venona, the name given to the effort, quickly showed that the Soviets had a penetration of the British Embassy in Washington in the latter stages of World War II, although the precise identify of the spy remained unknown into 1951. Unfortunately, MI6 had appointed Philby as its head of station in Washington in 1949, and Philby not only informed the Soviets of the need to change their codes, but also kept them abreast of the progress the US was making in identifying the mole, who was none other than Donald Maclean.

By spring 1951, Maclean's identification was imminent. Burgess, posted to the embassy and living in Philby's basement, returned to London to warn Maclean of the need to make his way to Russia. Maclean was barely functional at this point, so the KGB decided Burgess should accompany him. Thus, in late May 1951, Burgess and Maclean slipped across the English Channel while their MI5 watchers, who did not work weekends, slept. The disappearance of the two diplomats placed suspicion on Philby, who was told he was no longer welcome in Washington. Philby managed to avoid arrest, but MI6 dismissed him shortly after his return to London. Cairncross and Blunt ceased contact with the KGB around the same time, and in effect the Cambridge Spy Ring was at its end.

Morris highlights the enduring outrage that not a single member of the ring spent a day in prison for their treachery. In 1964, Blunt was given immunity for

a. On page 53 of this issues, see Kathy Gonzales' review of *The Secret History of UK Security Vetting from 1909 to the Present*, by Daniel Lomas.

his half-hearted cooperation and allowed to continue his work as a distinguished art historian. Cairncross admitted his espionage around the same time and was never prosecuted, despite not being given immunity.

As for Philby, when his MI6 colleague and close friend Nicholas Elliott visited Beirut in 1963 and presented Philby incontrovertible evidence of his betrayal, Philby made a partial confession and then defected to the Soviet Union. The stench from this counterespionage malpractice remains malodorous to this day.

Morris is a good writer. Her prose is compelling and easy to follow. What she does not do is break any new ground. There are no new insights or even vignettes to share. Hers is an abridged version of a story—stories, really—that have been told in greater depth elsewhere. Morris admits as much in the foreword. She is nonetheless admirably conversant in the topic, and one complaint is that the book ends rather abruptly. This reader would have appreciated Morris's assessment of why it all matters and what lessons we can draw from this sorry episode. For all that, if you are looking for a one-volume summary of these five traitors, you could do considerably worse than this one. As to the question of why another volume on the Cambridge Five? The answer might simply be: Why not?■