

# Sailor in a Russian Frame

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SAILOR IN A RUSSIAN FRAME. By Cdr. *Anthony Courtney*. (London: Johnson. 1968. 256 pp. 35s.)

"I'm not a Profumo, but ..." was the title on the illustrated handbill, with photos to match, which was sent to the British press and the wife and political friends and enemies of retired Royal Navy Commander Anthony Courtney, Conservative Member of Parliament for Harrow East, in August of 1965. Before a year had passed, Courtney had lost his wife, his seat, and most of his business as a result of a KGB political action operation in the heart of London. His book is the story of why the Soviets "framed" him and how he fought back, and almost won. The episode vividly exemplifies how the Soviets employ assiduous data collection and personal provocation in political action.

Courtney's father had exported machine tools to Russia during World War One and became a Russophile, leading his son to practice oneupmanship among his schoolmates with assiduous study of *Hugo's Russian Course, Part I*. A tour with the China Station in the late 20's as Sub Lieutenant of *H.M.S. Cornwall* gave the younger Courtney practical experience, particularly with the "many delightful girls in the White Russian clubs and cabarets" of Shanghai, and probably provided the first entries in RIS files. In 1933 he had been awarded nine months' leave to study Russian in Rumania. In 1935 he spent his summer leave in the USSR. Subsequently he was assigned to the Naval Intelligence Division of the Admiralty in London to re-write the "Russian Intelligence Report." This gave him a chance to meet Soviet military officers in London, including Marshal Tukhachevsky. Back to ships by 1937 and married in 1938, he was not involved with Russia again until he was assigned as Deputy Head of the British Naval Mission to Moscow in October of 1941. By his own account he made the most of his year there to get close to

the natives, and after the war he was placed in charge of the Russian Section of the Naval Intelligence Division for almost three years. At the end of 1948 he was assigned as Chief of Intelligence Staff to the Flag Officer, Germany. In 1951 he returned to the Admiralty and retired in 1953 with a small pension, no capital, but " ... three assets: a naval training, a good knowledge of three languages and the best wife a man has ever been blessed with." During the next five years he sought election to Parliament, finally succeeding in 1959.

During the same five years, he also sought with some success to re-establish his fathers commercial trade with Russia and other eastern countries, and broadcast a weekly talk in Russian on the BBC. He exhibited at the Poznan fair in 1955, 1956, and 1957; in the last year, after a property dispute, he was escorted out by the UB, never to return. He therefore turned to Moscow, where he renewed old acquaintanceships and made new ones, so that by early 1961 he was on top of the wave commercially, politically and socially, having made his maiden speech in Commons on the hope for improved Anglo-Soviet relations through commerce and adding China to his list of Communist trading posts. Two years of negotiations had resulted in that rarity of east-west trade, a successful contract with the Russians. In March, however, Courtney's wife of 23 years, "the first Elisabeth," died of a heart attack, and here his fortunes changed.

In the summer of 1959, while staying at the Hotel Ukraina, Courtney had met "a pleasant woman" on the INTOURIST staff, Zinaida Grigoryevna Volkova. By the following year, "Zina" had accepted an invitation to the theater. In May of 1961, there was held in Moscow the first British Industrial Exhibition since the Revolution, with which Courtney had much to do. Despite meetings with the Khrushchevs and Suslov, Courtney found life rather boring, since many of his friends were away from Moscow on vacation. Not so Zina, however; she had given up part of her annual holiday from INTOURIST to work at the exhibition.

"Since Elisabeth's death her ably warmer, and she knew come, now that there was no attitude towards me had been noticefull well how desolate life had bewife waiting for me on my return to England ... Just how it occurred, I have no idea, except that it 'was certainly on her initiative, but it is a fact that for the first and last time in our acquaintance she came up to my [hotel] bedroom after dinner and stayed there with me for several hours. Our affair was not a success. It was therefore not altogether surprising that on the next occasion when we met she

expressed some distress at having behaved in the way she had, saying she knew now that it was not really what I had wanted ... In June, 1961, rightly or wrongly, the thought never entered my head that a successful operation might in fact have been mounted by the KGB against myself."

A year after Elisabeth's death, Courtney married another Elizabeth (with "z" this time), the widowed Lady Trefgarne, in the Crypt Chapel of the House of Commons. His new wife, a Director of the family firm of machine-tool manufacturers, was quickly accepted as both a commercial and political asset, and in 1962 travelled with him on a trip to Moscow, Leningrad and China. Zina took her sight-seeing.

Despite his increasing dependence on the Soviets for his business success (or perhaps because of it, in that he may have feared to be charged with a conflict of interest), his speeches in Commons often criticized the Government for failure to protest KGB harassment of British Embassy personnel in Moscow. In the light of the Vassall and Blake cases, he also spoke to the House on what he considered Foreign Office incompetence in the security field. (He had personal knowledge of Blake since he had arranged Blake's naval cover to attend a special Russian course at Downing College, Cambridge, just after World War II.)

He also made an increasing number of trips to the Soviet Union, and it was there that he received at his hotel a letter which had come through the British Embassy, from his wife. "The letter was very much to the point. My wife had decided to leave me, as our marriage had not turned out the success she had hoped: no more specific reason was given ... I duly telephoned my wife at home and managed to persuade her to change her mind. But great damage had been done. The telephone call, which I was forced to make on an open line from my hotel, had undoubtedly let the KGB discover that there was a weak link in the Courtney armour." The file was growing swiftly.

Courtney survived the general election of 1964 but lost half his majority in the general trend toward Labour. In November an incident occurred which he does not describe in detail but which seems to have involved a fortnight's indiscretion on the part of his wife, and in January Courtney's eldest stepson, the leader of the Conservative Party (then Sir Alec Douglas-Home), and he all received anonymous letters "from a source or sources which appeared to be very well-informed about my wife's private life," suggesting he resign "as our M.P." Then, his critical review of a Soviet book on the naval history of World War II for the *Evening*

*Standard* was attacked in *Red Star*. By March, 1965, 'when he was next to visit Moscow, he realized that he might be in danger there, and wrote a letter to the Foreign Secretary for his wife to mail in case anything happened to him. Although his business efforts seemed to go better than ever, one old friend of 23 years' standing refused to accept a call or a visit, which Courtney could only interpret as an urgent warning.

He nevertheless continued his criticism of Foreign Office security and his efforts to get the Soviets to agree to the first chartered Anglo-Soviet commercial concern with three British and three Soviet directors. In July 1965 he was to visit the Soviet Union again, but three days before his departure Sir Alec Douglas-Home resigned from the Leadership of the Conservative Party and Courtney could not leave London. Ten days later, two days before the Summer recess, members of the press and Parliament received copies of an illustrated handbill which "contained six photographs, five of them being of myself—with appropriate captions .... Two of the photographs represented me in company with a woman (or women) in circumstances which plainly indicated sexual intimacy." The impact of a special mailing to his wife was apparently not lessened by the fact that he had told her about the incident with Zina in 1961 soon after their marriage in 1962.

The remainder of the book is an engrossing picture of Courtney's fight to retain his political position in the face of his Party's unseemly haste to dump him as a candidate, his winning of his constituency's support and overthrowing the local Conservative leadership, and his subsequent, heartbreaking loss of his seat by 378 votes while the former leadership sat on its hands. Ten weeks later his wife was granted a divorce, and March 1967 saw a special party meeting packed with Young Conservatives choose one of their number to be the prospective conservative candidate for Harrow East. "For me the decision was a blow that seemed politically mortal. The process set in train by the KGB in August 1965 had been completed."

It must be admitted that Courtney probably gave the Soviets even more cause for enmity—and perhaps hope for success—than he makes explicit in the book. In 1947 or 1948, he had had "certain ideas involving the use of fast surface craft and submarines in cooperation with the SIS," and after he contacted "C,"<sup>1</sup> "discussions took place about the feasibility of obtaining information from the Black Sea area" using such craft. Unfortunately the man SIS assigned to the discussion was Kim Philby, who "listened to my proposals with interest, for he had a wide

knowledge of Turkish affairs and his support was essential if Naval Intelligence was to make any contribution to the common effort in the Black Sea." Yes, indeed. "But nothing whatsoever emerged from this meeting ... " Nothing daunted, in 1949 or 1950, when assigned as Chief of Intelligence Staff to the Flag Officer at Hamburg,

"Once again I found myself working closely with the Secret Intelligence Service, and at last I had the opportunity to put some of my ideas into practice by providing the SIS with direct naval assistance in the Baltic ... I was struck by the potential capabilities of stripped-down ex-Kriegsmarine 'E' boat hulls, powered by the incomparable twin Mercedes-Benz 518 diesel engines. With my assistants . . . at Hamburg and Kiel I was frequently at Lubeck and Flensburg and other smaller harbours such as Eckernforde and Kappeln, from which we mounted our operations. Little did I know that the penetration of the Foreign Office and SIS by the Russian Intelligence Service must have not only doomed our efforts from the start, but had involved me personally in sending many a brave man into the jaws of a Soviet trap."

Not only that but, as the press has reported for years now, the boat crews and even the teams themselves were penetrated, in both the Baltic and Black Seas and probably in the Far East as well.

It is amazing that Courtney's post-war commercial enterprises got as far with the Soviet Union as they did, and in fact his success only becomes plausible in the light of his deduction that it was leading him into an elaborate trap. He believes that trap was to have been sprung on him in Moscow in July 1965; that he was to be held to exchange for Soviet spies such as the Krogers or George Blake, then in jail in England; that he escaped the trap only when he had to cancel the trip at the last minute because of a Party crisis; and that the handbill, originally designed to discredit him and render him defenseless while in a Soviet dungeon, was simply too far along to be stopped by the bureaucracy when the KGB realized he had not arrived on schedule in Moscow.

Perhaps, but it seems more likely to this reviewer that the KGB planned to recruit him—or perhaps even tried just before the trip—and that the publication of the handbill was a vindictive substitute for the original plot. Courtney naturally does not want to admit that perhaps the Soviets had reason to believe he would be vulnerable to recruitment, but by

then his publicly expressed "weakness for blondes" had been documented in his KGB dossier for 35 years. It may in fact have figured in the UB action against him in 1957. As he put it later to the press, "I knew the danger of microphones but never thought of cameras. This was before James Bond and ... the idea never occurred to me." He obviously thought he could have his cake without paying the baker, and probably had been doing so for some years.

Courtney's writing is excellent, his index professional, and his approach, considering the subject, dignified. Above all, however, we must respect his political and personal courage in this matter, even though it was described in some quarters as "cheek," since the KGB's role was never proven. The subject matter must have been almost irresistible to the British press in the wake of the Profumo affair, but it was relatively restrained, perhaps influenced as much by libel laws as by a sense of fair play and anger at Soviet high-handedness.

But worse was to come than is mentioned in the book: in March, 1968, Courtney won a suit against his former friend, the out-voted ex-head of the Harrow East Association, Sir Theo Constantine, for repeating Courtney's estranged wife's statement that the incident depicted in the photographs must have occurred in 1963 after their marriage, rather than in 1961 before it, because in 1961 he did not yet wear that kind of "underpants." This must have seemed to Courtney the lowest blow of all and it apparently undermined the Party's faith in him beyond recall. Whatever the facts of the affair, we can only wish with Courtney that the Conservative voters of Harrow East had risen to the occasion and cast their votes, if not for Courtney, at least against the KGB.

# **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

1 General Stewart Menzies, then head of MI-6.

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