

Intelligence in Public Literature

A Spy Among Friends: Kim Philby and the Great Betrayal

Ben Macintyre. (Crown Publishers, 2014), 384 pp., illustrated.

Kim Philby: The Unknown Story of the KGB's Master Spy

Tim Milne. (Biteback Publishing, 2014), 304 pp., illustrated.

Reviewed by Thomas G. Coffey

Of all Soviet spies during the Cold War, Harold (Kim) Philby is the one authors seem to most like writing about. (Well over a dozen books about him, including his autobiography and his widow's memoir, have appeared in print in multiple versions and languages.) He was not creepy like the FBI's Robert Hansen. Nor had he topped out like CIA's Aldrich Ames. He was no screw up like British Foreign Service officer Guy Burgess or defense contractor TRW's Christopher Boyce and his partner Daulton Lee. He was not dastardly to those around him like the US Navy's John Walker. Rather, Philby was charming, smart, quite likeable, and a professional success. While many of his MI6 colleagues felt deeply betrayed by his spying, a few expressed no hard feelings.

Philby's life had all the elements of a gripping novel. Two of his British intelligence colleagues based their fiction on him. Graham Greene was a pen pal and visitor after Philby defected to Moscow, and his book *The Human Factor* (not *The Third Man*) was written with Philby in mind. The same goes for John Le Carré's classic about high-level betrayal at MI6, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*. And so it is only fitting that a terrific storyteller and documentarian, Ben Macintyre, would provide a novel's touch to a factual account of Philby's espionage. And if Macintyre's narrative comes across at times as too interesting to be true, a fellow MI6 officer and close friend of Philby, Tim Milne, provides a sanity check while putting Philby's spying in context.

Macintyre rehashes much of Philby's history (see the textbox on the right) but gives it a fresh look by telling the story through the prism of Philby's friendship with his MI6 friend and colleague Nicholas Elliot, who ultimately confronted Philby with the truth in Beirut in 1962. True to form, Macintyre's book is well told and juicy. For

Philby in Brief

Born in 1912 to a strong-willed and independent-minded Middle East scholar, Kim continued the intellectual tradition as a student at Cambridge. He joined the communist cause in 1933 and was recruited by the Soviets in London in 1934. In the spring of 1936, Philby was working for an Anglo-German trade journal, using the position to report to the Soviets about the Nazi regime. He then got a job as a freelance journalist in Spain in early 1937 during the civil war and ended up as the London *Times* correspondent to Loyalist leader General Franco.

In July 1940, Philby joined the British foreign intelligence service, MI6, and within a year was assigned to the counterespionage section dealing with the Iberian Peninsula. In June 1944, he was selected to run the newly created Soviet counterintelligence unit, Section IX. He headed the Istanbul station from February 1947 to September 1949, when he was posted to Washington to act as a liaison with the CIA and FBI.

In May 1951, Philby sent fellow Soviet spy Guy Burgess to London to arrange the defection of another spy in the Foreign Service, Donald Maclean. Despite Philby's appeal, "don't you go too," Burgess defected as well and suspicion fell squarely on Philby as the "third man" in the conspiracy. In mid-July 1951, Philby was forced to leave MI6 under a cloud of suspicion. His loyalty was called into question in Parliament in the fall of 1955, but he was cleared when Foreign Secretary and later Prime Minister Macmillan spoke in Philby's defense.

In August 1956, Philby got a job as a stringer for *The Economist* and the *Beirut Observer*, jobs arranged by his MI6 colleagues. He also served as an agent for MI6. In late 1962, new and damning information surfaced against Philby. A former colleague confronted him and got a signed confession. Philby managed to defect days later. He lived the remaining 25 years of his life in Moscow, working periodically with the KGB to train officers.

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starters, there are so many references to tours abroad, drinking, wild parties, passing out on the sofa, trashed apartments, ripped panties, and womanizing that you'd think this was a biography of the Rolling Stones and not a spy. Macintyre peppers the narrative with marvelous turns of phrase and characterizations of Elliot, OSS officer and later CIA counterintelligence officer James Angleton, and Philby. He describes Elliot as "a distinctly English combination of the staid and unconventional, conservatism and oddity." Angleton, who interacted frequently with Philby, is depicted as haunted by the spy case, known to ascribe new signs of treachery well after Philby defected as being "all Kim's work."

Macintyre quotes MI6 officer and later historian Hugh Trevor-Roper as looking around the office spotting "part-time stockbrokers, retired Indian policemen, epicureans from the bars...robust adventurers from the bucket shop (shady trades)...and I looked at Philby. He alone was real. I was convinced he was destined to head the service." Philby's destiny took a markedly different turn in 1951 and later when Elliot urged him to own up to his spying, sign a confession, and tell British authorities all he knew in return for immunity. The transcript from this encounter is Macintyre's contribution to the Philby literature and it makes *A Spy Among Friends* a riveting read.

Milne throws some cold water on Macintyre's portrayal of Philby. He was not a big drinker, in the sense of being an alcoholic, at least in front of Milne, until he came under suspicion. He did not have a complex about his father, as Macintyre suggests. The prep school he attended was not typical of public school life—a key theme of Macintyre's is that Philby was "one of them," from the ruling class, with the same upbringing, schools, and acquaintances and this protected him from suspicion. Milne sees little psychological explanation to Philby's spying, no attraction discernible in the double life spying forced on him. Like Macintyre, he notes Philby took the path of many others who joined the Communist Party in the 1930s, when capitalism was collapsing and fascism was on the rise. However, he never lost faith in the cause upon discovering the extent of Stalin's monstrous rule.

For this reviewer, Macintyre's discussion of Angleton is a bit exaggerated—as he believes are many accounts of Angleton—and does not add up in some cases. He asserts Philby's betrayal motivated Angleton to be increasingly suspicious—which it no doubt did—and illegally spy on

US antiwar protesters and dissidents. The real culprit here is President Lyndon Johnson, who ordered the CIA to undertake these operations against domestic opponents.^a

Macintyre contends little is known about what exactly Angleton told Philby during their martini-filled lunches because Angleton destroyed memos he supposedly dictated right after the sessions. It is hard to believe Angleton would give away the store to Philby because he was drunk and then return sober enough to dictate a comprehensive memo detailing his possible violation of the need-to-know principle—in itself an act of astounding stupidity.

The relationship between the Brits and their American cousins was not nearly as chummy as Macintyre suggests. Philby himself in his memoir *My Silent War* cites many instances of CIA officers' and their British counterparts' sparring over who should lead insurgent groups behind the East Bloc. Milne does not discuss Angleton in much detail.

The Angleton memos begin to provide insight into the damage caused by Philby's spying and to put it in context. Milne carries this further quite well. From 1941 to 1944, Philby's informing the Soviets of what the British—and to a lesser extent—the Allies were doing counterintelligence wise in the Iberian Peninsula during WWII did little damage. Some of Philby's reporting during this period should have actually benefited the Allied cause. Information that the British were not actively spying on the Soviet Union during the war should have eased Soviet suspicions and built trust. It did not. The Kremlin simply could not believe its luck. His information seemed so good that they came to wonder if Philby was a double agent. His reporting did apparently help convince the Kremlin that London and Washington had no intention of selling out the Soviets to coup plotters against Hitler or allying with a successor German government against them.

The real damage began in 1944, when the British and Americans set their counterintelligence sights against the Soviet Union. Philby gave up one Soviet defector just before the defector could name Philby as a spy. The Soviet consular official in Istanbul had promised to turn over the names of hundreds of Soviet agents in Turkey and Britain. Philby shared with the Soviets the names of leading Catholics in Germany who could play a role in government

a. John Ranelagh, *CIA, a History* (BBC Books, 1992), 534.

after the war. The Kremlin had many of them killed or imprisoned. This was a particularly cruel act.

Philby appears to have acted slavishly without any reflection, given the Soviets almost certainly would have gained hegemony over parts of Germany without this kill list. He gave away plans of the United States and Britain to infiltrate insurgents into Albania, thus ensuring these raiding parties were all rolled up. Philby mentioned in his memoir a similar failed foray into Ukraine, of which he most likely warned the Kremlin. However, it is very possible these operations would have ended badly anyway, given their difficult nature. Similar operations during the Cold War behind other parts of the Iron Curtain, China, and North Vietnam failed miserably. Indeed, Philby's spying backfired in one case, depriving the Soviets of his services for many years. The end of his time as an MI6 officer started with Philby's telling his handler that MI5, the British equivalent of the FBI, was planning to arrest Maclean based on intelligence indicating he was a spy.

The takeaways for an intelligence officer from these books are few and simple. As the above rundown suggests, the impact of spying is hard to discern and there are often unintended consequences. Another lesson, unfortunately, is that crime sometimes does pay. Philby escaped to Moscow—some believe MI6 looked the other way to avoid the embarrassment of a public trial—and lived a relatively content 25 years there. It undoubtedly stung that the Soviet authorities received him as an agent and not a KGB officer, in part because his easy escape from Beirut invited suspicion he was still working for the British government. For his first five years in Moscow, Philby had little to do and attempted suicide. Eventually the KGB came to trust him and had him lecture and train new intelligence officers. He had an affair with Maclean's wife, remarried, wrote a memoir, lived comfortably by Soviet standards, and traveled within the Communist bloc. He seemed himself again.

The Philby case drives home the need to be wary of liaison relationships, even with the closest of allies. Macintyre notes the deal MI6 offered had Philby confess to spying until 1949, even though they undoubtedly knew Philby spied afterwards, when stationed in Washington. Macintyre makes plain that the early end date for Philby's spying allowed MI6 to cut Washington out of the deal and offer Philby immunity. (257–58) MI6 was also slow to acknowledge Philby was a spy despite growing evidence against him. (173) Director Bedell Smith let his British counterpart know what his Agency had concluded about Philby:

. . . a letter had arrived from CIA chief Walter Bedell Smith, drafted by Bill Harvey with his indictment attached. Aggressive in tone and addressed to C in person, it stated under no circumstances would Philby be permitted to return to Washington. The underlying message was blunt: Fire Philby or we break off the intelligence relationship. (163–64)

Finally, one can be too close to an issue to think objectively. Elliot and Milne believed Philby was innocent until his defection. Elliot fought to clear Philby's name and even used him as an agent when Elliot served as chief of station in Beirut. Milne continued to receive Philby warmly after he was forced out of MI6. Macintyre sees this disbelief as part of the British elite's refusing to believe the worst about one of their own. Angleton also kept faith, writing a memo in Philby's defense to Director Smith. It was outsiders in MI5, officers who traveled in different circles with different upbringings, as well as former FBI officer and then colleague of Angleton's Bill Harvey, who were convinced of Philby's guilt.

Whether one is hunting for intelligence lessons, life lessons, or no lessons at all, the two books are worthy reads as historical literature: informative, thought-provoking, and even entertaining.



