

EUROPE

Even in Death, the Spy Kim Philby Serves the Kremlin's Purposes

By ANDREW HIGGINS OCT. 1, 2017

MOSCOW — Bereft of friends in Western capitals since its 2014 annexation of Crimea, Russia is celebrating the memory of the British K.G.B. spy Kim Philby, a stalwart supporter who stood by it through thick and thin — and spent the last 25 years of his life in Moscow, often drunk and miserable but still loyal.

Mr. Philby, a notorious double-agent who defected to Moscow in 1963 and died there in 1988, was recently honored with a portrait in a Russian state art gallery and is celebrated in a soon-to-be broadcast film on state television.

The adulation has now reached a new level with the opening of an exhibition in Moscow on the life and work of the best-known of the so-called Cambridge Five Soviet spies in Britain. It portrays Mr. Philby as an unwavering Russian patriot, and it includes the first public display of some of the more than 900 secret British documents he passed on to the K.G.B., the Soviet-era spy agency.

The burst of tributes to Mr. Philby reinforces an escalating campaign by the Kremlin to burnish the image of the K.G.B., the former employer of President Vladimir V. Putin and many of his senior officials, and to make loyalty to the state the bedrock of Russia's resurgence as a great power.

Portraying Russia's secret police officers as selfless public servants rather than lawless goons, however, has sometimes been an uphill struggle. Their public image took a big hit this week when Russian media reported that a Mercedes car driven by

an officer in the Federal Security Service, the successor to the domestic branch of the K.G.B., had rammed a traffic police officer at high speed in central Moscow and killed him.

Mr. Philby, highly educated, well spoken and driven by hostility to fascism rather than by greed, fits perfectly with the image that Soviet and Russian intelligence operatives have of themselves. “He was an idealist,” said Mikhail P. Lyubimov, a former K.G.B. officer in London who saw Mr. Philby frequently in Moscow after his defection. “I knew him quite well. His idea was that he was not serving Stalin but the people.”

The Philby exhibition, which opened just a few days after the unveiling in Moscow of a giant statue in honor of the inventor of the Kalashnikov automatic rifle, is “all part of the drive to create a national idea that revolves around the military and special services,” said Mark Galeotti, a researcher on Russian security and intelligence issues at the Institute of International Relations in Prague.

Mr. Galeotti said the celebration of Mr. Philby’s exploits also fit into efforts by security service veterans to rehabilitate the reputation of Felix E. Dzerzhinsky, the ruthless founder of the Soviet security apparatus whose statue in front of Lubyanka, the headquarters of the Soviet K.G.B., was toppled by pro-democracy protesters in 1991.

Among Mr. Philby’s personal papers now on display is the handwritten text of a message he sent to K.G.B. officers in 1977, the 100th anniversary of Dzerzhinsky’s birth. Hailing Dzerzhinsky as “your great founder,” he wished Soviet secret service officers “every success in your important and responsible labors” and expressed hope that “may we all live to see the red flag flying on Buckingham Palace and the White House.”

Mr. Philby, a senior officer in Britain’s Secret Intelligence Service, the intelligence agency also known as MI6, started working for Soviet intelligence in 1934 after falling in love with a young Austrian communist in Vienna. But while Mr. Philby’s 54 years of service to the K.G.B. were largely driven by an ideological commitment to Marxism, the spy has been rebranded as a Russian patriot.

The Moscow exhibition, which also includes Mr. Philby's favorite pipe and armchair, along with other homey personal knickknacks, presents Mr. Philby as a principled idealist who rallied to Moscow's side — and stayed there — because of his love for Russia and his determination to battle injustice and fascism, a catchall category now used to vilify Ukraine's pro-Western government and new NATO members in the Baltics.

The exhibition is put on by the Russian Historical Society, a state organization run by Sergei Y. Naryshkin, who is the chief of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, or S.V.R., the successor to the foreign intelligence arm of the K.G.B.

“He consciously chose to cooperate with the Soviet Union because of his antifascist beliefs, principles of fair world order, principles of liberty, of social fairness,” Mr. Naryshkin, a close ally of President Putin, said this month at the opening of the exhibition, “Kim Philby: The Spy and the Man.”

Konstantin Mogilevski, director of the historical society's “fatherland history” collection and an organizer of the Philby exhibition, said the tribute to the K.G.B. spy “is not propaganda” but an effort to show the human face of a man “who made a choice to serve Moscow” and stuck with it.

Mr. Philby, who never wavered in his loyalty despite Moscow's 1939-41 pact with Hitler and the invasions of Hungary in 1956 and of Czechoslovakia in 1968, was long regarded as a hero in the Soviet Union, which hailed him as a committed Marxist, put his face on a postage stamp and buried him in the Kuntsevo cemetery in Moscow along with other Soviet heroes, including the secret police agent who murdered Leon Trotsky.

One of the documents on display, however, hints at the suspicion and distrust that greeted Mr. Philby when he first fled to Moscow in 1963, slipping out of Beirut, Lebanon, aboard a Soviet ship bound for Odessa. The partial transcript of a 1977 speech he gave to K.G.B. officers in Moscow records Mr. Philby saying: “It is the year of my first visit to the Soviet intelligence headquarters. It has taken me a long time to get here.”

Christopher Andrew, a Cambridge University professor and the author of classic books on Soviet espionage, said Mr. Philby had to wait 14 years after his arrival in Moscow before being received at the intelligence headquarters “because they didn’t trust him.”

Mr. Lyubimov, the former K.G.B. officer, said this was not true, explaining that Mr. Philby had fallen under suspicion among members of Stalin’s intelligence service during World War II but “was completely trusted” once he got to Moscow in 1963. Mr. Lyubimov also disputed widespread accounts by witnesses of Mr. Philby being drunk and despondent in Moscow. “When he first came to Russia, because of the shock of the whole affair, he was just drinking but this did not continue a long time,” Mr. Lyubimov said.

All the stolen British documents put on display — marked in red with the words “Top Secret. To be kept under lock and key. Never to be removed from the office” — relate to World War II. Most are reports on intercepted messages sent to Tokyo by Japanese diplomats on the state of the German military and other secret matters. They include a report by a Japanese envoy in Italy on Mussolini’s account of how Hitler had sustained “minor injuries” and had his hair burned during a failed assassination attempt in East Prussia in July 1944.

More significant — and far more damning to Mr. Philby, as far as the British are concerned — is a copy of a September 1949 intelligence report sent to Stalin and his foreign minister, Vyacheslav M. Molotov, based on information provided in London, presumably by Mr. Philby.

It details secret Anglo-American plans to train “émigré-fascists” from Albania in Malta and the Greek island of Corfu and send them back to Albania to start a “partisan movement” against the Communist government of Enver Hoxha. It says chillingly that the information had been passed on to a Soviet adviser to Albania’s Interior Ministry so that it could “take corresponding measures.”

Hundreds of Albanians died after the Western-trained anti-Communist agents were captured as soon as they landed by sea and were then either executed on the spot or killed after brutal interrogations that led to the arrest and often execution of their family members, too.

The betrayal of the 1949 Albania subversion operation, planned and executed by Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, Mr. Philby's employer at the time, and the C.I.A., was one of the most disastrous episodes for Western intelligence during the Cold War. Similar subversive operations into western Ukraine also failed miserably.

Debate continues about how much Mr. Philby contributed to the failure of these and other Anglo-American plots to undermine Communism but, from Russia's perspective, one thing is clear: Western intelligence agencies have labored tirelessly to undermine Russia's interests. This narrative has gained new force since street protests toppled Ukraine's pro-Russian president in 2014, an event for which Russia blames "fascists" working in league with the C.I.A.

Mr. Philby, Mr. Galeotti said, was indeed a lifelong enemy of fascism but "would be spinning in his grave" over his portrayal in Moscow as a defender of narrow Russian national interests. "This was a man motivated by Marxism, not by love of Russia," he said. "Presenting him as a great Russian patriot is far from the truth."

Sophia Kishkovsky contributed reporting.

A version of this article appears in print on October 2, 2017, on Page A4 of the New York edition with the headline: Loyal Spy, Long Dead, Still Helps Kremlin.