

TRUST NO ONE

Kim Philby and the hazards of mistrust.

BY MALCOLM GLADWELL

When Kim Philby decided that he wanted to join the British Secret Intelligence Service, he “dropped a few hints here and there,” as he later recalled, and waited patiently. Philby had attended Trinity College, Cambridge, and his father had been in the Foreign Service. He had the right accent. It was the late nineteen-thirties, when the British class system was still firmly in place, and a formal application wasn’t necessary. On a train to London, Philby found himself in the first-class compartment with a journalist named Hester Harriet Marsden-Smedley, who was of that same small world. She looked him over and said that she would make a few inquiries on his behalf. Then he got a call from someone at the War Department, and was invited to tea at St. Ermin’s Hotel, off St. James’s, with an imperious Tory doyenne named Sarah Algeria Marjorie Maxse. They chatted. Philby was famously charming. He had impeccable manners, a disarming stammer, and an epic capacity for alcohol. His name was passed up the line to M.I.5—the British F.B.I.—which came back with the laconic verdict “nothing recorded against.” The deputy head of the British spy service, M.I.6, had served with Philby’s father in India. “I was asked about him,” the official explained later, “and I said I knew his people.”

Once Philby joined M.I.6, he roamed its halls, gossiping and making friends. The man who controlled the “source books”—the inventory of British intelligence assets—was a red-faced ex-policeman with a crippling drinking habit. Philby would go out and get him drunk, and soon had the run of the files. He became fast friends with James Angleton, who later rose to the head of counterintelligence at the C.I.A. The two of them served together in Washington, and had long boozy lunches, at which they traded the most

What did more damage—Philby’s treachery or the subsequent obsession among spy officials with preventing future Philbys?



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intimate secrets. Philby was promoted to head the anti-Soviet section of M.I.6, and then became the principal liaison between the British and the U.S. intelligence agencies. “I looked around at the part-time stockbrokers and retired Indian policemen, the agreeable epicureans from the bars of White’s and Boodle’s, the jolly, conventional ex-Navy officers and the robust adventurers from the bucket shop; and then I looked at Philby,” the historian Hugh Trevor-Roper later wrote. “He alone was real. I was convinced that he was destined to head the service.”

He came close. In 1951, two of his good friends—Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean—fled to Moscow, revealing themselves to be Soviet spies. Philby’s colleagues stood by him, but he was forced to resign. He moved to Beirut to work as a correspondent for the *Observer* and *The Economist*, only to have M.I.5 launch a second investigation, in the early nineteen-sixties. Before it could be completed, Philby slipped away. In January of 1963, a car with diplomatic plates picked him up from a bar in downtown Beirut and took him to a Soviet freighter bound for Odessa. He had been, it turned out, a Soviet spy since soon after leaving Cambridge, in the mid-nineteen-thirties, dutifully feeding his K.G.B. handlers every morsel of information gleaned from his many friendships. In Moscow, he was welcomed by a congratulatory headline in an official Soviet newspaper: “HELLO MR. PHILBY.” “What it comes to is that when you look at the whole period from 1944 to 1951, the entire Western intelligence effort, which was pretty big, was what you might call minus advantage,” the C.I.A. officer Miles Copeland, Jr.—himself a close friend of Philby’s—said. “We’d have been better off doing nothing.”

“A Spy Among Friends: Kim Philby and the Great Betrayal” (Crown) is the latest in Ben Macintyre’s series on twentieth-century espionage (including the best-selling “Operation Mincemeat”). All are superb, and “A Spy Among Friends” is no exception. Macintyre gives the familiar story of Philby new life, putting the case in its full social context.

Philby’s boss was Sir Stewart Menzies, who, we are told, “rode to hounds, mixed with royalty, never missed a day at Ascot, drank a great deal, and kept his secrets buttoned up behind a small, fierce mustache. He preferred women to men and horses to both.” Menzies was an amateur at a time when his adversaries were professionals. Philby’s fellow Soviet spy Donald Maclean was a mess. But since he was a mess with the right accent and background he easily found a home in the British spy service. At one point, Macintyre says, Maclean “got drunk, smashed up the Cairo flat of two secretaries at the U.S. embassy,

ripped up their underwear, and hurled a large mirror off the wall, breaking a large bath in two. He was sent home, placed under the care of a Harley Street psychiatrist, and then, amazingly, after a short period of treatment, promoted to head the American desk at the Foreign Office.”

When suspicion finally fell on Burgess, he was placed under surveillance. But this was the kind of surveillance intended for people for whom surveillance was not actually thought necessary. The “watchers” did not work weekends or evenings. They rarely left London. “Most were former police officers selected for their sharp eyesight, good hearing, and average height,” Macintyre writes. “They were expected to dress in trilby hats and raincoats and communicated with one another by hand signals. . . . They looked, in short, exactly like surveillance agents.” Philby, Macintyre concludes, “existed within the inner circle of Britain’s ruling class, where mutual trust was so absolute and so unquestioned that there was no need for elaborate security precautions. They were all part of the same family.”

Within a few years, that complacency was shattered. In 1961, M.I.6 learned that one of its operatives, George Blake, was a Soviet spy who had exposed scores of British and American agents in Eastern Europe. In 1962, a naval attaché by the name of John Vassal was found to have given away a treasure trove of British military secrets to the K.G.B. In 1963, the Profumo scandal raised the possibility that naval secrets had been passed to the Soviets by a prominent politician. In 1964, the Queen’s art adviser, Sir Anthony Blunt, confessed to having been a Soviet spy since his twenties. “A Spy Among Friends” is the portrait of an England suddenly vulnerable to its enemies. It makes for riveting reading, except that it leaves out a crucial part of the story, which is what happened next.

In December of 1961, a high-ranking K.G.B. agent knocked on the door of the U.S. Embassy in Helsinki, asking for asylum. His name was Antoliy Golitsyn, and he had a remarkable secret to share. There had existed within the British intelligence service, he said, a “ring of five”—all of whom knew one another and all of whom had been recruited by the Soviets in the nineteen-thirties. Burgess and Maclean, who had decamped to Moscow a decade earlier, were No. 1 and No. 2. The art historian Anthony Blunt had been under suspicion by M.I.5 for some time. He was No. 3. No. 4 sounded a lot like Philby: that was why M.I.5 rekindled its investigation of him shortly thereafter. But who was the fifth? When Philby managed to escape to Moscow, concern grew. Had the mysterious fifth man tipped him off?

Within the espionage world, Golitsyn was a deeply divisive figure. Some suspected that he was a fabulist, who embroidered his accounts of K.G.B. secrets in order to extend his usefulness to Western intelligence. Two people remained firmly convinced of Golitsyn's bona fides, however. The first was Philby's lunchmate at the C.I.A., James Angleton. The news about Philby convinced Angleton that the C.I.A. must be riven with moles as well, and he set off on a frenzied search for traitors which consumed the American intelligence community for the next decade. (Angleton, allegedly, would rummage through old files, muttering, "This is Kim's work.") The other was Peter Wright, of M.I.5, one of the most senior counterintelligence officials in the British government.

Wright, born in 1916, was of the same generation as Philby. His father had been involved in signals intelligence during the First World War, and Wright followed him into the field. In 1954, he was hired as the principal scientific officer for M.I.5, and led the agency's effort to modernize its eavesdropping and code-breaking efforts. Alarmed by Golitsyn's revelations, Wright launched an internal investigation in the winter of 1962. "Over those unhappy months . . . as I pored through the files, back-checking and cross-checking the complex details of nearly eight years of frantic work, it all became suddenly very obvious," Wright wrote in his best-selling 1987 memoir, "Spycatcher: The Candid Autobiography of a Senior Intelligence Officer." "What until then had been a hypothesis, became an article of faith. There was a spy; the only question was who?"

His attention focussed on two men: Roger Hollis, the head of M.I.5, and Hollis's deputy, Graham Mitchell. "Was it Hollis," Wright wondered,

the aloof, pedestrian autocrat with whom I had enjoyed a civil but distant relationship? Or Mitchell, his deputy, a man I knew less well? There was a secretiveness about him, a kind of shyness which made him avoid eye contact. . . . I knew my choice would be based on prejudice, but in my mind I plumped for Mitchell.

Wright placed his files in his safe each evening on top of tiny pencil marks, so that he could tell if they had been moved. One day, they had been. Only two men knew the safe's combination: Mitchell and Hollis. "The shadows were gathering; treachery stalked the corridors," he wrote. He put a camera inside Mitchell's office behind a two-way mirror and watched him closely. ("It was an

unpleasant task; every morning Mitchell came in and picked his teeth with a toothpick in front of the two-way mirror, and repeated the meticulous process again before lunch, after lunch, and then again before he went home.”) Wright searched Mitchell’s wastepaper basket, and painstakingly reconstructed pieces of paper that had been torn into pieces: nothing. Frustrated, he turned his attention to Hollis. Was he the spy? Certainly, that would make sense of Hollis’s “long-standing refusal to entertain any possibility of a penetration of the Service.” Wright began a “freelance” investigation of Hollis, mindful of the career consequences of investigating his own boss. He travelled to Oxford, and hunted through the university’s files for Hollis’s undergraduate transcript. He discovered that Hollis had never got his degree: “He left inexplicably after five terms.” Where did he go? Slowly, Wright built his case: “I had faith in his treachery as another man might have faith in God.”

Something else that Golitsyn had said also stuck in Wright’s mind. The K.G.B. was apparently planning the assassination of a major Western politician, and the evidence suggested that the country in question was Great Britain. Hugh Gaitskell, the leader of the British Labour Party, died mysteriously in January of 1963. Did the K.G.B. kill him? Wright researched the disease that Gaitskell died from—a rare form of lupus. Gaitskell had visited the Soviet consulate in London to get a visa and had been served coffee and biscuits. Had he been slipped some kind of “lupus pill” at the time? Wright huddled with experts at the British chemical-warfare lab. He had Angleton comb through Soviet research papers for studies about the disease. Golitsyn hinted that the reason for the assassination was that the K.G.B. wanted to clear a path for its own man. Gaitskell’s successor as leader of the Labour Party was Harold Wilson, who would go on to become Prime Minister, in 1964. And what had Wilson done, when he was the president of the British Board of Trade, in the late nineteen-forties? He had repeatedly visited the Soviet Union.

One of Wilson’s closest supporters, furthermore, was a wealthy garment manufacturer, based in his constituency, named Joseph Kagan. Kagan was a Holocaust survivor from Lithuania. He survived the German occupation in Kaunas, until the city was liberated by the Soviets, then walked with his wife across Europe to Romania, where he got a British visa. Once in England, he invented a waterproof material called Gannex—wool backed by nylon—and became a prominent manufacturer of raincoats. To Wright, Kagan’s story was simply too good to be true. In “The Wilson Plot,” the journalist David Leigh quotes from Wright’s private correspondence:

We had been suspicious of Kagan for years because of the way he had escaped from the Soviet Zone after the war. . . . It had all the symptoms of an escape arranged by the K.G.B. We became very concerned when it became very clear that Kagan was courting Wilson's friendship and patronage. . . . (Incidentally, the manufacture of raincoats is a well known cover for Soviet intelligence operations. "The Excellent Raincoat Company" was one of the main cover set-ups before the war for the Soviet network in Europe.)

If Kagan was K.G.B., then where did it end? Wright eventually decided that six members of Wilson's first cabinet were also Soviet operatives, along with a number of Labour Party backbenchers and a senior Party official. In his later years, Leigh says, Wright would roar at questioners, "No one should have been allowed to become Prime Minister who made twelve trips to Moscow!"

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Here we have two very different security models. The Philby-era model erred on the side of trust. *I was asked about him, and I said I knew his people.* The "cost" of the high-trust model was Burgess, Maclean, and

Philby. To put it another way, the Philbyian secret service was prone to false-negative errors. Its mistake was to label as loyal people who were actually traitors.

The Wright model erred on the side of suspicion. *The manufacture of raincoats is a well-known cover for Soviet intelligence operations.* But that model also has a cost. If you start a security system with the aim of catching the likes of Burgess, Maclean, and Philby, you have a tendency to make false-positive errors: you label as suspicious people and events that are actually perfectly normal.

Was Gaitskell murdered? It turns out that he had been ill for a while, long before he had coffee and biscuits at the Soviet consulate. Wilson, the K.G.B.'s own archives confirm, was never a Soviet spy. Hollis seems to have been under suspicion by Wright and his small circle at M.I.5—and no one else. Christopher Andrew, in his definitive history of M.I.5, "Defend the Realm," writes, "The KGB found the Hollis conspiracy theory so bizarre that some of its foreign intelligence officers suspected that it derived from 'some mysterious,

internal British intrigue.’” As for Kagan, Leigh points out how far-fetched Wright’s suspicions were. Could the K.G.B. in 1945 really have predicted that a penniless, malnourished Holocaust survivor would one day become “a very rich mackintosh manufacturer and make the acquaintance eight years later of an MP from Huddersfield who, ten years on from that, would become Prime Minister”? Wright called his book “Spycatcher.” During his entire career, he never actually caught any spies.

Books about spies and traitors—and the congressional hearings that follow the exposure of traitors—generally assume that false-negative errors are much worse than false-positive errors. The disclosure of national-security secrets is so damaging that its prevention is worth almost any price. The Philby case, however, leaves a very different impression. On one side of the ledger, we have a senior counterintelligence official recklessly accusing the democratically elected leader of his own country of treason. On the other side, we have a series of false-negative errors that, in the end, don’t seem to add up to much. Macintyre tells us, for example, of Philby’s involvement in the case of a German intelligence official during the Second World War named Erich Vermehren. Vermehren defected in 1944 with his wife, bringing with him all his contacts within the German Catholic underground. Philby passed on the names to his Soviet handlers, who liquidated nearly everyone on the list. “The Vermehrens believed they were alerting the Allies to the men and women who might save Germany from communism,” Macintyre writes. “Unwittingly, they were handing them over to Moscow.” Morally, Philby’s betrayal of this secret was despicable. Strategically, it was of little consequence. When the Communists in East Germany eventually came to power, after all, they scarcely needed outside help in rounding up dissidents.

Macintyre devotes the bulk of a chapter to an M.I.6 operation known as Operation Valuable. After the war, the British recruited Albanian exiles in Italy for guerrilla operations against the Communist government of Enver Hoxha. The would-be guerrillas were taken to Malta to be trained by (inevitably) an “eccentric Oxford don,” then dropped off near the Albanian coast to start an uprising. The operation was a disaster. Philby passed the details on to the Soviets, and they started picking off the guerrillas as soon as they landed.

But then Macintyre goes on to tell us how ill-conceived the operation was from the beginning. British and U.S. intelligence never understood how well entrenched Hoxha was: “The planners had simply believed that ‘Albania would fall from the Soviet imperial tree like a ripe plum and other fruit would soon

follow.’ ” Few of the Albanian volunteers had any military training. The British instructors didn’t speak Albanian. The Albanians didn’t speak English. According to Macintyre, one recruit’s understanding of his mission was, as a result, rather vague: “get into Albania, head for his hometown near the Greek border, sound out the possibilities for armed insurrection, then get out and report back.” Operation Valuable was the British Bay of Pigs. The strategic value of the secret that Philby betrayed in this case—that the British were cavalierly sending dozens of young men to their deaths—was very close to zero.

Philby’s most significant breach happened during the Second World War, when he conned his way into M.I.6’s document room, and read the agency’s secret file on its intelligence assets in the Soviet Union. He reported what he found directly to Moscow: Britain had no spies in the Soviet Union. His handlers, however, refused to believe him—and Philby’s intelligence coup quickly aroused their suspicion. The K.G.B.’s reasoning, Macintyre writes, was that “the Soviet Union was a world power and MI6 was the most feared intelligence organization in the world; it therefore stood to reason that Britain *must* be spying on the USSR. If Philby said otherwise, then he *must* be lying.” This time around, the secret betrayed was significant. But its strategic value was still zero, because it is not enough for a secret to be of consequence; it must also be understood by those who receive it to be of consequence. Few secrets meet both conditions.

Shortly after Golitsyn defected, another K.G.B. officer, Yuri Nosenko, followed him to the West. Golitsyn had said that there was a high-level mole within the C.I.A. Nosenko said there was not. The C.I.A. had a problem. The agency held Nosenko in solitary confinement for twelve hundred and seventy-seven days. He was a subject of numerous internal C.I.A. reports, one of which ran to eight hundred and thirty-five pages, which alternately made the case for his authenticity or for his duplicity. If Nosenko was a K.G.B. plant, intended to discredit Golitsyn, then Golitsyn’s account was confirmed. There was a mole within the C.I.A. But, if Nosenko was real, there was reason to wonder about Golitsyn—unless, of course, both were plants, or both were real but sometimes strayed from the truth. Somewhere, in the many thousands of pages of transcripts related to the debriefing of both men, there are valuable secrets. To this day, however, there is no agreement on which parts of that treasure trove are gold and which are dross.

In a review of “Spycatcher” published in the journal *Intelligence and National Security*, the historian Harry Gelber made a similar point about the many betrayals and lost secrets that fuelled Wright’s feverish mole-hunting. Wright’s problem was that he was unable to assess the consequences of the intelligence losses. The Soviets got details of the Concorde’s electronics systems. Did this make any difference to the Soviet civilian or military aviation performance? Who knows if the Soviets even believed what they were told? The revelations about Britain’s atomic program leaked to the Soviets by Klaus Fuchs are believed to have accelerated the Soviets’ own nuclear operation by two years. In the grand scheme of things, did that two-year leap amount to anything? Gelber searched for some account of how the world would have been different if Fuchs or Philby or the Rosenbergs had never lived, and couldn’t find it.

He concluded, “One cannot help being left with the uneasy suspicion that, just possibly, a good deal of what he tells may have mattered less than hard-working, intelligent but sometimes narrow-minded participants like Peter Wright spent their professional lives thinking it did.” Wright’s obituary in the *Independent* was a good deal blunter: “No British intelligence officer other than Kim Philby caused more mayhem within Britain’s secret services and more trouble for British politicians than Peter Wright, former assistant director of M.I.5.”

Macintyre tells Philby’s story through the prism of his longtime friendship with another young star of M.I.6, Nicholas Elliott. The two men were of a piece. Elliott’s father, Claude, was the headmaster of Eton. According to Macintyre, the elder Elliott “loathed music, which gave him indigestion, despised all forms of heating as ‘effete,’ and believed that ‘when dealing with foreigners the best plan was to shout at them in English.’” Like Philby, Elliott went to Trinity College, Cambridge, and did not join public service so much as he was ushered into it. A family friend, Sir Nevile Bland, “simply told the Foreign Office that I was all right because he knew me and had been at Eton with my father.” (Sir Nevile’s words of advice to Elliott: “In the diplomatic service it is a sackable offense to sleep with the wife of a colleague,” and “I suggest you should do as I do and not light your cigar until you have started your third glass of port.”) Elliott trusted and revered Philby. Their families vacationed together. Elliott modelled himself on his friend, Macintyre writes: “his spycraft, his air of worldly irony, his umbrella with an ebony handle. . . . They were as close as two heterosexual, upper-class, mid-century Englishmen could be.”

When Burgess and Maclean were identified as Soviet spies, and suspicion fell for the first time on Philby, Elliott and Philby's other old colleagues at M.I.6 volubly insisted that Philby was being framed, and ought to be invited back to the service. Elliott and another senior M.I.6 official launched an internal review of his case and declared Philby innocent. Elliott was "overjoyed" at the thought that Philby might rejoin M.I.6. And, when the Golitsyn revelations cast suspicion on Philby once again, it was Elliott who was sent to Beirut to confront him.

The chapter in "A Spy Among Friends" on the final reckoning between Elliott and Philby is Macintyre at his best. Philby, sensing that British intelligence was closing in on him, lapsed into a "miasma of drink and depression." Elliott, too, was in crisis. On his way to Beirut, he stopped to have dinner with a friend in Athens, who later described his anguish: "Nicholas knew he had blood on his hands." Elliott, Macintyre writes, "had given away almost every secret he had to Philby; but Philby had never given his own."

The M.I.6 station chief in Beirut called Philby and told him to come for a routine meeting at a nearby apartment. Philby climbed the stairs to the apartment and knocked on the door. "When it was opened by Nicholas Elliott," Macintyre goes on, "Philby seemed strangely unsurprised. 'I rather thought it would be you,' he said."

They shook hands. Elliott asked Philby about his health. Philby asked Elliott about his family. They were well, Elliott said. His son Mark was about to start school term at Eton. The apartment was bugged, so Macintyre is able to give us a verbatim account of what happened next:

"Wonderful tea," [Elliott] said. A pause.

"Don't tell me you flew all the way here to see me?" said Philby.

Elliott took out his Mont Blanc pen, placed it on the table, and began to roll it back and forth under his palm. It was an act of nervous tension, but also an old interrogation trick, a distraction.

"Sorry for getting right on with it. Kim, I don't have time to postpone this. And we've known each other for ever, so, if you don't mind, I'll get right to the point," said Elliott, not getting to the point. "Unfortunately it's not very pleasant." Another pause.

"I came to tell you that your past has caught up with you."

The two men talked some more, then again during the next few days.

The watchers did not watch. Philby slipped away to Russia. The architect of one of the twentieth century's greatest deceptions lived out his days in a drab Moscow apartment, awash in alcohol. Elliott, his great victim, flew back to London, and later retired to the English countryside.

In his autobiography, "Never Judge a Man by His Umbrella," Elliott tells the hilarious story of one of his forebears, who was a don at Trinity College in the mid-nineteenth century:

In 1848 he published a thesis entitled *Horae Apocalypticae*, purporting to prove beyond doubt that the world would come to an end in 1868 because the Euphrates would have dried up the previous year. Harmless enough, you would think. But since he was a man of dominating though eccentric personality he succeeded in persuading the wine committee of Trinity that it would be pointless to lay down any 1853 port because it would not be fit to drink before Judgment Day. As 1853 proved to be one of the best vintages of the century and as Trinity was the only college without any, his name was not remembered with overmuch affection.

Elliott surely intended that story as allegory. People in great institutions are occasionally credulous. By 1869, everything was back to normal. ♦



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