

THE MOSCOW PLOT

Antony Percy (1965) has recently been awarded his doctorate in Security and Intelligence Studies at the University of Buckingham. The title of his thesis, "Confronting Stalin's 'Elite Force': MI5's Handling of Communist Subversion, 1939-1941", picks up the notion of Stalin's 'elite force' from the memoir of the Communist spy, Kim Philby.

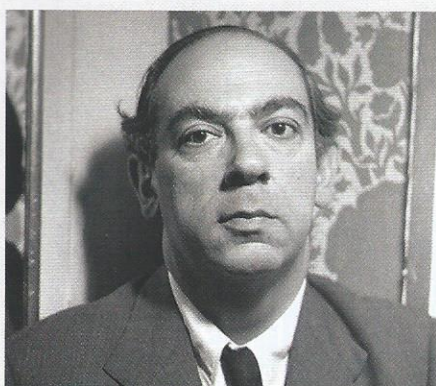
The dominant message from Percy's dissertation is that, at the time when the Soviet Union was an ally of Nazi Germany (before August 1939 to June 1941), and providing materiel and strategic intelligence to help the Germans wage war against Great Britain, the country's political organizations – and MI5 in particular – let their guard down, allowing Soviet agents to infiltrate the corridors of power.

The pivotal event in Percy's story is a mission to Moscow planned by the spy Guy Burgess and his cohort Isaiah Berlin in the summer of 1940. References to the mission – approved at the highest levels of the Foreign Office – were strenuously avoided when the inevitable post mortems occurred after Burgess's absconding to the Soviet Union with Donald Maclean in 1952. Yet documents released to the National Archives towards the end of 2015 confirmed Percy's emergent hypothesis – that Burgess had convinced his political bosses that he could personally succeed in turning the Comintern against Hitler, and thus bring the Soviet Union into the war on the side of the Allies.

Percy explains that Burgess had a secret agenda, namely that he wanted to alert his spymasters to the fact that, while the defector Walter Krivitsky, who had been interrogated by officers from MI5 and MI6 at the beginning of 1940, had given broad hints as to

the identity of 'moles' within the British intelligence services, the situation was under control. For MI5 had been incredibly clumsy in communicating the outcome of the interviews to departments of government: another spy, Jenifer Hart (who would later become Isaiah Berlin's lover) worked in the Home Office, signed that she had seen the report, and communicated its contents to her friends. Guy Burgess was thus able to orchestrate a response that diminished Krivitsky's testimony, shifted focus very sharply on to an imaginary Nazi 'Fifth Column', initiated a programme of bringing more Communist spies or sympathisers into MI5 (such as Anthony Blunt and Lord Rothschild), and allowed his colleagues in espionage to resume their treachery.

The mission to Moscow itself was called off when Berlin and Burgess reached the United States – probably because by then, Churchill realised that Hitler had abandoned his plans for invading Britain. In that situation, he (Churchill) no longer needed a feint that indicated to Hitler that an active 'Peace Party' might still threaten Churchill's position (and thus give Hitler what he wanted without a fight), and the overtures to convince Stalin of Britain's resolve were thus no longer necessary. Burgess was recalled to Britain, while Berlin, after some devious workings with Chaim Weizmann and the Zionist movement, found an important job with British propaganda in the United States.



Far left: Guy Burgess

Centre: Isaiah Berlin

Left: Walter Krivitsky