



## Courier, traitor, bigamist, fabulist: behind the mythology of a superspy

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## REVIEW ARTICLE

## Courier, traitor, bigamist, fabulist: behind the mythology of a superspy

**Agent Sonya: Moscow's Most Daring Wartime Spy**, Ben Macintyre, New York: Crown, an imprint of Random House, 2020, 377 pp., \$28.00 (Hardback). ISBN: 9780593136300.

### Agent Sonya

Among the set of dazzling photographs, most of them published for the first time here, that Ben Macintyre has provided to illustrate *Agent Sonya* is one showing a rural Cotswold scene. The rubric runs as follows: 'The railway bridge over the road west of Great Rollright. The dead-drop site was in the hollow root of the fourth tree on the left after the crossroads beyond the bridge' (206–207). In the text to which this scene applies, Macintyre specifies the location. 'A few miles west of Great Rollright, the Banbury and Cheltenham Direct Railway passed over the road running between Banbury and Oxford', amplifying the statement that his subject made in her memoir, namely that the dead-drop constituted the special arrangement that Sonya and her Soviet Embassy contact, 'Sergei', had made for money and messages to be passed to her. As Macintyre continues, 'Sonya cycled under the railway bridge, parked her bike ... and reached into the hole' (284).

Yet the location can quickly be determined as being somewhere else. The station next to the bridge is clearly Rollright Halt, and the village of Great Rollright can be seen at the crest of a hill, about half a mile away. No crossroads is visible in the picture, however, and the road from Great Rollright is a minor one, running north to south. There were no other stations to the west between Rollright and Chipping Norton. If Sonya had indeed ridden (or walked) down the hill she would not have reached the bridge before coming to the tree. In his subject's memoir, *Sonya's Report*, on which he clearly relies, Sonya confirms the essence of the story, writing, however, that 'a few miles from Great Rollright, the Oxford to Banbury road passed under the railway', while describing the precise location of the dead-drop in the words that Macintyre echoes.<sup>1</sup>

A contact from the Soviet Embassy would obviously not have driven off the beaten track to within eight hundred yards of Sonya's residence, where he would have been very conspicuous, and certainly not to a location west of Great Rollright. Indeed, Macintyre himself writes that 'any stranger turning up in a remote village like Great Rollright would have been spotted at once' (296). Moreover, the Oxford-Banbury road runs roughly in a north-easterly direction, and the Cheltenham to Banbury line crossed it at Adderbury, just south of Banbury, and about twelve miles east of Great Rollright, thus requiring at least the use of a bicycle to be reached. The presence of a crossroads near the bridge is not clear, but maybe the whole exercise was a fiction? Apparently not, as the Soviet Embassy had made a mistake over the exact tree: as Macintyre writes, about her move to inform the GRU that she was leaving Britain, in February 1950, Sonya 'climbed on her bicycle and rode toward Banbury' to place a message in the hollow tree root (314).

Sadly, this example is characteristic of Mr. Macintyre's approach to sampling and verifying anecdotes for the composition of his book. Writing biographies of intelligence agents is a hazardous business. The subjects have led a life of subterfuge and deception, and their memoirs are similarly untrustworthy; their employers indulge in campaigns of disinformation; such few archives as do exist

have frequently been extensively redacted, or have false entries deposited in them. A methodology for sifting the chaff and reconciling conflicting stories is a necessary part of the armoury.

Agent Sonya (or Sonia), née Ursula Kuczynski, married to Rudolf Hamburger (1927) and to Len Beurton (1940), *aka* Ruth Werner, is certainly a good candidate for treatment. Aficionados of intelligence history may have come across her in Alexander Foote's *Handbook for Spies* (1949), but Foote's memoir was ghost written by MI5 officers, and thus is not totally reliable. Sonya's own memoir, *Sonjas Rapport*, appeared in 1977 in East Germany, but was largely guided and censored by her employer, Soviet Military Intelligence (the GRU), and likewise needs to be treated carefully. An English version, *Sonya's Report*, was published in 1991, with some refreshment to reflect the passage of time. Klaus Fuchs could not be identified in the first version, but it was safe for him to be drawn out of the cold after his death in 1988, with communism having collapsed. The English journalist Chapman Pincher highlighted her story in several books, culminating in *Treachery* (2010). The casual reader may not have encountered John Green's *A Political Family* (2017), which provided a history of the broader Kuczynski clan, but took a distinctly charitable view of its contribution to humanity. The really dedicated reader may have tracked down *Superfrau iz GRU*, by Viktor Bochkarev and Aleksandr Kolpakidi, published in Moscow by the Olma Press in 2002, which essentially takes *Sonjas Rapport*, and adds some insider information. *Sonya's Report* has been quoted as an apparently reliable source in biographies of Klaus Fuchs, such as Frank Close's compendious *Trinity*.

Amidst the controversy over details, some facts on Sonya's life are undisputed. She was born in Prussia in 1907, the second child, and eldest daughter, of academic, secular Jewish parents. She joined the Communist Party in 1926, and, after a period in the United States, married Rudolf Hamburger, an architect, in 1929. His work took them to China, where she was cultivated by the Comintern spies Agnes Smedley<sup>2</sup> and Richard Sorge<sup>3</sup> (and became the latter's lover). The Hamburgers' first child, Michael, was born in 1931. In 1934, she went to Moscow for formal training as a wireless operator, having sent Michael to live with her parents-in-law in Czechoslovakia, and returned to work with Johannes Patra in Manchuria, then under Japanese control. She became pregnant during an affair with Patra, and she and the indulgent Rudolf were recalled to Moscow, and then sent to Poland, where her daughter Nina was born. In August 1938, they were sent to Switzerland, where she helped set up an illicit wireless network, and recruited two veterans of the International Brigades in Spain, Alexander Foote and Len Beurton. Rudolf was dispatched to China, while Sonya, with her visa running out, and the threat of being extradited to Germany, and certain death, hanging over her, arranged to marry Beurton, and thus engineer a transfer to the United Kingdom, despite the knowledge of the British authorities of her political allegiance. Beurton was able to join her at the end of July 1942, soon after which time she became the courier for the atom spy, Klaus Fuchs. Their son, Peter, was born in 1943. When Sonya heard about Fuchs's arrest in February 1950, she fled to East Germany, where she spent the rest of her days. She died in 2000.

Any attempt to delve beyond the basic outline of Sonya's life immediately encounters conflicts, controversies, and conundrums. Macintyre's biography is undoubtedly fascinating, as he deftly brings in many external events and agencies to add verisimilitude to his narrative. Moreover, Macintyre's insights have been significantly helped by the contributions of Sonya's family, and he has been assisted by both German and Russian experts who claim access to previously unavailable national archives. Unfortunately, this technique has not been balanced by an equally rigorous study of the archives available in English. In addition, many events are undated, and the sequence of happenings is frequently incongruous.

Problems can be encountered in relying on the memories of those close to the heroine, who may, in any case, have a rosy-eyed opinion of the achievements and character of the biographer's subject. Macintyre himself admits the unreliability of *Sonjas Rapport*, writing that 'Ursula's memoir was partly a work of communist propaganda' (327), but that recognition does not stop him citing it. Sonya's son Maik, shortly before he died earlier this year, wrote an article where he stated that his mother recruited Fuchs from the village of Great Rollright.<sup>4</sup> Yet the Beurtons did not move there until after the war, and Fuchs had left for the USA at the end of 1943. In a BBC radio interview, Maik also

described Sonya as cycling past MI5's temporary location at Blenheim Palace on her way to Banbury,<sup>5</sup> which would have caused problems, as Blenheim is on the Woodstock Road, not the Banbury Road.

In addition, East German and Russian archives are notoriously inaccessible, and Macintyre neither identifies nor presents any original documents. He twice refers to the fact that the Stasi archive holds an unexpurgated copy of *Sonyas Rapport* but he does not indicate that he has inspected it. He relies on Soviet archives at either second- or third-hand, informing us that the Russian historian Vladimir Lota cites sources that are 'off limits to other researchers' (250). On *Superfrau iz GRU* (which he has admittedly not read himself, as it is in Russian), he writes of it thus: 'Unreliable in parts, this source nonetheless benefits from access to GRU files' (342). This latter work contains a short bibliography of Russian and German works and articles, but no endnotes, no index, and no archival references but Macintyre does not explain in which places he found it 'unreliable'.

There are several minor problems with Macintyre's account, and one major flaw in the book. I present first some examples from the former category.

### The presence of Rudolf Hamburger and Johann Patra in Switzerland

In *Sonyas Rapport*, the author records that her husband, Rolf, was with her at the beginning of 1939, preparing for his departure for China.<sup>6</sup> He had found a training school for radio operators in Marseilles, and thus took up that opportunity. Sonya's chronology suggests that Rolf 'came to see them for the last time' in the early summer of 1939, or shortly after. Patra ('Ernst') then joined them from Moscow, as Rolf had been ordered to work for Patra. She and Rolf reportedly started divorce proceedings, and Sonya watched her husband and former lover depart together on the train from Caux to Montreux, apparently at some time in late summer 1939.<sup>7</sup>

Macintyre's account is quite different. First, Patra arrived unexpectedly one spring afternoon in 1939: 'he was paying another brief visit to the Center before returning once more to Shanghai' (157). Patra's departure is not described, but it appears to occur before Rudi's [i.e. Rolf's] arrival. Macintyre states that Sonya and Rudi had decided that they could not live together, and that, before returning to Shanghai to work as an architect, Rudi opted to spend the summer in the USA, and then undertake a two-month radio technology course in Paris. (This seems rather unusual behaviour for the GRU to have approved.) Rudi came to Switzerland (with no date given) 'to say farewell', having completed his radio course, but had similarly been ordered to sail with his new boss, Patra, out of Marseilles (160). He stayed only a few days, and Sonya saw him off at the station, and Macintyre even quotes Sonya's description of 'watching the little mountain train until it had disappeared round the bend' (161). Macintyre later informs us, however, that Rudi and Johann left Marseilles on the *Katori Maru* as early as 20 April 1939 (185).

Macintyre offers no explanations for the discrepancies, or why he chose to omit Sonya's account. The conclusion could be that the GRU forced Sonya to change her story. This would have been done to give the impression that Rolf had indeed assisted in the divorce proceedings before he left, since Sonya indicates that it was not until the 'early summer' that she and Moscow Centre discussed divorce and possible re-marriage as a solution to her residential problem, when Rudi had apparently already left. The falsification would help apply some superficial legitimisation of her highly problematic marriage to Len.

### Sonya's 'network of spies'

Part of Macintyre's boosting of Sonya's achievements as a spymaster is the attribution to her of a large network of spies, acquired soon after she arrived in the United Kingdom: 'Sonya's network, beginning with members of her own family, would gradually expand into a wide web of informants providing, consciously or unconsciously, a range of information useful to Moscow: economic, political, technical and military' (212). He picks up the refrain, describing the situation at the end of 1942. 'Sonya's network, beginning with members of her own family, would gradually expand into a wide web of informants providing, consciously or unconsciously, a range of information useful to Moscow: economic, political, technical and military' (235). Melita Norwood, who worked at the British

Non-Ferrous Metals Research Association, is added to the list. This new responsibility kept Sonya very busy, of course, and she was transmitting reports to Moscow three times a week.

This is an exaggeration. There is no evidence that Sonya recruited any real 'spy' who had access to confidential information. These persons were her friends and relatives, who could better be classified as 'informants'. Sonya (and Macintyre) make much of the agent 'James', who worked in the technical department of the Royal Air Force (RAF), but 'James' was probably Sonya's brother-in-law. Her sister Barbara's husband, Duncan Burnett Macrae Taylor, was a trainee wireless operator in the RAF, and thus was probably the officer Sonya claimed to have developed when she boasted of her 'network'. Bochkarev and Kolkapidi introduce a colleague of the husband of Sonya's sister Brigitte, Arthur Long, a journalist at the *Daily Worker* whose name was George Basset, given the cryptonym FRED, as well as MAX, who worked for the BBC.<sup>8</sup> The source is not given.

Moreover, Sonya was never a regular courier for Melita Norwood (TINA). She assuredly had some contact with Norwood, who was probably of even more use to the Soviets than was Fuchs, but this lasted only for a short time in 1945. Melita's mother was on friendly terms with Sonya's mother, and Sonya and Melita had met shortly after Sonya's arrival in 1941. It would not have been efficient for Sonya, based in Oxfordshire, to have couriered for Norwood, who was, after all, a KGB agent. The Vassiliev Notebooks tell us that, even though Norwood had been recruited by the OGPU as far back as 1935, the receipt of papers from her in June 1945 was only the second batch she handed over.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, she had left her job at the British Non-Ferrous Metals Research Association in 1943 to bear her child and was out of action for over a year. Thus, the claim that David Burke makes in *The Spy Who Came in from the Co-Op*, that Sonia 'was Melita Norwood's controller between 1941 and 1944'<sup>10</sup> should be quickly dismissed.

Lastly, one has to consider the role of Sonya's brother Jürgen, one of her key 'informants'. On page 148 appears the following claim: 'Secretly, Jürgen was also writing political and economic reports for the Soviet Union, which were couriered back to Moscow via the Soviet Embassy. A frequent visitor to Jürgen's home was the Soviet press attaché, Anatoli Gromov (real name Gorski), in reality the chief of Soviet intelligence in Britain, code-name "Vadim".' Macintyre also cites the 1941 memo from MI5 that indicated that the Security Service knew that Jürgen was in touch with Soviet intelligence. It would thus appear highly extravagant, and unnecessarily dangerous, for Jürgen to have to arrange a meeting with Sonya in London, so that she could take such reports back to Oxford, encipher them, and then transmit them to Moscow when Jürgen was presumably handing the same documents over to Gorski. Even if there was rivalry between the NKVD and the GRU, at some stage one would expect someone in Moscow Centre to have intervened. (In the spring of 1942, Gorski, who was the NKVD officer handling the Cambridge spies, was recalled to Moscow, and replaced by Boris Kreshin,<sup>11</sup> but Macintyre does not suggest that Jürgen resorted to using Sonya because of loss of contact with Gorski.)

## Travelling to Banbury

The promotional material (including the book's cover) for *Agent Sonya* features her bicycle very strongly. The publicity on his publisher's website runs: 'If you happened to be in the quiet English village of Great Rollright in 1942, you might have seen a thin, elegant woman emerging from a cottage and climbing onto her bicycle.'<sup>12</sup> It follows up by declaring that Sonya was on her way to a meeting with Klaus Fuchs. Apart from the fact that Sonya was living in Summertown, Oxford, not Great Rollright, for the entire time that she acted as courier for Fuchs (October 1942 to November 1943), this method of her travel is inconsistently portrayed.

According to Sonya, her brother Jürgen arranged a meeting between Fuchs and her 'towards the end of 1942', near Banbury, 'which lies between Birmingham and Oxford'.<sup>13</sup> She arranged the meetings, via the 'letterbox', or *dubok*, outside the town in secluded areas, so that she could use her bicycle. How Fuchs gained mobility to track down the messages in the *dubok*, and then move on to the trysting-place, was not explained by Sonya, but the distance from Birmingham to Banbury is about sixty miles, so he would surely have taken the train. There is no evidence that he took a bicycle with him, which would have attracted undesired attention.

Macintyre's initial description of Sonya's travel to Banbury explains that 'every few weeks, Ursula ... climbed on her bike, and secretly pedalled to a different part of the English countryside' to meet Fuchs (229). How she was able to accomplish this 'secretly' is not explained, and, since she apparently had to go to the *dubok* first, it was a repetitive voyage. Yet, according to Macintyre, Fuchs and Sonya had originally met in a café opposite Snow Hill station in Birmingham (i.e. not Banbury). Macintyre then repeats Sonya's impressions of the meeting without explaining why he has changed the location. He continues by stating, however, that Sonya, on the train journey home after that first encounter, thought to herself that Banbury, just over twenty miles from Oxford, would be a quieter place to meet. Thus, according to Macintyre, she next met Fuchs near Banbury railway station, and they strolled into the countryside, where they established the *dubok*. Thereafter, Sonya would, every few weeks, catch a morning train to Banbury and leave a written message indicating the place to meet. 'Fuchs caught the afternoon train from Birmingham' (231), presumably walked to the *dubok*, advanced to the meeting-place, and had his half-hour meeting with Sonya (before it got dark, one assumes). This account appears to come from an interview that Sonya gave an Oxford newspaper in 1990: 'One meeting was in Overthorpe Park, two miles east of Banbury, and within easy reach by bicycle or on foot.'<sup>14</sup>

Macintyre thus leaves us with a conflicted description. He counters his own suggestion that Sonya pedalled off into the countryside by asserting that she took the train. She may have taken her bicycle on the train (after all, she had to get to Oxford Station from Summertown, which was about four miles away), but it would be wasted if Fuchs were restricted to going on foot. Moreover, cycling home from Banbury to Oxford in the dark in winter would have been a hazardous affair – especially in the latter months, when Sonya was pregnant. The loose ends in this garbled story immediately cause the reader to doubt it, and, from Fuchs's testimony in jail, the meetings occurred much more rarely than this – only every two or three months, and lasted for only a few minutes.<sup>15</sup> That makes much more sense. The complications of the *dubok*, and cycle-rides into the countryside, sound more and more like a romantic elaboration. Why such untruths needed to be told is unclear.

## Wireless parts

A recurring theme of *Agent Sonya* is the ability of Soviet agents to construct their wireless apparatus from parts acquired locally. Thus, Sonya is trained to do this in Moscow. She follows up in Shanghai by purchasing parts for a transmitter-receiver, and Patra performs the same task in Peking. When in Switzerland, Sonya builds her set from parts bought at hardware shops in Geneva, Vevey and Lausanne (including two heavy batteries); in Chungking, Patra builds Rudi a shortwave wireless concealed inside an ordinary commercial radio; in Oxford, Sonya purchases parts for her transmitter. While one might marvel at the broad availability of *Radio Shack*-type stores around the world, always with the appropriate equipment in stock, and no questions asked when the nefarious purpose of the acquisitions must have been quite obvious, a further consideration for the last incident arises. There was a war on, and the use of unlicensed wireless transmitters was illegal: one might imagine that a woman with a German accent attempting to purchase such parts might have provoked some questions.

Furthermore, the construction of reliable transmitter-receivers, and the installation of the appropriate crystals and antennas to make them effective over vast distances, are no simple tasks. Dr. Brian Austin has written an article on the challenges of clandestine communications by German *Abwehr* agents in World War Two, including the highly variable behaviour of the ionosphere that can distort long-range transmissions.<sup>16</sup> He has also documented the complexity of the effort to construct reliable wireless transmitter-receivers from off-the-shelf componentry.<sup>17</sup> The parts themselves were highly specialised (inductors, valves, capacitors, crystals, etc.), but the assembler would also have required an array of metal-working tools, such as soldering-irons. Moreover, while the construction of a transmitter is a relatively straightforward task, a receiver is a much more sophisticated piece of equipment. The latter task would have required a species of transformer that would certainly

not have been available over the counter. Macintyre makes no mention of the 25-meter long antenna that would have been required to be installed, at the correct angle, to ensure some hope of successful receipt of messages by Moscow. Lastly, Macintyre informs us that Sonya's accommodation in Great Rollright, 'The Firs', had no electricity (282). Neither he nor Sonya explains how she was able to convert the 12-volts DC of a car battery into the 240-volts AC presumably required to power her radio equipment.

Thus, Sonya's claims must be treated very sceptically. That is not to say that she did not transmit: we know of at least one (unsuccessful) set of attempts by virtue of VENONA transcripts of Embassy traffic,<sup>18</sup> but she probably acquired her apparatus from the Embassy directly rather than constructing it herself. The DIY story appears more as a romantic flourish to emphasise her flair and devilry. Furthermore, she may not have transmitted so frequently as her memoir claims, a busyness that Macintyre eagerly echoes, and she may well have sent messages to the Embassy in London rather than to Moscow. (The Red Orchestra in Brussels sent its messages to London when communications with Moscow deteriorated).<sup>19</sup> That raises a whole new set of questions, as it would have been simpler to send messages destined for Kensington, but it would, because of the frequencies she would have had to use, made her more vulnerable to wireless interception processes by the Radio Security Service. The fact is that Macintyre has rather oversimplified this complex matter.

## Operation 'Faust'

Macintyre devotes two absorbing chapters to Operation Faust, the project by the US OSS (the Office of Strategic Services) to parachute anti-Nazi German exiles into Germany on reconnaissance missions at the end of the war (255–281). Lieutenant Gould, who ran the project, had encountered Jürgen Kuczynski by chance in his search for candidates. Macintyre attributes far too much of the responsibility for selecting men for the mission to Sonya, while ignoring the fact that their father Professor Robert Kuczynski was President of the Free Germany Committee of Great Britain, which was already a Moscow-controlled organisation. Sonya certainly inserted herself, with the aid of Erich Henschke, into the programme, but to characterize the Faust spies as 'double agents working for Ursula Kuczynski of the Red Army' (257), and then assert that she 'despatched [them] into mortal danger' (274) is to overstate grossly her role. Her betraying details of the missions to Moscow is probably true, and she was thus responsible for allowing the ground-to-air VHF technology to be placed in Soviet hands. Macintyre's laudatory tone around this mission is thus highly inappropriate, as also when he echoes Sonya's celebration of contributing 'to the liberation of her home city from the curse of Nazism' (274). Many of the agents died in the operation – the Soviet army immediately shot two when the latter captured them in Gestapo disguise. The subtitle of *Agent Sonya* is 'Moscow's Most Daring Wartime Spy', and the book is promoted as the 'True Story behind the Cold War's Most Intrepid Female Spy'. The Faust spies, as well as the many Soviet agents who were parachuted into German-controlled territory ahead of the Red Army, faced far more hazards than Sonya ever did. Her greatest danger was probably the risk of falling off her bicycle on the Oxford-Banbury road.

## Sonya's Evasion of MI5

The major flaw in Macintyre's work, however, is his failure to include a thorough analysis of Sonya's ability to elude the surveillance and interest of MI5. This was facilitated by Soviet subversion of British intelligence (as chronicled in my *Misdefending the Realm*<sup>20</sup> and elsewhere).<sup>21</sup> Indeed, MI5 (and MI6) had abetted Sonya in her marriage to Len Beurton, her acquisition of a British passport, and her subsequent escape to the United Kingdom.<sup>22</sup> There is numerous archival evidence proving that British intelligence were well aware of Sonya's background and objectives when she was admitted to Britain in January 1941.<sup>23</sup> Macintyre's book is about Sonya in wartime, and the years 1939 to 1945

(and the few afterwards until her escape) are the kernel of his story. Any chronicler of Sonya's exploits has eventually to confront the unsettling facts about her career and survival.

- The bigamous marriage to Len Beurton, facilitated by Alexander Foote's perjury.
- The smooth granting of her passport and subsequent entry to Britain.
- The testing questions of immigration officials not followed up.
- The lazy surveillance undertaken.
- The lack of interest in the discovery of her illicit wireless apparatus in Summertown.
- Her ability to evade the interception energies of the RSS.
- The irresponsible interrogation at Great Rollright.
- The reluctance of MI5 to follow up on the testimony of Foote after his 'defection'.
- The inability to match Fuchs's statements about his Banbury contact with Sonya herself.
- The insouciance about her speedy escape from the United Kingdom, followed shortly by the untroubled departure of Len.

Two theories revolve around this unprofessional behaviour of MI5 – one of treachery, and one of incompetence. And both theories almost exclusively involve Roger Hollis. The journalist Chapman Pincher developed a devoted following by piling on 'evidence' that showed that Hollis was in fact the Soviet spy known as 'ELLI', and that he had single-handedly managed to protect Sonya from any investigation or suspicion.<sup>24</sup> The problem with this theory is twofold. First, no archival evidence has ever appeared to suggest that Hollis had been recruited by the NKVD or GRU (and even Sonya herself, as well as the defector Oleg Gordievsky, have denied that Hollis was ever a Soviet agent),<sup>25</sup> and Pincher's evidence is repetitively circumstantial or fabricated. Second, it would have been impossible for Hollis to wield that amount of influence on his senior colleagues. D Division of MI5, responsible for Soviet espionage, was not established until June 1941, and Hollis did not replace Curry until October of that year. Hollis was no doubt a plodder: Macintyre describes him as having 'the imaginative flair of an omelette' (250), but to imagine that he could hoodwink such experienced officers as Petrie, Liddell and White over Sonya's innocence is absurd.

The other theory points to Hollis's incompetence, but, again, grants too much executive power to Hollis. Despite his failings, moreover, Hollis was not a disaster. Peter Fleming was one who thought highly of him,<sup>26</sup> and he could not have risen to Director-General if he was a complete buffoon. He was cautious, but occasionally did speak out more vociferously about communist threats than his peers. Thus, this latter theory breaks down for the same reason as the former.

Macintyre chooses to take no strong stand on the issue, rejecting the arguments of Chapman Pincher, but eventually siding with the case that Hollis 'was really quite thick' (250), as if that explained all. Yet that avoids the broader question of the abetting of Sonya's passage to Britain by MI6, the recruitment of Len Beurton for intelligence work in Switzerland, and the role of Foote, who was clearly recruited by MI6 before his assignment with Sonya, as the archive shows.<sup>27</sup> In an Afterword, Macintyre writes that 'a baseless theory has since emerged that Foote was a double agent, working for MI6 all along' (333), but an unauthoritative denial that shows no intellectual curiosity is an inadequate response. I have shown in my essay 'Sonia and the Hidden Hand of MI6' how her charmed life was enabled by a misguided project by Claude Dansey of MI6 to attempt to control her in some way. This was perhaps an attempt to use her wireless transmissions as cribs for interception and decipherment, and that the senior officers of MI5 were inevitably drawn into the conspiracy.<sup>28</sup>

So why does Macintyre step back from considering the intricacies of this case? I do not believe that he is unaware of them. I say that because, in one place in his narrative, he shows that he has grappled with one of the controversial claims about Sonya's espionage – her revealing of the details of the Quebec Agreement between Churchill and Roosevelt in August 1943. Macintyre is sensibly sceptical about this assertion, but cites three primary sources in his endnotes: Chapman Pincher's

*Treachery*, Vladimir Lota's *GRU I atomnaya bomba*, and to this reviewer's on-line piece on 'Sonia and the Quebec Agreement' (346 n).

Pincher claimed that the authors of *Superfrau iz GRU* revealed the coup that Sonya had delivered 'the prime single achievement of her career', the receipt and transit of the Anglo-American Quebec Agreement, just sixteen days after it had been signed.<sup>29</sup> 'On 4 September, Sonia reported data on the results of the conference,' he quotes from *Superfrau*.<sup>30</sup> Yet the book by Bochkarev and Kolpakidi contains no such statement. It has only two sentences on the Quebec Agreement, and does not refer to any relevant messages from Sonya at that time.<sup>31</sup> Macintyre cites the passage above as coming from Lota, (250) but I have not inspected his book. It is possible that Pincher confused the two, but since he was relying on the rather dubious Dr. Svetlana Chervonnaya, who made claims to him about having 'discovered' a document describing the fact that the report was taken directly to Stalin, we should necessarily be cautious.<sup>32</sup>

In my essay on the Quebec Agreement, however, I inspect very carefully the complexities of the events at that time, and conclude that it would have been impossible for Sonya to have known at that time the details that Pincher claimed, including the names of the scientists about to be despatched to America.<sup>33</sup> Macintyre gives the impression of having read my piece, but the inevitable conclusion must be that he decided that these matters are too complex for him to introduce. His scepticism shows, and he rightly concludes that, if Sonya did indeed obtain the secret, it remains a mystery how she did so. I thus detect a pattern whereby Macintyre is conscious that the story of Sonya is far more complicated than he wishes to present it, but that he wishes to retain *Agent Sonya* as a picaresque account of an intrepid and unusual woman, and not distract any of his readers with the subterfuges, conspiracies and cover-ups that bedevil British counter-espionage.

## The verdict

Macintyre's final verdict? His Introduction runs as follows: 'Ursula Kuczynski Burton [*sic*] was a mother, housewife, novelist, expert radio technician, spymaster, courier, saboteur, bomb-maker, Cold Warrior, and secret agent, all at the same time.' (xviii) This is a travesty. She was a poor mother, who continually put her children second to her distasteful profession. A housewife – perhaps, but one who needed nannies to help out. A novelist, indeed. A very capable radio operator, but probably not as expert an assembler as is made out. A spymaster – hardly. She took her instructions from Moscow, and developed a string of informants, mainly relatives and old friends, who passed on mostly gossip or information that was probably not confidential. A courier, certainly, for Fuchs, but her sabotage work was restricted to the training-fields of Moscow, as were her bomb-making exploits. A Cold Warrior, of course, given high-level ranks that surprised her, and an agent who managed to conceal her relationship with Fuchs, but whose other activities were an open book.

Above all Sonya was a dedicated Stalinist who could not admit to the monstrosities of the Purges, a traitor who accepted British citizenship by means of a bigamous marriage, and then betrayed her loyalty for a misguided and oppressive cause. She let her novelettish imagination run riot when compiling her memoir. Macintyre encourages his readers to think that we are supposed to admire this person, if not as a feminist icon, at least as a wily woman who outsmarted those who were supposed to detect her nefarious activities. Moreover, she is presented as romantically human as any other woman. When Richard Sorge left her company for the last time, Macintyre comments: 'No one noticed that her heart was broken' (75). As a serial reader of Ben Macintyre's gripping books on intelligence, and as someone who had studied Sonya's career in great detail, I was awaiting the publication of *Agent Sonya* with a mixture of enthusiasm (because the woman's life merits attention) and apprehension (lest it not receive a truly rigorous treatment). The work is certainly an engaging read, written with customary Macintyrean verve, and will surely sell in huge amounts, but those myriad readers will be misinformed with regard to some vital details.

As a coda, one final aspect of the Cold War remains uninspected by Ben Macintyre. If part of Sonya's mission, as 'the Cold War's most intrepid female spy', was to use her explosive talents to

sabotage the vital link in the strategic Cheltenham to Bletchley Park railway connection, she failed. Dr Richard Beeching succeeded, however, in her stead. In 1962, he closed the Chipping Norton to Banbury line permanently.

## Notes

1. Werner, *Sonya's Report*, 274
2. Agnes Smedley (1892–1950) was a prolific spy, who worked as a triple agent who worked for the USSR, the Chinese Communists, and the Indian nationalists. On Smedley, see Price, *The Lives of Agnes Smedley*.
3. Richard Sorge (1895–1944), born to a Russian mother and a German father, was one of the most successful spies of the twentieth century. Working as a journalist he spied on both Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. When stationed in Japan in 1940–1, he warned the USSR that Hitler was about to invade in 1941. His intelligence was disregarded. In September 1941 he informed Moscow that Japan would not attack the USSR that year. This time his information was heeded, and the Soviet Union was able to transfer large number of troops from the Far East to defend Moscow. He was arrested in October 1944 and executed in November 1944. Twenty years after his death, Sorge was posthumously awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. For a recent study, see Matthews, *Impeccable Spy*.
4. Hamburger, "The German Riveter: MY MOTHER SONYA," 11 December 2019, [https://www.eurolitnetwork.com/the-german-riveter-my-mother-sonya-by-maik-hamburger/\(accessed 24 October 2020\)](https://www.eurolitnetwork.com/the-german-riveter-my-mother-sonya-by-maik-hamburger/(accessed%2024%20October%202020)).
5. BBC *Omnibus*, "Codename Sonya," <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p0376mkb>, 2 January 2003 (accessed 24 October 2020).
6. Werner, *Sonya's Report*, 198
7. Werner, *Sonya's Report*, 202
8. Bochkarev & Kolkapidi, *Superfrau iz GRU*, 289.
9. Wilson Center, *Vassiliev Notebooks*, Yellow Notebook No. 1: File 82702, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112856> (accessed 24 October 2020).
10. Burke, *The Spy Who Came In From The Co-op*, 14.
11. West & Tsarev, *The Crown Jewels*, 146
12. Random House, "Agent Sonya," <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/612487/agent-sonya-by-ben-macintyre/9780771001949> (accessed 16 October 2020).
13. Werner, *Sonya's Report*, 251.
14. Waite, "RED SONYA," *Oxford Mail*, 6 August 2010, [https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/8317761.red-sonya-spy-lived-kidlington/\(accessed 24 October 2020\)](https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/8317761.red-sonya-spy-lived-kidlington/(accessed%2024%20October%202020)).
15. The National Archives: Public Record Office (TNA: PRO): KV 2/1250, "Klaus Emil Fuchs," s.n. 443b.
16. Austin, "HF Propaganda and Clandestine Communications during the Second World War".
17. Personal correspondence from Dr. Brian Austin, October 2020.
18. National Security Archive, "SONIA's Meeting with IRIS," 31 July 1941, [https://www.nsa.gov/Portals/70/documents/news-features/declassified-documents/venona/dated/1941/31jul\\_sonia\\_mtg.pdf](https://www.nsa.gov/Portals/70/documents/news-features/declassified-documents/venona/dated/1941/31jul_sonia_mtg.pdf) (accessed 24 October 2020).
19. Tarrant, *The Red Orchestra*, 39.
20. Antony Percy, *Misdefending the Realm: How MI5's incompetence enabled Communist Subversion of Britain's Institutions during the Nazi-Soviet Pact* (Buckingham: University of Buckingham Press, 2017).
21. Percy, "Sonia's Radio," [http://www.coldspur.com/sonias-radio/\(accessed 24 October 2020\)](http://www.coldspur.com/sonias-radio/(accessed%2024%20October%202020)); Percy, "Sonia and the Quebec Agreement," 28 February 2018, <http://www.coldspur.com/sonia-and-the-quebec-agreement/>, (accessed 24 October 2020); Percy, "Special Bulletin: Response to Denis Lenihan," 19 March 2020, <http://www.coldspur.com/special-bulletin-response-to-denis-lenihan/> (accessed 24 October 2020); Percy, "Special Bulletin: The Letter from Geneva," 23 April 2020, [http://www.coldspur.com/special-bulletin-the-letter-from-geneva/\(accessed 24 October 2020\)](http://www.coldspur.com/special-bulletin-the-letter-from-geneva/(accessed%2024%20October%202020)); Percy, "Sonia & MI6's Hidden Hand," 31 July 2020, <http://www.coldspur.com/sonia-mi6s-hidden-hand/> (accessed 24 October 2020).
22. Walter & Lazarus, "Did a staggering British blunder hand Stalin the atomic bomb?" *Mail on Sunday* (London), 28 June 2020. For analysis, see Percy, "Special Bulletin: Sonia and the *Mail on Sunday*," 27 June 2028, 29, 2020 and 7 July 2020: <http://www.coldspur.com/special-bulletin-sonia-and-the-mail-on-sunday/> (accessed 24 October 2020).
23. Percy, "Sonia & MI6's Hidden Hand," 31 July 2020, <http://www.coldspur.com/sonia-mi6s-hidden-hand/> (accessed 24 October 2020).
24. On this issue, see Tyrer, "The Unresolved Mystery of ELLI," 785–808.
25. Werner, *Sonya's Report*, 289; Gordievsky, *Next Stop Execution*, 242.
26. Ogden, *Master of Deception*, 20.
27. TNA: PRO: KV2/1613/1, "Alexander Allan Foote" s.n. 149a.

28. Percy, "Sonia & MI6's Hidden Hand," 31 July 2020, <http://www.coldspur.com/sonia-mi6s-hidden-hand> (accessed 24 October 2020).
29. Pincher, *Treachery*, 185.
30. *Ibid.*, 187.
31. Bochkarev & Kolpakidi, *Superfrau iz GRU*, 295
32. Pincher, *Treachery*, 19.
33. Percy, "Sonia and the Quebec Agreement," 28 February 2018, <http://www.coldspur.com/sonia-and-the-quebec-agreement/> (accessed 24 October 2020).

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