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**How Seriously did the Cambridge Spies Damage
British Interests During World War Two?**

Essay prepared for Edward D.R. Harrison

British Intelligence in the Second World War

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INTRODUCTION

At the end of the 1930s, five British young men espousing pacifically but genuinely the Communist ideology were ‘discovered’ by the Soviet secret service while they were studying at the Cambridge University. They were to embark on a remarkable array of careers within the British establishment at the same time than providing Moscow, as infiltrators or double agents, with invaluable insights of British political scene, secret services and foreign relations. The group was to be known as the Cambridge Five or the Magnificent Five and consisted of Harold Adrian Russell ‘Kim’ Philby, Duart ‘Donald’ Maclean, Francis de Moncy ‘Guy’ Burgess, Frederick ‘Anthony’ Blunt (later Sir), and John Cairncross. All of them enrolled in the ranks of Soviet intelligence which, for convenience, and despite frequent changes in name, we will refer to as the KGB¹.

Few spies in the history of espionage have attracted as much attention as they did and the literature on the Cambridge spies is impressive in quantity. However, like it is often the case in a field where most of the historical documents are still classified and where emotional and political involvement often distorts the facts, the literature on the Five contains a great load of propaganda and disinformation. Such a fact – because it is a fact and not a groundless statement – has to be kept in mind and taken into consideration when researching such a topic.²

This essay does not pretend to reinvent the assessment of the work of the Cambridge Five and of their success. Instead, this essay will humbly focus on a very specific target, namely the degree in which the Cambridge spies damaged British interests during the Second World War. To do so, a few preliminary notes are necessary. First, concerning the concept of ‘damage’, it is understood to include an action or an omission which worsened a situation or

¹ *Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopastnosti*, the Soviet Committee for State Security.

² See Sheila Kerr, ‘KGB Sources on the Cambridge Network of Soviet Agents: True or False?’, *Intelligence and National Security*, vol. 11, no. 3, July 1996, pp. 561-585.

prevented a situation from reaching a good or better conclusion. That damage has to be related to British interests which were, during the war, pretty straightforward. In brief, Britain wanted to resist the German offensive and ultimately defeat the Nazis while minimizing the losses and retaining its status of major world power.

One of the most important characteristics of this research is that it focuses only on the work of the Cambridge Five during the second world conflict. Therefore, the period of time covered will be the one starting in 1939 when Britain declared war on Germany (3 September) to 1945 when Germany surrendered in northern Europe (7 May). This is of critical importance because much of the literature assessing their successes and their impact on Britain focuses on the post-war period. It is therefore not my objective to discuss the impact the Cambridge group had on the course of the Cold War but the reader has to keep in mind that they indeed deeply damaged British interests after 1945. Their post-war impact can be used as a means of comparison to assess their wartime impact.

This essay presents the assertion that the damage of the Cambridge Five on British interests during the war was greatly inferior to that of after the war and that, in fact, the group did little damage to Britain during that period. To support that hypothesis, the wartime work of the five agents will be presented in chronological order of recruitment. These presentations will try to show how the Five, despite their high-profile careers, despite the trust they earned from their British colleagues and superiors, despite their devotion and ambitions, did little damage to British interests during the Second World War.

1. PHILBY, DISINFORMATION AND BETRAYAL

Harold Adrian Russell 'Kim' Philby was the first and is probably the most well-known of the Cambridge Five to be recruited. During the Second World War, Philby experienced rapid career advancements. In autumn 1941, after a year as an instructor for Section D of SIS³ trainees, he began to work as head of the Iberian subsection of Section V of SIS which dealt with counterintelligence. Three years later, he became the head of the newly reactivated Section IX specifically responsible for Soviet counterintelligence. One of the reasons for such rapid progression was his 'bureaucratic skills' which were to serve him while damaging British interests at the same time.⁴

Indeed, the head of Section V Felix Cowgill was a potential candidate for the direction of that 'resuscitated' section of SIS but Philby succeeded in undermining Cowgill's standing with the chief of SIS Major-General Sir Stuart Menzies and in reaching the very sensitive position of head of Soviet counterintelligence.⁵ However, after the publication of Philby's memoirs, it has been argued that 'Cowgill had dug his own grave by years of belligerence to all and sundry. It seems unlikely that he would have become head of Section IX even if Philby had for once minded his own business. [...] Philby exaggerates his own role in Cowgill's downfall because it serves to further the myth of the KGB super-spies.'⁶ In any

³ The letter D stood for 'Destruction' and this section was responsible for unconventional warfare operations like sabotage and subversion in periods of war only. It was to be separated from SIS and renamed Special Operations Executive (SOE) in the summer of 1940. The acronym SIS stands for 'Secret Intelligence Service' which is also known by its wartime name of MI6 (Military Intelligence section 6).

⁴ Edward D.R. Harrison, 'Kim Philby: The End of a Myth', in Alistair Horne (ed.), *Telling Lives: From W.B. Yeats to Bruce Chatwin*, London, Macmillan, 2000, p. 5.

⁵ Robert Cecil, 'C's War', *Intelligence and National Security*, vol. 1, no. 2, May 1986, p. 178. See Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB: The Inside Story of its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1990, p. 242.

⁶ Edward D.R. Harrison, 'Some Reflections on Kim Philby's *My Silent War* as a Historical Source', in Richard J. Aldrich and Michael F. Hopkins (eds.), *Intelligence, Defence and Diplomacy: British Policy in the Post-War World*, London, Frank Cass, 1994, p. 222.

case, Philby damaged British interest in getting rid of a 'staunch anti-Communist' who would have protected British interests during the remaining of the war and the early Cold War.⁷

But this episode – following which Cowgill resigned – occurred at the end of the war and therefore had little impact on wartime British interests. In fact, Philby has been, in a sense, a valuable asset for Britain during the fight against Germany since he genuinely wanted to defeat Nazism. His work was therefore not aimed at affecting Britain's war effort to defeat Germany – which was the main interest of wartime Britain. However, one has to keep in mind that at the end of the day, the Soviet interests had priority over British interests and Philby had 'no qualms about suppressing intelligence which might produce effects contrary to the interests of the Soviet Union. On at least two occasions he suppressed significant intelligence about the German Resistance.'⁸ In doing so, Philby undermined the possibility for Britain to bring support to Hitler's enemies and indirectly to end the war before the Soviet Union was in a dominant position in Central Europe.⁹

Nevertheless, Philby did seriously damage British interests by undermining the quality of Anglo-Soviet relations during the war. The Soviet Union was a precious ally for Britain and the West and it was in the interest of London to maintain good relations with Moscow. But Philby misled the Soviets in thinking that Britain had plans for a separate peace treaty with Germany which would precede a war against the Soviet Union. Two instances, related by authors Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, indeed misled Moscow's appreciation of British policy.

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⁷ Robert Cecil, 'The Cambridge Comintern', in Christopher Andrew and David Dilks (eds.), *The Missing Dimension: Governments and Intelligence Communities in the Twentieth Century*, London, Macmillan, 1984, p. 179.

⁸ Edward D.R. Harrison, 'More Thoughts on Kim Philby's *My Silent War*', *Intelligence and National Security*, vol. 10, no. 3, July 1995, p. 523. The author states that '[d]uring the Second World War, Philby was fighting both for Britain and against it, and his role is a significant negative factor in any assessment of SIS in 1939-45.'

⁹ Edward D.R. Harrison, 'Some Reflections on Kim Philby's *My Silent War* as a Historical Source', *supra* note 6, p. 210.

In May 1941, Adolf Hitler's deputy *Führer* Rudolf Hess paid a visit to Britain to negotiate a separate peace treaty between Germany and Britain – both of which dismissed Hess's attempt as pure nonsense. But Philby got scared and sent a report to Moscow clearly leading Soviet leaders to believe in genuine and potentially fruitful negotiations between the British and the Nazis.

The second episode occurred in 1942 when the wartime head of the *Abwehr*,¹⁰ Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, visited Spain. Cowgill had approved plans for an assassination attempt by SOE but Menzies categorically refused to approve such action. When Philby read Menzies' reply to Cowgill – 'I want no action whatsoever taken against the Admiral' – he automatically considered it as further evidence of Anglo-Nazi *rapprochement* and reported it as such to the Kremlin.¹¹

Finally, Philby damaged British interests by providing the KGB with detailed information on SIS (as well as MI5¹²). Although his most harmful actions took place after the war when the Soviet Union replaced Germany as the main target and when Philby was head of Section IX of SIS, he did betray operations and agents, greatly affecting the work of SIS and probably leading some British agents to a sinister fate.¹³

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¹⁰ German secret service.

¹¹ See Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB*, *supra* note 5, pp. 239-241.

¹² Military Intelligence Section 5, now the Security Service.

¹³ See Edward D.R. Harrison, 'Kim Philby', *supra* note 4, p. 9, Stephen Dorril, *MI6: Inside the Covert World of Her Majesty's Secret Intelligence Service*, New York, The Free Press, 2000, p. 11, Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB*, *supra* note 5, p. 241, Nigel West and Oleg Tsarev, *The Crown Jewels: The British Secrets at the Heart of the KGB Archives*, London, HarperCollins, 1998, pp. 295 and 345, Yuri Modin, *My Five Cambridge Friends*, London, Headline, 1994, p. 270, Roy Godson, *Dirty Tricks or Trump Cards: U.S. Covert Action and Counterintelligence*, Washington, Brassey's, 1995, p. 14, and Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive: The KGB in Europe and the West*, London, Penguin Books, 2000, p. 149.

2. MACLEAN, POLITICS AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Duart 'Donald' Maclean is another of the Cambridge Five whose career climax as an agent occurred at the end of the war when he was posted at the British Embassy in Washington. Before that position in the United States, Maclean first became Third Secretary at the British Embassy in Paris in 1938. He was, to the opinion of late Robert Cecil, in 'a position to harm British interests.'¹⁴ Seeing copies of virtually all correspondence, including the letters of the ambassador, Maclean could report to Moscow valuable insights of Anglo-French relations. However, the actual damage caused to British interests seems rather nominal. Sir Eric Phipps, the ambassador in Paris, was an advocate of appeasement and thought that the French would not strongly fight the Nazis. Cecil seems to argue that these views influenced Stalin in deciding to sign the 1939 Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact. With all due respect, it seems to me that other factors, more important in number as well as in terms of strategic significance, led the Soviet leader to sign that agreement with the German dictator.¹⁵

The main achievement of Maclean as a Soviet spy was to gather valuable political intelligence. As an official of the British Foreign Office, Maclean had access to talks and documents of great interest for Moscow. Just like Philby, Maclean sent information to Moscow concerning the post-war attitude towards the Soviet Union. But while Philby led the Soviet leaders to think of an Anglo-German accord, the reports sent by Maclean around 1943 were closer to the reality. Indeed did he report the details of the main discussions of the Post-Hostilities Planning Sub-Committee (PHP) whose main conclusion – strongly supported by the chiefs of staff – was that the Soviet Union was the only potential enemy to emerge after

¹⁴ Robert Cecil, 'The Cambridge Comintern', *supra* note 7, p. 175.

¹⁵ My personal opinion is that the principal reason for Hitler to conclude such a treaty was to allow him to attack Poland without fear of a war in the East, therefore avoiding a 'two-front war'. The advantage for Stalin was to prevent his country to engage in a long, costly and perhaps devastating war in order to eventually stand up virtually intact against the West (and against a weak Germany) as the main post-war superpower in Europe.

the defeat of Germany.¹⁶ However, this was in August 1943 and it concerned the post-war world order; Maclean revelations therefore did not really damage wartime British interests. The same can be said about the intelligence he gathered on the Anglo-American collaboration in the building of the atomic bomb. His involvement in that area of policy began in late 1944 or early 1945 and did probably little damage to British interests – if any.¹⁷

In fact, Maclean had been the most successful of the Cambridge Five, and probably the most damaging, in the 1930s. His work after the Second World War was also of great value as he betrayed ‘British Government secrets and Anglo-American atomic policy decisions which accelerated the Soviet acquisition of nuclear weapons and helped to shape the course of the Cold War.’¹⁸ As of the war years, however, his spying career seems to have gone into a temporary eclipse.

3. BURGESS, BBC AND PROPAGANDA

Francis de Moncy ‘Guy’ Burgess was like Kim Philby employed by Section D of SIS when the war broke in 1939. However, he did not have Philby’s luck and was sacked when came the time for Section D to be merged into SOE. Burgess then went back to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) where he had worked from 1936 to 1939. Interestingly enough, the BBC itself writes that ‘Guy Burgess (1910-63) worked for the BBC from 1936-1939 and 1941-44. While working for the BBC in the 1940s he was also employed by MI5.’¹⁹

¹⁶ See Stephen Dorril, *MI6*, *supra* note 13, p. 13. PHP Chairman Gladwyn Jebb described the sub-committee members as ‘would-be drinkers of Russian blood’, a clear indication of the preconceived intentions of the chiefs of staff.

¹⁷ See Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive*, *supra* note 13, p. 166, and Yuri Modin, *My Five Cambridge Friends*, *supra* note 13, p. 270.

¹⁸ John Costello and Oleg Tsarev, *Deadly Illusions*, London, Century, 1993, p. 120.

¹⁹ British Broadcasting Corporation, ‘The Cambridge Spy Ring’, *News*, [Online], http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/special_report/1999/09/99/britain_betrayed/newsid_444000/444058.stm (Page visited on 18 February 2002).

In fact, he has never been in MI5 and his period of employment with the SIS was limited at the period of 1939 to the summer of 1940 when he was sacked.

That short period of time was enough for Burgess to succeed in facilitating Philby's entrance to SIS. However, during the main part of the Second World War, Burgess worked at the BBC and – him too – could only do little damage, if any, to wartime British interests. He was an influential talks producer within the BBC, preparing important texts and programs. But his work as a KGB agent was therefore principally limited to propaganda. This is not negligible in itself but even subtle and efficient radio propaganda could not seriously damage British interests in defeating Germany and remaining economically and politically strong. He did manage to have some important pieces of propaganda presented on the air of BBC Home Service (now Radio 4) but nothing that could be seriously regarded as really damaging operations.

4. BLUNT, MI5 AND COUNTER-INTELLIGENCE

KGB agent Frederick 'Anthony' Blunt, later to be made 'Sir Blunt' and later again to be stripped of his knighthood and academic honours, was working for MI5 during the Second World War. A very meticulous man, Blunt spent countless hours photographing MI5 documents to be sent to Moscow via Cambridge spies' controller Anatoli Borisovich Gorsky. The number of documents handed over by Blunt increased steadily as time passed 'until he became one of the most productive agents in KGB history.'²⁰

Basically, Blunt provided the KGB with all possible details on MI5, including details of its structure and lists of its agents. The scale of Blunt's betrayal of MI5 was spectacular but here again, we must assess whether his actions damaged British interests during World War

²⁰ Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB*, *supra* note 5, p. 243.

Two. There is no doubt that providing the Soviet Union with so much information on Britain's domestic intelligence and counter-intelligence service inflicted serious long-term damage to British interest. But one has to remember that during the war, the Soviet Union was an ally to the British and that MI5 being a domestic service, the safety of its agents was not as threatened as that of SIS agents could have been. British counter-espionage services did have spies abroad whose names became known to Moscow because of Blunt but nothing seems to indicate that such betrayal seriously undermined British interests during the war.²¹ However, when the war ended and the Soviet Union became the main enemy of Western democracies, the information provided by Blunt became dangerously useful to Communist leaders, agents and spies.²² Blunt also passed information on British counter-espionage efforts and intentions against Soviet Embassy personnel in London as well as against the British Communist Party. He also provided the KGB with intelligence on how much the British knew about some Soviet secret operations, like operation MONASTERY in 1941.²³ All of this probably inflicted some damage to Britain but only after the war and the emergence of the USSR as the prime enemy.

During the war, Blunt also used his British contacts and sources of information to provide the Soviets with intelligence on the German order of battle and operations.²⁴ If that intelligence had any impact on British interests, it could only have been positive. Cambridge spies' handler Yuri Ivanovich Modin wrote that 'Blunt [...] had helped change the course of the war, and his work unquestionably spared the lives of tens of thousands of Soviet soldiers.'²⁵ However true that statement is, it does not purport any serious damage to wartime British interests.

²¹ See Yuri Modin, *My Five Cambridge Friends*, *supra* note 13, p. 93.

²² Even such statement can be challenged since Blunt left MI5 in 1944 to pursue a career as surveyor of the Queen' s pictures and Director of the Courtauld Institute of Art, and could therefore not provide updated information on Cold War MI5 agents or operations.

²³ See Yuri Modin, *My Five Cambridge Friends*, *supra* note 13, p. 90, and Stephen Dorril, *MI6*, *supra* note 13, p. 410.

²⁴ Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB*, *supra* note 5, p. 244.

²⁵ Yuri Modin, *My Five Cambridge Friends*, *supra* note 13, p. 132.

5. CAIRNCROSS, ATOMIC BOMB AND ULTRA

John Cairncross, whose identity as the fifth spy of the Cambridge Five was first revealed in 1990, provided Moscow with intelligence on very specific subjects. Part of his work was undoubtedly damaging to Britain but whether the damage occurred during the Second World War is less than certain.

At the outbreak of the war, Cairncross was working at the Treasury, a position more strategic than one could think since information on numerous projects from several government organizations had to go through the Treasury and often through Cairncross. The sensitive information then gathered, when deemed interesting for his Soviet masters, was handed to his controller. But the most significant part of his career as a KGB agent began with his appointment as private secretary to Lord Hankey, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster but more important chairman of the Scientific Advisory Committee. Created in October 1940 to coordinate the application of science to the war effort, the committee produced a report on the development of uranium atomic energy to produce explosive material. Despite security precautions, Cairncross passed the information it contained to his controller Gorsky: it was the first warning of the Anglo-American decision to build an atomic bomb.²⁶

The damage to British interests was to be of great seriousness since it would undermine the fragile Anglo-American relations and stimulate the Soviet nuclear program. But these effects appeared only after the war when the atomic bomb was actually developed first by the Americans and then by the Soviets. However, in 1942, Cairncross moved to Bletchely Park, home of the Government Code and Cypher School (GC&CS, now GCHQ).

²⁶ See Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive*, *supra* note 13, p. 150, and Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB*, *supra* note 5, pp. 210 and 253. Philby is the one credited for alerting Moscow of the new TAL section (Tube Alloys Division) designed to disseminate information on atomic research undertaken abroad, principally in the Soviet Union. Philby's report served to remind the Soviets that it was essential to surround their work with the strictest secrecy; see Nigel West and Oleg Tsarev, *The Crown Jewels*, *supra* note 13, p. 235.

‘At the very moment in the summer of 1942 when the amount of disguised ULTRA forwarded to the Russians started to decline, John Cairncross began to provide it in unadulterated form.’²⁷ But the ULTRA decrypts were made of intercepted communications of the common British and Soviet enemy. Therefore, whatever ULTRA intelligence concerning Germany was passed to the Soviets, it could only serve – and not damage – British interest in defeating the Nazis.

CONCLUSION

When the Second World War ended, the defeated Germany was replaced by the Soviet Union as the primary concern for the Western countries. With that shift of attention also shifted the nature of British interests. They became focused on the fight against Communism, the improvement of Anglo-American relations and the reconstruction of the country’s economy and political influence. These British interests were to be seriously damaged by the work of the Cambridge Five. However, their actions had not damaged wartime British interests to any comparable extent.

The Magnificent Five did indeed damage British interests during the Second World War. However, many reasons explain why they did not inflict more serious damage to Britain and support my initial postulation. First, during the war, Britain and the USSR were allies against the Nazis. London and Moscow were acting and fighting with a different agenda in mind but ultimately, the work of KGB agents in Britain like the Cambridge Five did not immediately affect British interests as identified in the introduction.

Secondly, victim of its success, the group spent the years from 1942 to 1944 under strong suspicion from Moscow. Indeed, the KGB suspected them to be double agents

²⁷ Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB*, *supra* note 5, p. 247.

controlled by British intelligence ‘simply because their voluminous and highly classified intelligence sometimes failed to conform to Stalin’s conspiracy theories.’²⁸

Thirdly and finally, it appears that the Soviet capacity to understand the political and diplomatic intelligence it received never approached its ability to gather such intelligence. To damage British interests, intelligence from the Cambridge Five would must have been read and understood by Moscow – which was not the case. ‘Philby and the others fondly imagined that their prodigious labours were appreciated in Moscow. In reality the KGB was unable to read all the material they supplied.’²⁹ In addition, misinterpretations and preconceived ideas greatly undermined the usefulness of the Five’s intelligence and perhaps diminished the already small damage it could have done to wartime British interests.

²⁸ Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive*, *supra* note 13, p. 124. For example, ‘[i]nformation from War Cabinet papers and other intelligence provided by Cairncross and other Soviet agents did nothing to persuade Stalin that Churchill’s warnings of a German invasion of Russia proceeded from genuine alarm rather than a Machiavellian plot to embroil him with Hitler’; Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB*, *supra* note 5, p. 211. See also Ernest M. Teagarden, ‘The Cambridge Five: The End of the Cold War Brings Forth Some Views from the Other Side’, *American Intelligence Journal*, vol. 18, no. 1/2 (1998), pp. 63-68.

²⁹ Edward D.R. Harrison, ‘Kim Philby’, *supra* note 4, p. 8.

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