

VICTOR ROTHSCHILD, SOVIET SPY

MARCH 27, 2018 MARK HACKARD 5 COMMENTS

The mystery of Lord Victor Rothschild's (1910-1990) connections to Soviet intelligence has vexed researchers for over a half century now. As the scion of an ultra-wealthy banking house and confidante to Winston Churchill, Rothschild was an influential figure in Britain's power elite for decades, occupying key positions in counterintelligence, the energy sector and strategic policy planning. But was he also the notorious Cambridge Spy Ring's "Fifth Man," a spy for Moscow who could access the crown jewels of UK secrets?

The Cambridge network – consisting of [Kim Philby](#), Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean, Anthony Blunt, and John Cairncross – has gone down in history as one of Soviet secret service's most successful penetrations, to the shame of the British establishment. Long after their exposure, Rothschild was well-situated as a grey cardinal of UK politics, seemingly untouchable.

In 1994 investigative author Roland Perry wrote *The Fifth Man*, implicating Rothschild as a Soviet asset based on interviews with anonymous KGB veterans in Moscow. Yet Perry couldn't obtain the direct proof he needed to clinch the case.^[1] Now, new evidence has surfaced, suggesting that if not the Fifth Man, Rothschild was indeed working for Soviet foreign intelligence alongside the Cambridge Five from the 1930's up to the initial stages of the Cold War. The source is none other than the first chairman of the KGB, General Ivan Aleksandrovich Serov (1905-1991).



An enforcer for Stalin and Khrushchev, General Ivan Serov served as the first chairman of the KGB from 1954 to 1958.

Ivan Serov was a physically brave and ruthless NKVD officer who specialized in mass deportations and quelling internal unrest under Stalin. In 1954 he was chosen to head the newly reconstituted state security apparatus, the KGB, by Nikita Khrushchev, who considered Serov reliable from their time in pre-war Ukraine. "Ivan the Terrible," as the Western press christened him, led the KGB until 1958, when the

Politburo sent him to head the GRU, Soviet military intelligence. Ousted in 1963 after the exposure of GRU Colonel Oleg Penkovsky as a CIA-MI6 agent, Serov was soon lowered in rank, excluded from the Party, and forced into retirement. Though relegated to oblivion, the cashiered Kremlin enforcer kept a diary – a fact that was known to the KGB as early as 1971. Serov concealed his writings within the walls of his Moscow dacha's garage, and they were only discovered in 2012, some two decades after his death.

Serov's diaries, published in Russian as *Notes from the Suitcase (Zapiski iz chemodana)*, reveal a myriad of details on NKVD wartime deportation operations, the treacherous games played amongst Stalin's lieutenants, and a first-hand account of how the Red Army crushed the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. While Serov was not a professional intelligence officer, some of the most fascinating entries concern the espionage operations that he oversaw as chief of the KGB and GRU. And the question of Lord Victor Rothschild – whether he acted as a Soviet asset – is finally put to rest.

Serov describes meeting Rothschild while accompanying Khrushchev on his April 1956 visit to London:

I met with Victor Rothschild only once, at the embassy. This person was well-known from very long ago as an "heir" to the Philby affair and others. He knew perfectly well that these people, having certain inclinations, were connected to us, and used them to pass on information to Moscow, including false information.

Overall, useful ties with him ended with the formation of Israel.

As you remember, the British government was always against the creation of Israel, while Rothschild, to the contrary, aided this.

All materials on the Palestinian problem in the 1940's and on the British position were received by our intelligence service in the 1930's-40's. After Burgess and Maclean's escape, he only appeared at official receptions at our embassies and met with the ambassador, Mikoyan or Malenkov.

In London he made an unpleasant impression on me. He didn't inspire trust. I've met many such hustlers in Bessarabia and Romania, as well as in Germany after the war.

The contact, according to the program of the visit and issues for discussions with the British, was interesting, of course. But Rothschild always pursued only his own goals. In his own way, Rothschild also compromised Philby and others. Ties with him put the information passed on by them in doubt.

We were helped by such solid, serious, moral and non-mercenary people who shared our views, such as Bernal, Ivor Montagu, and major scientists. Rothschild was just a fellow traveler.^[2]

The ex-chairman of the KGB opens his passage with a stunning claim – Victor Rothschild not only knew of his school friends' espionage, he actively supplied information to Moscow Center through their network^[3]. Back in their Cambridge days, Rothschild, Burgess, and Blunt had all been members of the Apostles, a campus society characterized by Marxist intellectual speculation and homosexual activity. But as Serov makes clear, Rothschild the 'fellow traveler' was not under Soviet control. Rather, it is implied he was pursuing another aim entirely – the creation of a Jewish state, a family dream fulfilled in the aftermath of the Second World War. The role of the Rothschilds in founding Israel is undisputed^[4]; the Balfour Declaration of 1917 was due largely to the energies of young Victor's uncle, Lord Walter Rothschild^[5]. Secret diplomacy, double-dealing, the use of spies, and even terrorism all formed an indispensable part of the drama. And now Serov's revelation would suggest that by the end of the 1940's, the Soviet Union had outlived its utility in the eyes of the legendary financial dynasty.

Stalin had been among the first to support the fledgling State of Israel; after all, the political spectrum of the new nation-state leaned heavily socialist, and a large portion of its immigrants had come from the Eastern Bloc. Armaments from the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia helped tip the balance in favor of the Zionist cause during Israel's War for Independence, what Palestinian Arabs rather less enthusiastically have termed *an Naqbah*, "The Catastrophe." At the time of Israel's formation, the Kremlin believed Ashkenazi settlers, refugees and emigres – some of whom had fought in or alongside the Red Army against Nazi Germany – would deal a blow to Western imperialism in the Middle East. As Serov's entry indicates, Rothschild and the Cambridge network helped inform the Soviet leadership and perhaps further undermine Britain's weakening grip on the Palestine Mandate^[6].

Soviet hopes for a red stronghold on the Levant, however, would evaporate quickly. Stalin was in firm command of international communism, but the Zionist movement proved well beyond his grasp. Events from the 1948 assassination of playwright and Jewish Antifascist Committee chair Solomon Mikhoels in Minsk to the Doctors' Plot show that the "Father of All Nations" was unable to bring Zionism under his control. The postwar purge of prominent Jews in the Soviet Union conformed to Stalin's standard practice of eliminating any and all perceived potential threats to his rule.

While Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion initially pursued a policy of balance between East and West^[7], he came to steer his country toward the Atlantic alliance – Israel needed a dependable great-power patron with a wealthy and influential Jewish diaspora community, and the United States fit the bill. Less than a generation into Israel's existence, under the Johnson Administration, Washington and Tel Aviv cemented extensive security cooperation (read: billions in arms contracts and economic aid) that continues to this day.

The Soviets would counter Israel's westward shift by backing not only the dispossessed Palestinians, but also secular Arab states in the region such as Syria, Egypt, and eventually Iraq. In the context of the Cold War, it made sense for Israel to arrange intelligence sharing with Western powers, especially the United States. The CIA's pointman for the Israeli relationship throughout the first half of the US-Soviet struggle was Company counterintelligence chief James Jesus Angleton, who happened to be a longtime drinking friend and understudy of none other than Kim Philby.

The demise of the Cambridge Five, beginning with the flight of Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean to Moscow in 1951, roughly coincided with Israel's gradual but steady integration into the Western camp. Working in Washington as the MI6 liaison, Philby knew from the freshly-decoded Venona intercepts that Maclean's career as a Soviet agent (codename "Homer") was coming to an end. He sent the debauched Burgess, who was also serving at the British Embassy and living in his house at the time, to warn Maclean and facilitate his escape. As it turned out, both Cambridge school mates vanished behind the Iron Curtain, leaving Philby under a dark cloud of suspicion and forcing his resignation. The master spy played it cool, laid low, and eventually made his way to Beirut five years later as an MI6 asset under journalistic cover (additionally re-establishing contact with the KGB).

Philby's final unmasking in Beirut during the winter of 1962-63 was the result of Rothschild action, a fact that most accounts have passed over without critical analysis. While Anatoly Golitsyn, the KGB major who defected to the CIA in 1961, is popularly attributed to have confirmed Philby's identity as a Soviet agent, it was Victor Rothschild who sealed his fate. The ostensible reason for the legendary mole's exposure was his unfavorable attitude toward Israel, as conveyed on the pages of *The Observer* and *The Economist*. Flora Solomon, an ardent Zionist whom Philby unsuccessfully had attempted to recruit in the 1930's, became incensed at his pro-Arab, anti-Israel journalistic slant and decided to reveal what she had known for decades. Solomon, whose son would found Amnesty International, reported Philby to a figure perched high in the British security establishment: Lord Victor Rothschild^[8].

Victor in formal morning dress at the Mansion House in December 1938.



Elusive Rothschild, The Life of Victor, Third Baron

If Serov's diary is genuine, then Rothschild would have no interest in Philby being brought back to the Old Bailey to stand trial, risking his own exposure. Much better to have the Cambridge Five's brightest star spirited away to Moscow than spilling secrets of high criminality in the establishment. As MI6 was about to close in with a group of officers headed by old friend Nicholas Elliott, Philby received a warning^[9]. Anthony Blunt, his spy days largely behind him and now ensconced as Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures, went to Beirut under the pretext of a botanical excursion in December of 1962, mere weeks before Philby's escape. The documentary film maker George Carey notes he was ostensibly in search of the frog orchid, a flower that grows wild in England, yet nowhere in Lebanon^[10]. So who sent Blunt, the KGB's London residency or his longtime associate Victor Rothschild?

Moscow Center wouldn't need to send Anthony Blunt all the way to Beirut to tip his old school friend off to the oncoming danger. Philby was already in contact with his immediate handler, a certain Petukhov stationed nearby under Soviet diplomatic cover, and Yuri Modin, his longtime control officer. Modin had in fact warned him of Golitsyn's defection in the summer of 1962, instructing him "not to return to Britain because of the danger of arrest, and to make contingency plans for his escape."^[11] Modin himself thought that through its seeming incompetence, MI6 "had actively encouraged him to slip away."^[12] The most powerful elements of the British ruling class, personified by Victor Rothschild, wanted Philby safe and silent behind the Iron Curtain so that higher-level elite treachery would remain hidden from public view.

During his lifetime, Lord Victor Rothschild threatened to sue anyone into penury for claiming he had worked for Soviet intelligence. Hardly would he believe that one day, from the grave, the former chief of the KGB would expose him as a spy.

- [1] Leitch, David. "Rothschild 'spied as the Fifth Man.'" *The Independent*, 22 October 1994, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/rothschild-spied-as-the-fifth-man-1444440.html>.
- [2] Serov, Ivan. *Zapiski iz chemodana*. Ed. Aleksandr Khinshtein. Moscow: Olma Media Group, 2016, pp. 543-544.
- [3] The late [Stanislav Lekarev](#), a veteran of the KGB First Chief Directorate who had worked in London, claims that Rothschild was first contacted by Soviet intelligence in August of 1934 at a symphony. His recruiter was supposedly the illegal Theodore Mally ("Otto"). Lekarev posits that Rothschild was not an agent in the ordinary operational sense, but rather was handled as a high-level agent of influence.
- Lekarev, Stanislav. "Baron Viktor Rotshil'd: Istoriia sponsora kembrizhskoi piaterki." *Argumenty nedeli*, 1 Feb. 2007. <http://argumenti.ru/espionage/n40/33679>.
- [4] "History." Yan Hanadiv, <http://www.yadhanadiv.org.il/general-page/history>. Accessed March 21, 2018.
- [5] "Walter Rothschild and the Balfour Declaration." The Rothschild Archive, https://www.rothschildarchive.org/contact/faqs/walter_rothschild_and_the_balfour_declaration. Accessed March 26, 2018.
- [6] Hines, Nico. "How Secret Russian Spy Kim Philby Helped Set Up Israel." *The Daily Beast*, 6 May 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-russian-mole-and-the-fight-for-the-promised-land>.
- [7] Shlaim, Avi. "Israel between East and West, 1948-1956." *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 36:4, November 2004, 657-673.
- [8] Weiss, Philip. "Kim Philby's last straw." *Mondoweiss.net*, 23 May 2015, <http://mondoweiss.net/2015/05/philbys-last-straw/>.
- [9] Carey, George. "Kim Philby: The spy who went into the cold." *BBC News*, 18 Nov. 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-24803131>.
- [10] Norton-Taylor, Richard. "Was Philby tipped off before defection to Moscow?" *The Guardian*, 14 Nov. 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/defence-and-security-blog/2013/nov/14/mi6-mi5>.
- [11] McIntyre, Ben. *A Spy Among Friends: Kim Philby and the Great Betrayal*. London: Crown Publishers, 2014, p. 242.
- [12] *Ibid*, p. 277.