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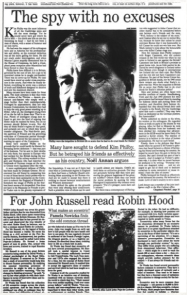
A TALE OF TWO SPIES

> "The man I trusted most, and my best friend, was a Russian spy. Try to imagine how that might feel. You could say I don't know who to trust anymore."

Damian Lewis as MI6 officer Nicholas Elliott in A Spy Among Friends



The spy with no excuses

Many have sought to defend Kim Philby. But he betrayed his friends as effectively as his country, Noël Annan argues

For John Russell read Robin Hood

What makes an eccentric? Pamela Nowicka finds the odd common thread

The shocking revelations about Philby's decades spent as a KGB double agent have made headline news since his exposure in 1963

A SPY UNMASKED

In March 1963 one name dominated newspaper headlines – Kim Philby.

The former MI6 officer, who had been one of the highest-ranking members of the British Intelligence Services, had finally been unmasked as a traitor, a double agent working for the KGB. For 23 years he had been passing the nation's most critical secrets to his paymasters in Moscow in one of the most shocking scandals in spy history.

CLICK ON THE ARROWS TO READ MORE

← →

Here we explore Philby and Elliott's families, formative years, politics and psychology, their complex relationship and the breathtaking deception that ultimately tore them apart...

Spies like us

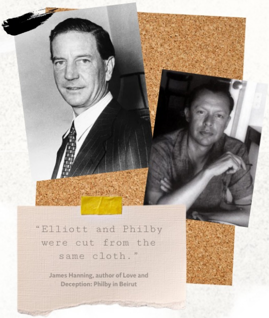
When they met at MI6 in 1940, it was unsurprising that Kim Philby and Nicholas Elliott became such fast friends. Their backgrounds were strikingly similar; both had attended top public schools – Elliott at Eton and Philby at Westminster. Both went on to study at Trinity College, Cambridge, with Philby graduating in 1933, the year Elliott arrived.

They were establishment men, children of Empire, 'good chaps' and the beneficiaries of an old boy network that stretched from the 'right' schools through the leafy quads of Oxbridge up to the highest echelons of British Intelligence. And the currency of this network was a quiet word in the ear, an assurance that, whoever it was, they were 'one of us'.

"Because I had been born into the British governing class, because I knew a lot of people of an influential standing, I knew that they would never get too tough with me," Philby admitted later.

It was that shared culture, and what he assumed to be their common values, that made it unthinkable for Elliott that his affable, funny friend could, in reality, be a ruthless traitor.

So how did these two men – so similar on paper – end up so diametrically opposed?

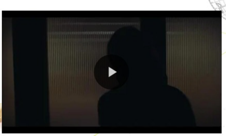


"Elliott and Philby were cut from the same cloth."

James Hanning, author of Love and Deception: Philby in Beirut

Philby and Elliott came from the same privileged circles, from public schools to their alma mater Cambridge, to the members clubs they frequented

The 1930s was a time of extreme global conflict, from the brutality of the Spanish Civil War to Hitler's terrifying rise in Germany



A time of extremes

The global politics of the late 1930s that birthed Philby and Elliott, both at Cambridge and then as they pursued their early careers, were febrile, tense and complicated. The Great War had ended over a decade earlier, but the peace was fragile, and the feeling that a new, even greater conflagration was just around the corner was palpable.

The UK establishment watched Hitler's rise in Germany with alarm. And during the Spanish Civil War, over 4000 young British men joined to fight against the fascists. "The 1930s was a time of intense intellectual ferment," says Ben Macintyre. "It was quite understandable to see communism as the only bulwark against the march of fascism. The communists seemed to be on the right side of history to many young people."

But domestic right-wing movements were also growing. In 1932 Sir Oswald Mosley had founded the British Union Of Fascists, finding some supporters among the disenfranchised working classes and sections of the press. At one point it boasted 50,000 members.

This politically incendiary atmosphere was reflected in the debates that raged in the bars and common rooms of Cambridge. It was a time when many young people found themselves picking sides. And by the time they met at MI6, although outwardly their politics appeared to align, Philby and Elliott had radically different visions of the world they wanted to make.

Polar politics

Both Philby and Elliott were appalled by the rise of fascism, and implacably committed to the defeat of Hitler. But their core beliefs, their political souls, were polar opposites. For Elliott, fascism was to be triumphed over by the democratic, liberal values of the western powers. For Philby, these were part, if not all, of the problem.

+ THE YOUNG RADICAL

At Cambridge, Philby met Donald Mclean and Anthony Burgess who would later become part of the Spy Ring

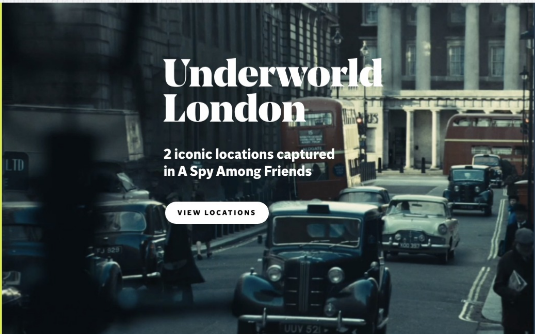
+ RECRUITED BY RUSSIA

Baptist College
Regent's Park
N.W.
Botan. Gart.
Inner Circle
St. Catharine's Hosp.
Outer Circle

In 1934 Philby met a man called 'Otto' in Regents Park – he was a recruiter for Soviet intelligence

+ THE ESTABLISHMENT MAN

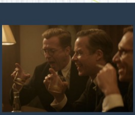
After witnessing the shocking militaristic display at Hitler's birthday celebrations in 1939, Elliott joined MI6



Underworld London

2 iconic locations captured in A Spy Among Friends

VIEW LOCATIONS



A MEETING OF MINDS AT MI6

The details of Philby and Elliott's first meeting are lost to history. Perhaps it was in the bar nestled deep within the MI6 building. Both enjoyed pink gin, cricket and dirty jokes. "They spoke the same language," Elliott's son, Mark, revealed. "Kim was as close a friend as my father had." However, it was a friendship based on a monumental deception.

The betrayal begins

From the moment he arrived at MI6, Philby started his campaign of deceit, pumping his fellow officers – including Elliott – for information and sending it straight to his KGB handlers in Moscow.

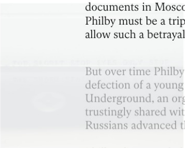
Philby: I spied for Russia rom 1933

"Every evening I left the office with a big briefcase full of reports which I had written myself, full of files taken out of the actual documents, out of the actual archives," Philby recalled later.

"I was to hand them to my Soviet contact in the evening. The next morning I would get the file back, the contents having been photographed, take them back early... and put the files back in

Philby began his campaign of betrayal from as soon as he joined MI6, leaking crucial documents and information to the KGB

The Russians couldn't believe their luck. In fact, for a while, they didn't. Poring over the documents in Moscow, they became convinced Philby must be a triple agent. How could MI6 allow such a betrayal, right under their noses?

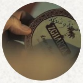


But over time Philby's loyalties became clear. In 1943 Elliott triumphantly supervised the defection of a young German agent Eric Vermehren, who had information on the Catholic Underground, an organisation opposed to both Hitler and Stalin. The list of names Elliott trustingly shared with Philby were immediately handed over to the KGB. Later on, as the Russians advanced through Germany, hundreds, possibly thousands of Catholics were shot.

Philby also upended 'Operation Valuable' – an attempt by the CIA and MI6 to infiltrate Albania (then under the rule of communist dictator Enver Hoxha) with counterrevolutionary forces. Philby both masterminded and oversaw the operation, keeping the KGB informed throughout. To the bafflement of the intelligence agencies, and despite repeated attempts, almost all the men sent on the mission were captured and shot. Including their families, and those identified as collaborators, the death toll may have been in the thousands.

Tricks of the trade

4 key spy techniques used by the agents in A Spy Among Friends

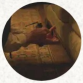


DEAD DROP

Delivering info via unremarkable objects: such as the KGB message jotted on a beer mat Philby receives in Beirut

COVERT COMMS

Philby receives a secret message written in invisible ink on a cigarette packet which he has to heat up to read



SURVEILLANCE

Bugging abounds, with Elliott and Philby both recorded via devices hidden in everyday objects around their homes

TAILING

Elliott surreptitiously follows Philby to a meeting with a mystery woman when some of his behaviour is called into question

DOSSIER

An easy target?

✕

A fatal friendship

Superficially, Philby and Elliott seemed a natural match. But under the surface, was there something deeper and darker drawing them together?

Elliott was smitten the moment he met Philby. “He had an ability to inspire loyalty and affection. He was… instinctively liked,” he recalled later. But Elliott also had a secret vulnerability. Since Eton, Elliott and Basil Fisher had shared that kind of intense friendship, bordering on romance, public schoolboys sometimes enjoyed. Then, in 1940, tragedy struck. Fisher, a fighter pilot, engaged with German planes over Southern England. His aircraft was hit, and his parachute engulfed in flames.

Just weeks later, Elliott met Philby, who effortlessly slid into his life, a welcome balm to his grief. “Elliott didn't make friends easily – he used jokes and cricket to keep the world at bay,” says Macintyre. “Philby penetrated that. Elliott quickly transferred his love for Fisher to Philby. And Philby would have no compunction about exploiting this.”

The death of Elliott's closest friend Basil Fisher made him vulnerable to Philby's attentions

1944

A close call

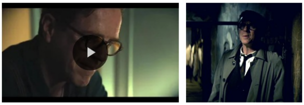
Philby’s cover was almost blown when Istanbul-based Soviet official, Konstantin Volkov, tried to defect. Volkov had a list of KGB agents in the UK – including Philby – and was offering it to MI6 in return for £50,000 and a new identity in Britain. Philby told the KGB the entire Spy Ring was at risk.

Elliott was due to handle the defection, but Philby persuaded MI6 to send him instead, delaying his departure to allow the Russians time to act. By the time Philby arrived, Volkov and his wife had disappeared. In fact they had been kidnapped, drugged, flown to Moscow and were being tortured in the basement of the Lubyanka. They were summarily executed.

CLICK TO EXPLORE THE TIMELINE

Duped? Or duplicitous?

It seems impossible to us now that Elliott could have been so naive. Did he know more than he was letting on? Was it all a carefully laid trap? Or did he simply not want to consider the awful possibility that he had been Philby’s dupe all these years?



Was Elliott really unaware of Philby's activities across the 23 years they spent together as colleagues and friends? Or did he just not want to know?

"You're dealing with a very small, tightly-knit club here," says Ben Macintyre. They're a tribe and they didn't want to look at this. It was: 'Oh well, he probably dabbled with communism at some point, there's no evidence and who hasn't?' But really, I think Elliott had been fighting off suspicion since 1955. At some level, in his heart, he knew – between suspected and knew. That's why when the moment comes, it's both appalling and a relief. It destroys Elliott, it destroys Philby, their whole world comes apart. But there's a relief in that sudden clarity."

By the early 1960s, Philby was enjoying a pleasant existence in Beirut, being paid both as a journalist and by MI6. But he had other irons in the fire. He had, perhaps inevitably given his nature, resumed spying for the KGB shortly after his arrival.

The good times weren't to last. The capture of spy George Blake and a series of defections, including KGB officer Anatoly Golistyn, reignited MI5's suspicions about Philby, which had never truly been quelled. Then the dam broke. A woman called Flora Solomon came forward saying Philby had attempted to recruit her for Moscow shortly after leaving Cambridge.

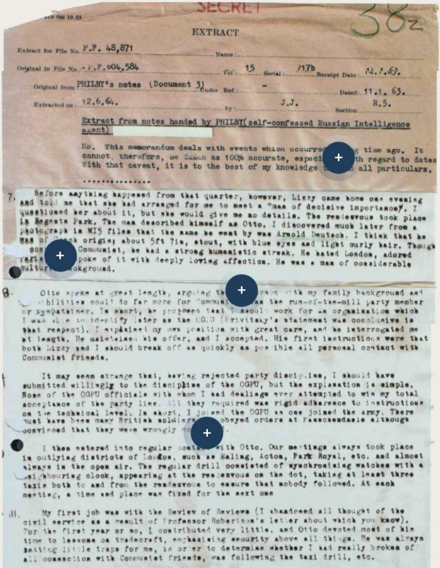
Finally, Elliott was convinced. Philby had been lying to him, to everyone, from the start. When MI5 said it intended to act, Elliott demanded that he be the one to confront Philby.

So, in January 1963, Nicholas Elliott sat opposite his friend of over twenty years in a tatty Beirut flat. Perhaps he thought of the pink gins they had swigged, the cricket they had watched, the jokes they had exchanged. "We've known each other forever, so if you don't mind I'll get straight to the point," Elliott said. "And I'm afraid it's not very pleasant."

A SPY AMON
FRIENDS

Anatomy of a confession

Ben Macintyre deciphers the key revelations in Philby's 1963 confession to Elliott



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EXTRACT

Extract for File No. P.F. 48,871 Name:
Original in File No. P.F. 604,584 Vol: 15 Serial: /17b Receipt Date: 14.1.63.
Original from PHILBY's notes (Document 3) Under Ref.: - Dated: 11.1. 63.
Extracted on: 12.6.64. by: J.J. Section: R.5.

Extract from notes handed by PHILBY(self-confessed Russian Intelligence agent) [redacted]

NB. This memorandum deals with events which occurre[illegible] time ago. It cannot, therefore, be taken as 100% accurate, especi[illegible]th regard to dates With that caveat, it is to the best of my knowledge [illegible] all particulars.

....

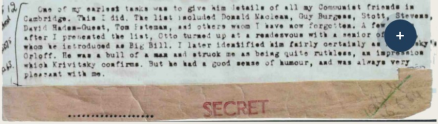
7. Before anything happened from that quarter, however, Lizzy came home one evening and told me that she had arranged for me to meet a "man of decisive importance". I questioned her about it, but she would give me no details. The rendesvous took place in Regents Park. The man described himself as Otto. I discovered much later from a photograph in MI5 files that the name he went by was Arnold Deutsch. I think that he was of Czech origin; about 5ft 7in, stout, with blue eyes and light curly hair. Though com[illegible] Communist, he had a strong humanistic streak. He hated London, adored Paris [illegible]poke of it with deeply loving affection. He was a man of considerable cultur[illegible]ckground.

8. Otto spoke at great length, arguing th[illegible]rson with my family background and [illegible]bilities could do far more for Communi[illegible]an the run-of-the-mill party member or sympathiser. In short, he propoeed that I should work for an organisation which I was able to identify later as the OGPU (Krivitsky's statement was conclusive in that respect). I explained my own position with great care, and he interrogated me at length. He maintained his offer, and I accepted. His first instructions were that both Lizzy and I should break off as quickly as possible all personal contact with Communist friends.

It may seem strange that, having rejected party discipline, I should have submitted willingly to the discipline of the OGPU, but the explanation is simple. None of the OGPU officials with whom I had dealings ever attempted to win my total acceptance of the party line. All they required was rigid adherence to instructions on the technical level. In short, I joined the OGPU as one joined the army. There must have been many British soldiers [illegible] obeyed orders at Passchendaele although convinced that they were wrongly co[illegible].

I then entered into regular conta[illegible] with Otto. Our meetings always took place in outlying districts of London, such as Ealing, Acton, Park Royal, etc. and almost always in the open air. The regular drill consisted of synchronising watches with a neighbouring clock, appearing at the rendezvous on the dot, taking at least three taxis both to and from the rendezvous to ensure that nobody followed. At each meeting, a time and place was fixed for the next one

11. My first job was with the Review of Reviews (I abandoned all thought of the civil service as a result of Professor Robertson's letter about which you know). For the first year or so, I contributed very little, and Otto devoted most of his time to lessons on tradecraft, emphasising security above all things. He was always setting little traps for me, in order to determine whether I had really broken off all connection with Communist friends, was following the taxi drill, etc.



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One of my earliest tasks was to give him details of all my Communist friends in Cambridge. This I did. The list included Donald Maclean, Guy Burgess, Stott, Stevens, David Haden-Guest, Tom Bateman, and others whom I have now forgotten. A few after I presented the list, Otto turned up at a rendezvous with a senior of whom he introduced as Big Bill. I later identified him fairly certainly as sky's Orloff. He was a bull of a man and struck me as being quite ruthless, an impression which Krivitsky confirms. But he had a good sense of humour, and was always very pleasant with me.

SECRET

> “The fatal conceit of most spies is to believe they are loved, in a relationship between equals, and not merely manipulated.”

Ben Macintyre, Author of A Spy Among Friends

Aftermath

The Philby affair sent shockwaves through the British and US intelligence agencies. The atmosphere of easy cooperation was replaced by suspicion and distrust.

Another casualty was James Angleton. Always prone to paranoia, he vanished into an interior maze of exotic conspiracy theories. If MI6 had been so completely penetrated, who was to say the CIA hadn’t? Forced out in 1974, he spent his retirement tending his orchids, before his death in 1987.

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← →

James Angleton, the CIA chief who had fallen for Philby's charms, never recovered from the fallout after the Spy Ring was exposed

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