
Desmond Bristow with
Bill Bristow

A GAME OF MOLES
The deceptions of an MI6 officer
292pp. Little, Brown. £18.99.
0 316 90335 3

Nigel West

THE ILLEGALS
The double lives of the Cold War's most
secret agents
254pp. Hodder and Stoughton. £19.99.
0 340 57247 7

In the mid-1980s, the "Spycatcher affair" revealed much about official attitudes towards the British intelligence community. At very considerable expense, including the public embarrassment in an Australian court of the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Robert (now Lord) Armstrong, the British Government failed to prevent the publication of memoirs written by a disenchanted former employee of the Security Service, MI5. Peter Wright's motives in writing an account of his time in the intelligence world were, apparently, both practical and patriotic. Badly treated in terms of the pension he received on retirement, Wright was able financially to exploit his experiences. But, more importantly perhaps, his intention was to "set the record straight" about the work of MI6 and to alert the wider public to the historic and continuing political threat (as then it was perceived) of the Soviet Union to the "Free World". Among other matters, Wright alleged that Sir Roger Hollis, the one-time head of MI5, had been a Soviet "mole".

The effect of the affair - which emphasized a number of difficulties arising from the historic situation of Britain's security and intelligence agencies - was to render the British intelligence community both more and less open to public view. The flimsy fiction, which British governments had maintained for most of the century, that the intelligence organizations MI5 and the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) did not actually exist, and which was ludicrously exposed during the Australian court proceedings, has been abandoned. The Security Service Act of 1989, dealing with MI5, and the currently proposed legislation covering MI6 and the Government Communications Headquarters at Cheltenham, places these agencies on a proper statutory basis. For the first time, the heads of all three organizations have publicly been identified, and some account of their work has officially been published. At the same time, however, the old official secrets legislation, which had become largely discredited for its "blanket" coverage of *any* information emanating from government, has been sharpened up, particularly with respect to intelligence matters. The 1989 Official Secrets Act specifically lays down that "a person who is or has been . . . a member of the security or intelligence services . . . is guilty of an offence if without lawful authority he discloses any information, document or other article relating to security or intelligence which is or has been in his possession by virtue of his position as a member of any of those services".

The enforcement of this law would clearly have prevented the publication of *Spycatcher*, in Britain at least. It is, therefore, interesting that Desmond Bristow's MI6 memoirs, *A Game of Moles*, should now have been published. One of the arguments advanced against *Spycatcher* was that the information contained in a book written

The not-so secret world

KEITH JEFFERY

by a former serving intelligence officer was more credible (or, from the government's point of view, less deniable) than anything published by non-practitioners, such as Chapman Pincher, Anthony Verrier or "Nigel West", however well informed. Bristow fits the Wright model. He joined MI6 in 1940 and stayed with the organization until about 1954. Like Wright, Bristow bemoans the poor treatment given to intelligence personnel, not least to Wright himself, whom Bristow notes "had worked conscientiously, and applied himself wholeheartedly to the security of the country". Bristow also suspects Roger Hollis of having been implicated in the Burgess-Maclean affair. He remains convinced, too, of the real threat posed by the Soviet Union during the Cold War, when the Communist infection "permeated the minds of a great percentage of academics, journalists and the so-called intelligentsia of Western Europe".

Bristow spent most of his time in MI6 attached to the Iberian Section. At the start, his immediate boss was Kim Philby, whom Bristow admits to having never truly suspected of treason. There is much interesting information about the wartime activities of MI6, and Bristow's work in Gibraltar, Algiers, Lisbon and Paris. Even before the recent relaxation of the secrecy surrounding MI6, accounts of its wartime work had become available, both in individual memoirs and the official history of intelligence during the Second World War. Where the Bristow book breaks new ground is in its detailed treatment of the peacetime work of the service. In 1947, Bristow became head of the MI6 station in Madrid, with cover as a Second Secretary of Chancery. His field section included officers at Gibraltar, Tangiers, Lisbon, Barcelona and Bilbao, whose principal duties were to collect general political intelligence as well as information about German-owned assets in the region. Bristow discusses the recruitment of agents, contacts with Spanish internal security, and liaison with American colleagues. He also describes the impact on the Service of the Burgess and Maclean defections, and his continuing contacts with Kim Philby, who turned up in Spain as a journalist for several months in the early 1950s. Bristow fin-

ished his full-time career with MI6 back in London at the head of a section dealing with matters of strategic trade. After he retired, he joined two ex-MI5 men in a security organization formed by the De Beers company to deal with diamond smuggling. Confirming the widely held assumption that people never fully leave the secret



Kim Philby in his Moscow flat

world, he was briefly re-engaged by MI6 in 1958 to help set up liaison with the new head of the Moroccan secret service.

A Game of Moles contains lively sections of almost total recall, no doubt a useful trait in an intelligence officer, though the very detailed descriptions ("I sat playing with a cigarette, Trevor fiddled with his glasses, we were all looking at each other. I glanced over to Kim..." sort

of thing) do not always inspire historical confidence. On other occasions, Bristow admits to his memory failing him, and there is some information which he refuses to divulge, such as the name of his contact at Spanish internal security, or that of an old (female) friend from Cambridge University days, an archivist and MI6 "senior agent" who worked in the Passport Control Office, and was "one of the most successful agent operators in Madrid".

One of the strengths of Desmond Bristow's book is that the purpose and function of his intelligence work is clearly explained. It is a weakness of Nigel West's *The Illegals* that the meaning of the "vast world-wide series of interlocking clandestine networks" set up by the Soviet Union is swamped by a plethora of details about their methods. This is a spy "procedural", with the emphasis very much on questions of "who, where, when and how". There is not so much "why" or "what", and, although West does provide some information about the kinds of intelligence gathered by this army of agents, there is very little discussion concerning the use to which the material was put. In the end, the book does not tell us very much more (although in very great detail) than that boys (and quite a lot of girls too) like to play at secret games of one sort or another. The significance of these networks is consistently assumed in the book. The "scope of Soviet espionage" in the USA in the early 1950s, writes West, "brought home to the American public the very real threat posed by the Russian intelligence service". But, curiously, this view is challenged in the foreword, provided by an actual KGB officer, Major Vladimir Kuzichkin. He writes that "until recently the media in the West has exaggerated the achievements of the illegals run by the KGB and GRU" (Soviet military intelligence). "If we examine specific cases, we find that the illegals achieved rather less than has often been claimed for them." Now that would be an interesting theme for a book: both to evaluate the work of these "illegals" and to examine critically why their alleged achievements have been overestimated. In the meantime, we have "games" of secrecy, with which West himself colludes. It is no particular "secret" that "Nigel West" is a pen-name of the Conservative MP Rupert Allason. The information is provided in the press release accompanying his volume. But nowhere in the book, or on the dust-jacket, is there any suggestion that "Nigel West" is a pseudonym. Like the "illegals" he investigates, Allason goes forward into the wider world with bogus documentation.

Subversion and sabotage

JOHN COLVIN

Peter Wilkinson and John
Bright Astley

GUBBINS AND SOE
254pp. Leo Cooper. £18.95.
0 85052 002 9

In 1919, a young Gunner Captain named Colin Gubbins, who had already won an MC in France, became aide-de-camp to General Ironside, commanding the Archangel Expeditionary force against the Bolsheviks. Later that year, after a course in guerrilla warfare, he took part in operations against the Irish Republicans in Dublin. In 1939, as a French and Russian speaker, he was posted to Section D of the Secret Intelligence Service responsible for insurgency in occupied countries. He accompanied the British Military Mission to Warsaw, handing over to Peter Wilkinson, an author of this book, in order to fight in the Norwegian campaign.

The creation of the Auxiliary Units, a secret guerilla force to operate in the UK after a German invasion, was his next task. It ended when the threat of invasion passed. He was then sec-

onded as a Brigadier to the Special Operations Executive (SOE), which he eventually led, under Hugh Dalton, Minister of Economic Warfare, whom Churchill had instructed to set Europe ablaze. Alexander Cadogan said that Dalton "sometimes came nearer to setting Whitehall ablaze".

Gubbins and SOE is not just an account of SOE's glamorous activities. It deals, of course, with the Polish and Czech undergrounds already existing in 1939, and is most moving about Anglo-Polish misunderstanding. It lists SOE's brilliant hijacking of sequestered British ships carrying ball-bearings; events in Hungary, Yugoslavia and Romania, including the overthrow of Prince Paul; the Iron Gates and other Balkan operations; the heroic Jean Moulin; the cutting-out of enemy vessels; the failures in Holland, Belgium and France; the attack on the heavy-water plant at Norsk Hydro, and a lot more.

It speaks also of the assassination attempt on Heydrich; of the approach from Adam Trott and the German conspirators, Lindemann's extraordinary "Moon is Down"; the destruction of the Gorgopotamos Bridge; days of delay imposed on German divisions after Overlord by SOE operations; the tragic Warsaw Rising; not to mention the political dilemma of Yugoslav operations,

Tito versus Mihailovic, and of Greece between ELAS and EDES. It does not neglect the intelligence dividend, especially on V2 rockets, from Resistance sources.

The book lucidly demonstrates the division of priorities for SOE between Resistance Groups and Guerillas, and Subversion and Sabotage. The authors, incidentally, are illuminating on the stagnant climate for Resistance in 1940, and the improvement after 1942 with US entry into the war, Alexander's victories, and Stalingrad.

The problems confronting SOE in Whitehall and abroad would confront any "temporary" organization dependent on other bodies and with few resources of its own, whose activities cut across the great Departments of State, Foreign Office, Admiralty, War Office, Air Ministry, Secret Intelligence Service and the GHQs of overseas Commands. (Nor were the difficulties eased by prejudice, unwise local initiatives or undisciplined ambition.) Even the Prime Minister on occasion threatened to close SOE down.

But in all the circumstances, a Service which produced Monty Woodhouse, Paddy Leigh-Fermor, Xan Fielding, Billy MacLean, David Smiley and hundreds of anonymous heroes, reflects honour on a modest leader, to whom, although knighted and laden with foreign honours, the substantive rank of Major-General was denied. At least the demise of SOE after the war has not – as the Falklands and Gulf wars demonstrated – been synonymous with an end to thought on the subject of Special Operations.