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Topics: Are Spies Needed in Our Apollo Age?

By JOHN LE CARRÉ

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The news these days from the KGB headquarters in Moscow's Dzerzinsky Square is not all good. A sense of unease is abroad, recruitment figures are falling off, a general attitude of "why bother?" extends beyond the legitimate needs of constructive self-criticism. It behooves all of us who share a protective regard for our older secret services to pause and examine the causes of this baisse in Soviet espionage morale.

Originally, we were inclined to put it down to the return of poor Kim Philby. It is an old truth that the man who distinguishes himself in the field is received with mixed feelings back at base. In Kim's case the license of the open spaces, the free-and-easy, be-your-own-master attitude which had been such a hit with the bourgeois-nepotist circles of decadent Whitehall were bound to collide with the staid, homey atmosphere of Moscow.

Well, it's old history now. Within a month of Kim's return, the worst had happened: promotion ladders upset, leave rosters scrapped, secretaries in tears, empty bottles in the secret waste disposer, wild talk about "Old-School-Tie Stalinism."

Hardly surprising then in all

this upset that the real source of rank-and-file dismay was overlooked. Not until last Christmas Day in fact did the truth come out: it was not Kim Philby but the American astronauts who were the cause of this general sense of rootlessness. It was they, with their sophisticated spyglasses, who had walked, or floated, roughshod through the exclusive preserves of the Secret Services; it was Captain Borman who had sinned against the traditions of the Espionage Guild.

KGB and CIA

A few things need to be said straight away. The KGB is not against science. In certain fields—I need only to refer to the radioactive gun, the cyanide bullet or the wire-free, all-plastic, nondetectable bug—the KGB has actually pioneered scientific advances which have found useful application in nonmilitary fields.

Nor is the KGB obsessively anti-American. In the past it has been perfectly ready to share both agents and know-how with the CIA, or to engage in heartening propaganda battles to the mutual advantage of the American and Soviet book trades. If then the KGB is all for that kind of give and take, whence the present anxiety?

The concern with aeronautical science is not new. Ever

since the first U-2 overflights, rumblings of discontent have been heard in the junior dormitories of Dzerzinsky Square. "What will become of us?" the younger ones whispered after lights out, "if science can do twice the job in half the time?" Only swift action saved the day. The public humiliation of Captain Powers kept morale intact. "Science may put them up there," the young ones laughed, "but she damn soon brings them down again."

To every disease, they assured one another, Mother Nature had produced her antidote. The same, alas, could not be said of the Apollo. That Christmas Eve, science had got them up there and science had kept them there; and done it moreover with the frankness, the clean-limbed, open-hearted, nothing-to-conceal insouciance of an uncoded telegram.

What the Swedes had done for sex, the American astronauts had done for intelligence.

Happily, as every Marxist knows, it is history which in the end provides the great lessons and the great comforts. Man's yearning for intelligence springs from quite a different well than his yearning for truth. Spies will always have their place, if only to provide the romance of inaccuracy and a substitute for the hard grind of logical analysis.

No one knows as well as the

intelligence officer how to treat his experts. Sorge gave them Operation Barbarossa; his predictions went unheard. Cicero gave them D-Day; they dismissed him as a fraud. The code-breakers gave them Pearl Harbor, and received equally short shrift.

Biblical Espionage

Of the twelve spies sent to the land of Canaan by Moses, only Joshua and Caleb were in favor of immediate occupation. The other ten confirmed the presence of milk and honey but painted a gruesome picture of the perils of invasion. Moses, like many other consumers of intelligence, fell back on intuition, and chose wrong. Joshua and Caleb were stoned, and the Israelites walked another forty years in the wilderness for their greater spiritual improvement.

Whatever else those astronauts got out of the Old Testament, I hope they recognized that the fallibility of man has long been one of the most elegant instruments of divine purpose. As long as that is the case, they can sleep easy in Dzerzinsky Square. And in one or two other places we've heard of.

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