

Ian Mitchell's Russia-related BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

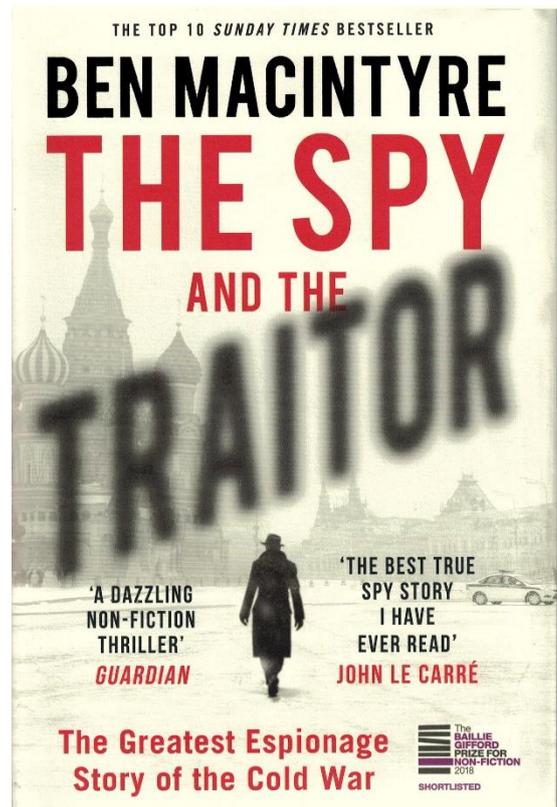
37 – *Spy and Traitor*
(18 March 2019)

THE SPY AND THE TRAITOR – the Greatest Espionage Story of the Cold War

Author: Ben Macintyre

Publisher: [Penguin Random House UK](#), 2018
(available on *Amazon*, [click on cover image for link](#))

Descriptor: Story of Oleg Gordievsky, the KGB agent turned spy for Britain, whose information influenced the West's handling of the Cold War in crucial ways during the 1970s and '80s.



RusRoL relevance: *Fascinating about STATUS and how it destroys the openness to change and new ideas of those addicted to it. In practical terms, in the long run it damages intelligence in both human and organisational terms.*

Reason to read: Wonderful book which tells a gripping story about vitally important events. Arguably Gordievsky did more than any other single non-government individual to bring about the demise of the Soviet Union. He was ideologically traumatised by having seen the Berlin Wall erected in 1961, and motivated to do something in response by the experience of living in Denmark in the later 1960s and Britain in the 1970s. He understood the stupidification of society when received wisdom acquires the STATUS of unquestionable authority, which (as with political correctness today) paralyses free inquiry and creative thought.

Main talking points: STATUS – Macintyre gives some remarkable examples of how hierarchy wrongly conceived can turn people into either gamers of the system they are supposed to be serving or jealous pole-greasers mesmerised by their own organisational altitude. To give an example of each:

1. **Gamers:** The KGB *resident* at the London Embassy in the early 1980s, Arkadi Guk, understood one of the main rules of STATUS, namely that the boss is not so much an employer as a modern type of feudal lord. He is the fount of wisdom and truth, as well as the protector of his servants underlings and the dispenser of justice between them. To contradict one's liege lord is to attack his STATUS. Inferiors should not tell such people what is true, but what they *want to hear*. That is why hierarchies eventually fail. They become impervious to surprise. They cannot compete in

terms of evolutionary adaptability with organisations structured on more market-orientated (i.e. CONTRACT-based) lines, in which healthy doses of truth are administered by the day or the hour, or even by the minute in cases like the stock exchange. Here is one example of corporate self-deception (in 1984): “Arkadi Guk scorned his bosses back at the Centre, but rushed to fulfil their demands, however ludicrous. When he heard on the BBC that a cruise missile exercise had taken place at Greenham Common, the *resident* hastened to manufacture a report indicating that he had known about the test beforehand. When mass anti-nuclear demonstrations took place in Britain, Guk claimed credit by insisting, falsely, that the KGB’s ‘active measures’ had prompted the protests. Two suicides of Soviet citizens in London, one in the trade delegation and the other the wife of an official, thrust Guk’s suspicions into overdrive. He sent the bodies back to Moscow, with orders to establish whether they had been poisoned, which the KGB scientists obediently confirmed – even though one had hanged himself and the other had thrown herself off a balcony.” (pp. 187-8)

2. Pole-greasers: Macintyre gives an amusing example of this principle in operation at Balmoral Castle, the Queen’s holiday home in Scotland and the headquarters of STATUS in the Highlands. All Prime Ministers have to undertake an annual Hajj to see Her Majesty there in a pseudo-feudal setting. Margaret Thatcher loathed the whole performance, and did not care much for the Queen either, it seems. She refused to stay in the Castle and instead holed up in a small cottage in the grounds where she could get on with running the country. One day in 1985, disaster struck in Moscow and 10 Downing Street needed to get her official, but *immediate*, authorisation to put into effect the long-planned operation to exfiltrate Gordievsky who had been summoned back to the Centre for “consultations”. A greedy American weirdo within the CIA, Aldrich Ames, had exposed his treachery to the Soviets. Gordievsky’s work had been so secret that nobody in government even knew the spy’s name. Even Mrs Thatcher knew him only as “Mr Collins”. Her Private Secretary, the ex-diplomat Charles Powell, had received the request in London for authorisation, but he could not respond without getting the Prime Minister’s agreement *in person*. He travelled to Aberdeenshire incognito but when he got to Balmoral he could not find her. “Thatcher was housed in a bothy in the grounds, where she spent her days with her red boxes and a lone secretary, as far as possible from the royal world of bagpipes, wellingtons and corgis.” (p. 270) There was not a minute to waste if the most valuable spy of the Cold War era was to be saved from the KGB. When Powell arrived at the gatehouse, he could not get the attention of the equerry on duty as he “was on the telephone, conducting a high-level discussion on a matter of considerable royal concern: the Queen wanted to borrow the Queen Mother’s videotape recorder in order to watch *Dad’s Army*... Powell tried to interrupt the conversation, but was silenced with a cold look... For the next twenty minutes, while Powell tapped his foot and looked at his watch, the equerry continued to discuss the royal videotape recorder, its precise whereabouts and the need to move it from one room in the Castle to another.” (p. 271) STATUS advertises itself by keeping “little people” waiting. “Finally, after more delay, he was ushered into the presence of the Queens’ Private Secretary, Sir Philip Moore, later Baron Moore of Wolvercote, GCB, GCVO, CMG, QSO and PC, and chief keeper of the Queen’s secrets.... “Why do you want to see Mrs Thatcher?” he asked.

‘I can’t tell you,’ said Powell. ‘It’s secret.’

Moore’s sense of propriety was piqued. ‘We can’t have people wandering around the Balmoral estate without knowing why they are here.’

‘Well, you are going to have to, because I need to see the Prime Minister. Now.’

‘Why do you need to see her?’

‘I can’t tell you that.’

‘You have to tell me.’

‘I don’t.’

‘Whatever you tell the Prime Minister she will tell the Queen and Her Majesty will tell me. So please tell me your business.’

‘No. If the Prime Minister wishes to tell the Queen and the Queen wishes to tell you, that is for them to decide. But I am not able to tell you.’

The Royal courtier fumed...

Powell got to his feet. ‘I am going to go and look for the Prime Minister.’

With the injured air of a man who has witnessed an intolerable display of bad manners, Moore summoned a footman who led Powell out of a side door, into the damp garden, and down a path to what appeared to be ‘a sort of garden shed’. Margaret Thatcher was propped up in bed surrounded by papers.” (p. 272)

Incidental interest:

1. Motivation: Gordievsky “was undoubtedly rebelling against his father, an obedient, guilt-ridden KGB yes-man. [He wore his KGB uniform during all his waking hours, even on weekends.] A secretly religious grandmother, a quietly non-conformist mother, and a brother who died [of drink] in the service of the KGB at the age of thirty-nine, may all have exerted a subconscious influence, driving him towards mutiny. He had little respect for most of his colleagues, KGB time-servers, ignorant, lazy and on the fiddle, who seemed to win promotion by political manoeuvring and toadying.” (p. 65) The last sentence is also a good description of a hierarchy in the process of degeneration due to long-unchallenged STATUS.
2. Emotivation: “All spies need to feel they are loved... Spies want to feel wanted, part of a secret community, rewarded, trusted, cherished.... There has never been a successful spy who did not feel that the connection with his handler was something more profound than a marriage of convenience, politics or profit: a true, enduring communion, amid the lies and deception.” (p. 65)

Surprising points:

1. Michael Foot was once on the KGB payroll—known in the Lubyanka as “Agent BOOT”! When named by a journalist in 1995, he sued *The Sunday Times* and won substantial damages as the allegation could not then be proved. (pp. 115, 333)
2. Jack Jones, General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, was an even more enthusiastic supporter of communism, and also a paid KGB contact. (p. 115)
3. Perhaps the most surprising general point to come out of this book is just how inefficient the KGB were, and how few agents of any importance they had in Britain after Sir Alec Douglas Home expelled 105 Soviet “diplomats” in 1972, the biggest expulsion of all time in any country.

After that, the KGB treated Britain with considerably more respect. STATUS gives power its due. It is also noticeable how effective MI6 was—but the thought creeps into the reader's head that maybe Macintyre needs to portray it this way if he wants to get information for future books. You never know; it is a world of mirrors.

Thought(s) provoked: Spies perform a very useful function, like short sellers in a free market. They undermine the STATUS of conventionally received wisdom by passing information against the accepted flow. This often means that crises springing from ignorance of the motives, capacities or fears of the other side can be defused. There are many examples in this book.

Spies can also offer useful practical advice, as Gordievsky did to Margaret Thatcher when she went to Chernenko's funeral in Moscow in 1985. Due to what he told her about etiquette at Soviet events of this sort, she was able to behave in a way which gained the respect of the grey cardinals of the Kremlin and made it easier for Gorbachev, the Young Turk, to “do business” with her.

Style: Journalistic

Publishing quality: Good, excellent photographs, especially those illustrating how he escaped.

Author: Ben Macintyre is a columnist for *The Times*. He has written many books about espionage in the twentieth century. He tweets.

Link(s): Macintyre talks interestingly about the Gordievsky story here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Ey5_1-Y-2g

Overall recommendation level: HIGH – as recreational reading



About the reviewer: Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including *Isles of the West* and *The Justice Factory*. He is writing a comparative study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called *Russia and the Rule of Law*—hence the “RusRoL Relevance” section at the top. He can be contacted at: ianbookrec@gmail.com. For other reviews in this series, see [Ian Mitchell's Book Recommendations](#).