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## MI5 and MI6 cover-up of Cambridge spy ring laid bare in archive papers

Agencies engaged in frantic attempts to prevent information about Kim Philby and other spies from being disclosed to public and even to US government



Kim Philby in 1955. Photograph: PA

MI5 and MI6 engaged in a massive effort to cover up the activities of the notorious Cambridge spy ring and avoid hugely embarrassing prosecutions, newly released papers reveal.

The scale of the efforts to smother the unprecedented spy scandal emerges from more than 400 top-secret documents which have been released at the **National Archives** after being suppressed for more than 50 years.

They show in detail how MI5 and MI6, backed up by senior Foreign Office officials, engaged in frantic attempts to prevent any information about Moscow's "magnificent five" spies - Kim Philby, Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean, Sir Anthony Blunt and John Cairncross - from being disclosed to the British public and even to the US government.



The five were contemporaries at Cambridge University in the 1930s, and were attracted to communism mainly because of the Wall Street crash and in opposition to appeasers in the British and other governments during the rise of Hitler. Burgess was at the centre of the ring, all of whom had Soviet controllers based in London.

The files reveal how Philby - a high-ranking British intelligence officer who became a double agent and ultimately defected to Russia - was protected by his MI6 superiors to the end, and how, in episodes rich in irony, Blunt helped MI5 officers investigate Burgess.

Burgess and Maclean fled to France on 25 May 1951 after a tipoff from Philby that the net was closing in on Maclean. The files show how, as the top MI6 man in Washington, Philby was kept closely informed by his bosses in London about the investigation into his fellow spy.

Many years later, the Foreign Office was still deeply worried about the potentially damaging fallout. "We certainly don't want either [Burgess and Maclean] to return" an FO official told his boss, Sir Harold Caccia, in 1962.

One problem was the lack of hard evidence against the two men and the difficulty in prosecuting them if they returned to Britain. The FO told Sir Patrick Reilly, the British ambassador in Moscow: "Defection is not, of course, a crime in English law." One frustrated, unidentified member of the cabinet said Burgess should be warned that if he returned to the UK "he might face a prosecution for homosexuality".

Soon after the escape, Philby told nervous MI5 officers that Burgess had an "incredibly wide range of acquaintances". They included Maynard Keynes, Victor Rothschild, EM Forster, WH Auden, Stephen Spender and Somerset Maugham. The files, many of which are heavily redacted, show they also included Clarissa Churchill, the prime minister's niece, who knew Burgess from her work in the wartime FO.

MI5 intercepted a letter Burgess wrote to her from Moscow in 1956. He said he had written earlier but never posted the letter for fear of embarrassing her. He was writing again to "congratulate you on your marriage" - to Anthony Eden, the foreign secretary.

An increasingly worried MI5 turned to Blunt for help, asking him to write to Burgess pleading with him not to return to Britain.

Burgess was anxious to visit his ailing mother - their warm relationship is reflected in a telegram he wrote in June 1951, apparently sent from Rome, which appears in the files. "Terribly sorry for my silence," it read. "Am now embarking on long Mediterranean holiday. Do forgive. All love. Guy Boy."

MI5 told FO officials worried because of the lack of hard evidence: "We have taken steps to have the idea conveyed to Burgess that if he thinks he could come to this country with impunity he is gravely misinformed."

The result was Blunt's letter to Burgess, dated 27 February 1959, a letter inspired by MI5 but which also served Blunt's interest. "What the outcome of the trial would be is of course a matter of speculation, but on the way the whole story would be raked up again and many of your friends would certainly be called as witnesses, and mud slung in all directions," Blunt wrote.

He added: "As regards myself, I should certainly have to resign one of my jobs and might well lose the other."

In a covering note to the FO, Courtenay Young told the FO: "The job from which Blunt would have to resign is presumably that of surveyor of the Queen's pictures, the other of course refers to his position as director of Courthaulds Institute."

The letter appears to have dismayed Burgess - he had originally recruited Blunt as a spy, and Blunt had got Burgess a job in MI5 when he worked for the security service during the war.

In dissembling perfected by years of betrayal, Philby had earlier distanced himself from Burgess. He told his MI6 superiors he remembered that Burgess "possessed a sunlamp, which he used seldom, if ever, for its normal purpose." Philby added: "On one occasion Burgess mentioned to me that he possessed a camera."

But the government wanted to shove the whole spy affair under the carpet, the files make clear. "If we want to avoid embarrassment, the best course would be to let him slip away," Sir William Strang, the FO's most senior official, told his Whitehall colleagues in December 1952, referring to Philby.

"You should burn this letter after you have read it," the FO told their ambassadors abroad as they described growing suspicions about the Cambridge spies. "I think we should be careful of what we pass on to the Americans," Sir Roger Makins, a senior FO official, told his colleagues. "If the results of this case became public," he wrote, referring to Maclean's post as head of the FO's American department, "it would cause a sensation in the US."

MI5 had suspected Philby - codenamed Peach in the files - ever since he was questioned by the barrister Helenus "Buster" Milmo in November 1951. By 1955 it had gathered what it considered to be convincing evidence against Philby. A contemporary FO file notes that MI6 was engaged in "intensive lobbying" on Philby's behalf.

Sir John Sinclair, the head of MI6, hit back at MI5. "It is entirely contrary to the English tradition for a man to have to prove his innocence even when the prosecution is in possession of hard facts," he wrote. "In a case where the prosecution has nothing but suspicion to go upon, there is even less reason for him, even if he were able to do so, to prove his innocence."

Cairncross, who was forced to resign from the Treasury after notes were discovered in Burgess's flat after the escape, confessed to MI5 in 1964 when he was applying for a job in the US. The files reveal the FO's concern about "publicity" if the UK sought deportation proceedings. No action was taken against him.

An added cause of potential embarrassment, the FO said, was Cairncross's brother Alec's position as chief economic adviser to the government. The government would be seen as employing "someone whose brother was a self-confessed communist spy", noted the cabinet secretary Sir Burke Trend in a minute on 6 March 1964.

Blunt secretly confessed in 1964 after new evidence emerged against him. The Queen was told but he was allowed to keep his post as surveyor of the Queen's pictures until he was outed as a wartime Soviet agent in 1979.

Burgess died in Moscow in 1963; Maclean died there in 1983. Philby was given a job with the Observer and Economist in Beirut. After he was offered immunity from prosecution in 1963 by his old MI6 friend Nicholas Elliott, if he would return to London and confess, he hurriedly left on board a Soviet ship. He died in Moscow in 1988.

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