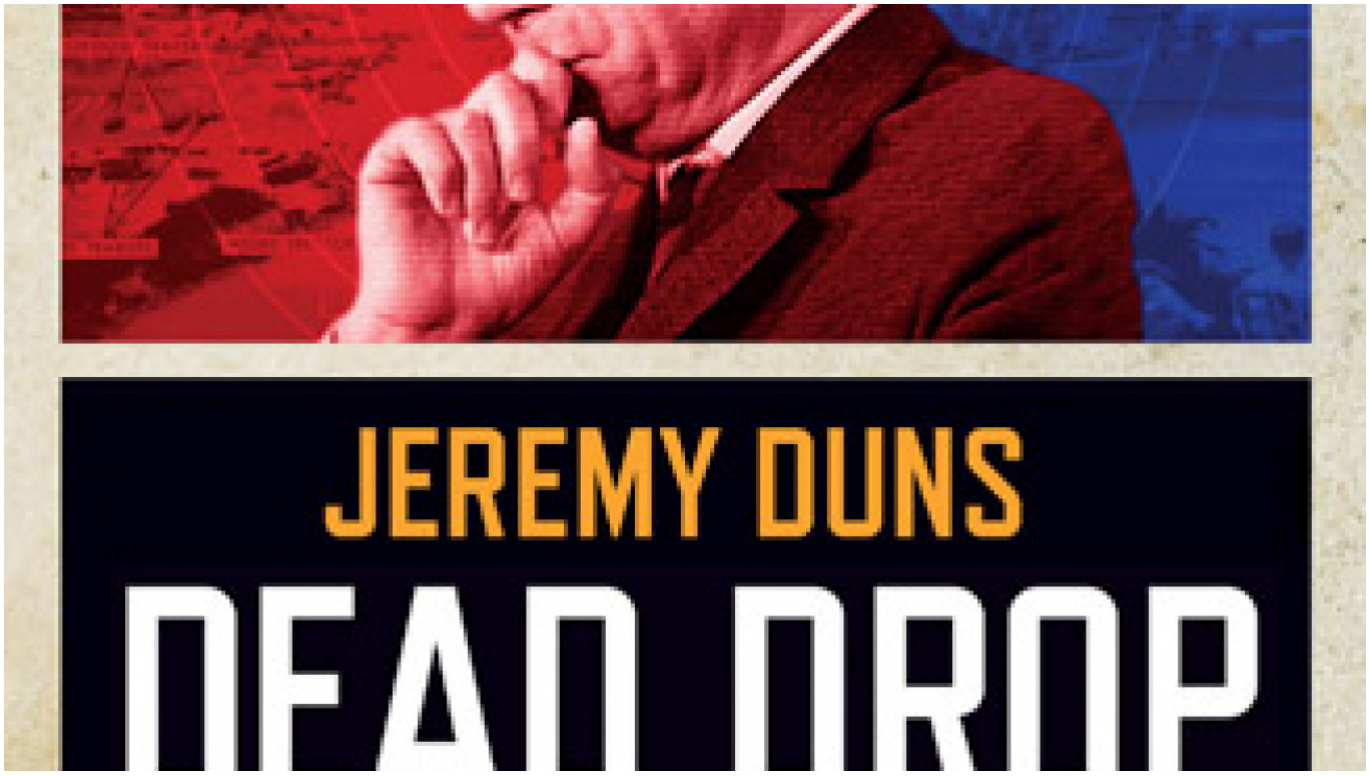
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Moscow's 1960s British Community: KGB Bugs, Friendship With Burgess and a Soviet Spy

By The Moscow Times

March 24, 2015



Duns' book looks at whether Penkovsky was a spy or a planned deception.

An excerpt from "Dead Drop: The True Story of Oleg Penkovsky and the Cold War's Most Dangerous Operation" by Jeremy Duns. Read an interview with the author here.

The CIA's power-brokers had given the operation the green light to continue, but Penkovsky was now back in the Soviet Union and therefore out of direct American control: for the foreseeable future his fate rested in the hands of a few Brits in Moscow, and in particular a 31-year-old mother of three.

The idea to use Janet Chisholm as Penkovsky's contact has been characterized as a "fit of intelligence lunacy" by one writer on Cold War espionage. Apart from the fact that George

Blake had known her in Berlin, she was not a professional intelligence officer and so had never worked in the field, let alone one as intimidating as Moscow. It was home to KGB headquarters, tens of thousands of whose officers roamed the city, many of them under cover conducting surveillance on the small pool of foreign diplomats. Walls in apartments, offices and public locations across the city contained microphones, and entire floors of buildings were given over to command posts listening in to and recording conversations. It was not for nothing that [CIA officer] COMPASS had become paranoid, and that the CIA still didn't have a station there: in 1961, Moscow was perhaps the most dangerous city for espionage in the world.

How to meet Penkovsky in such an environment? The plan depended on simple, brazen double bluff. Shergold had reasoned — and Dick White had agreed with him — that the sheer improbability of using Janet Chishom was the best reason to do so, as the Russians would never consider the possibility. White would later say he had felt that the alternatives of using dead drops and safe houses in Moscow would have been even riskier — especially as, thanks to Blake and other traitors, the Russians knew MI6's "complete order of battle."

Janet Chisholm was no longer in MI6, but as a result of her brief time understood what it meant to work for her country's interests. Born in India, the daughter of a colonel in the Royal Engineers, she was naturally reserved and patient: both good characteristics for intelligence work. She had learned Russian at school and French at Grenoble University, immediately after which she joined MI6 as a secretary, and was posted to the Allied Control Commission in Germany.

Her boss there turned out to be a charming and 'immensely likeable' Roman Catholic Scot. Ruari Chisholm's father had been a Highlander, then a gaucho in Argentina, but had returned to Europe to fight in the First World War, during which he had lost a leg and been imprisoned by the Germans. Ruari became a cold warrior, joining MI6 after studying French and Russian at Cambridge. Berlin had been his first posting, and after marrying Janet he had worked back in London and then in Singapore.

In May 1960 he had arrived in Moscow as Head of Station, working under diplomatic cover as a visa officer at the embassy. He was soon joined by Felicity Stuart, fresh from a three-year assignment at the MI6 station in Paris. After learning Russian from MI6-approved emigres in London, Stuart had been offered the posting in Moscow, which she had jumped at. "I was dying to go there," she says. "I had an aunt who'd had some marvelous experience during the revolution and I wanted to follow in her footsteps."

Stuart, under cover as a junior attache in the embassy, was Chisholm's secretary and cipher clerk. Despite the lack of creature comforts compared to Paris, she remembers her time in the city fondly: there was usually a party on somewhere to stave off the "Moscow Twitch," the feeling of isolation that came from being far from home and under constant surveillance, unable to discuss one's feelings or work with friends or even spouses for fear of being bugged. Stuart was certain her flat was bugged, and fairly sure her car was, too. "I had a little black Austin A30 I used to bomb around in," she says, "but the battery failed shortly after I arrived in the city and a new one was fitted by Russians." This may have afforded an opportunity for a microphone to be fitted somewhere in the car but, miraculously, the new battery also worked, even in sub-zero temperatures. "It made me incredibly popular. The big American cars like

the Chevrolets never used to be able to start, but my Austin did so I was always giving people lifts home from parties."

She soon learned to spot surveillance on the street, usually a muddy green Pobeda with no number plate in front, and perfected a move to lose it: "A quick turn round Arbatskaya Square meant you could get behind the Pobeda and even spot its rear number plate as it waited by traffic lights to follow you. But it was a tricky maneuver and not to be recommended with innocent passengers."

At the British Embassy — a former sugar baron's mansion directly opposite the Kremlin — Stuart and Ruari Chisholm shared an office, and both took it as a given that this too was bugged. "Ruari was a marvelous storyteller, but sometimes he would get halfway through an anecdote and suddenly realize that he was about to say something incriminating about someone he knew, and that it might be used for blackmail. So he would finish the story by scribbling the crucial point down on paper and we'd have a good laugh about it, before rushing off to burn the paper." There was a pan especially for this purpose in the nearest bathroom — the ashes were then flushed away.

If they wanted to discuss sensitive matters at greater length they would leave the office, as it was believed that the KGB's microphones picked up less if one kept moving. Loudspeakers were strategically placed around the embassy's corridors, and at the touch of a button would play random snatches of speech or music to confuse the eavesdroppers. Another technique was to talk while strolling across the tennis courts at the back of the embassy. And like the Americans, the British had a "bug-proof" room. John Miller, a Reuters correspondent in the city at the time and a friend of the Chisholms, once visited it and felt it resembled a combination of "a 'portakabin' toilet, bank vault and boardroom."

Ruari Chisholm took his work seriously, but he also had a mischievous sense of humor. Miller remembers how after they had once been unable to book a table at the Praga restaurant, Rauri had hammered on the plate-glass door. When a doorman angrily approached, Rauri grandly proclaimed he was the King of Laos, who was on a state visit to the Kremlin at the time. He and Miller had been shown to a table at once.

Miller and Stuart were both frequent visitors to the Chisholms' home on the eighth floor of 12/24 Sadovo-Samotechnaya Street, a beige block of flats built by the German POWs after the war. It was nicknamed "Sad Sam" by its residents, all of whom were foreign diplomats and journalists — no Russians lived there, and the courtyard had a ten-foot-high cement wall closing it off from surrounding houses and apartments. But the KGB, or "the Nasties" as Ruari called them, were again ever-present. During a spot check the Chisholms found a bug in a hollow spot in one of their walls, but when they tried to remove it they found themselves in a surreal tug of war with the KGB men at the other end, eventually coming away with the microphone and a piece of snipped wire. Cleaners were provided by a Soviet agency that was clearly a KGB front: Janet discovered their first maid going through their drawers and sacked her, but when the next did the same realized it was futile. An exception was the family's nanny, Martina Browne, a young Irish Catholic whom they had brought with them from London.

The Chisholms had quickly adapted to life in the city. Janet enrolled in ballet classes at the

American ambassador's residence, Spaso House, while the children attended the city's Anglo-American school. Ruari would often dip into the bar at the British Embassy, where staff and visiting Brits would usually drink to avoid getting into trouble elsewhere — apart from the alcohol and the company, it was a good way to keep his ear to the ground.

Along with John Miller, the Chisholms were also close friends with the Daily Telegraph's correspondent, Jeremy Wolfenden, who lived in the Ukraina Hotel. Janie, the couple's eldest daughter, who was five when the family arrived in Moscow, remembers Wolfenden as a charming and funny visitor to their flat in Sad Sam. "He used to tell us children that he was Jeremy Fisher from Beatrix Potter,' she says.

Wolfenden was precociously clever: reputed to have been the cleverest boy at Eton (and, in the school's estimation, therefore the country), he had taken a congratulatory first in PPE at Oxford, with one of his examiners complaining that even when he was being brilliant he acted as though it were beneath him: "He wrote as though it were all such a waste of his time." As well as being charming and clever, Wolfenden was gay, an irony as he was the son of Sir John Wolfenden, who had chaired the 1957 committee recommending the decriminalization of homosexual acts in Britain (although the law would not be changed until 1967).

Jeremy Wolfenden may also have worked for MI6, at least informally. Journalists were even more prized assets than businessmen, as they were trained to ferret out information and had permission to do so. After Eton, Wolfenden had learned Russian as part of his National Service, and at Oxford had been recommended to MI6 by a fellow undergraduate. Following the interview, Wolfenden confided in a friend that he believed that only the secret services could make the most of his talents, adding: "And they don't seem to mind me being homosexual."

After a spell at The Times Wolfenden had been poached by The Daily Telegraph, a paper rumored to have close links with the intelligence services. One former correspondent on the paper has claimed he was told to report to MI6 officers in Moscow when he was posted there, and it may be that Wolfenden received similar instructions before he arrived in the city in April 1961. If so, he would have been able to inform with relative ease on other expatriates, as he himself noted in a 1965 article about Moscow life: "Everyone knows the private affairs of everyone else."

But Wolfenden was not a natural spy, mainly because he spent most of his days in an alcoholic haze. Moscow's expatriate village was cozy, but could also lead to strange interconnections: as well as being friends with MI6's man in Moscow and his family, Wolfenden was close to one of the most notorious traitors of the time, Guy Burgess. Since his defection in the early 1950s, Burgess lived in a flat in the city under the alias Jim Andreyevitch Eliot, pottering around it in blue silk pajamas from Fortnum & Mason. Burgess and Wolfenden had a lot in common: both were Old Etonians, had worked for The Times, were flagrantly gay and were heavy drinkers — after his death in 1963, Wolfenden inherited many of Burgess's books and was one of the pallbearers at his funeral.

This was the cast of the British community in Moscow but for now the leading player was Janet Chisholm, who had been given the codename ANNE (her middle name). On Sunday 2 July

1961, as Margot Fonteyn and her company prepared to perform at the Bolshoi, Janet gathered up her three children and walked with them toward Tsvetnoy Boulevard. The location for the brush pass with Penkovsky was the park just off the boulevard, which had been chosen to avoid drawing suspicion on either of them if they happened to be seen there. It was just a few minutes' walk from Sad Sam, so an unsurprising spot for Janet to take the children for an outing, and a plausible place for Penkovsky to wander during his lunch break from his office at the State Committee on Gorky Street, while also ebbing far enough away that it was unlikely that any of his colleagues would do the same.

Summers in Moscow are short and sultry, and on the Sunday the threat of rain was in the air. Janet was wearing a brown suede jacket, as she had been instructed by Ruari, and pushed her youngest child, Alastair, in a pram. Once they had reached the park she found a bench by the main path, opposite a circus and a cinema and near some kiosks selling fast food and ice cream, and kept one eye on the pram and another on her two daughters as they ran around playing.

Penkovsky arrived shortly after. He had brought his "red book" with him as a safety precaution — if a militiaman challenged him he intended to brandish his GRU credentials to bluff his way out of the situation. Approaching the middle of the park he soon recognised ANNE from her jacket and the photograph Greville Wynne had shown him. He didn't much like the spot she had picked: there were too many people milling around for his liking. He wandered around for a while until, as he had hoped, it started to rain. The crowd began to thin out, and Penkovsky approached the bench. He casually admired the baby in the pram, then smilingly offered the older children a box of multi-colored vitamin C tablets, commonly eaten as sweets by Russian children because of the climate. Janet thanked him, took the box, swiftly placed it under a blanket in the pram, then brought out an identical box and offered those to the children instead. Penkovsky was impressed by how naturally she had acted, and with his typical flamboyance called her a "heroine" when later relating the encounter to MI6. He chatted with the children a little while longer, then moved on. Just a friendly stranger saying hello.

All told, the pass had taken less than two minutes — but it was one of the most significant moments of espionage during the Cold War. Hidden inside Penkovsky's box of sweets were seven rolls of undeveloped film and two typewritten sheets of paper.