The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

United Kingdom Declassifies Confessions of 'Cambridge Five' Soviet Spies

January 14, 2025

Anthony Blunt and Queen Elizabeth II. **Press Association Images / npg.org.uk**

Britain's National Archives on Tuesday released declassified MI5 domestic counterintelligence agency files containing the confessions of notorious double agents known as the "Cambridge Five" who spied for the Soviet Union.

"The release reveals new details in the cases of the Cambridge spies Kim Philby, Anthony Blunt and John Cairncross, including their confessions," the government agency said.

The Soviets recruited Philby, Blunt and Cairncross, as well as Donald Maclean and Guy Burgess, in the 1930s at Cambridge University.

Russia honored Blunt in 2010 with a plaque at the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) headquarters in Moscow. Burgess and Maclean were honored in 2019 with a memorial plaque in the city of Samara, where they lived for several years after defecting in 1951.

Philby's partial confession in 1963 revealed that he had spied for the Soviet Union between 1932 and 1946. It included an admission that he outed Soviet intelligence officer Konstantin Volkov, who sought to defect to the U.K. before he and his wife were taken from Turkey to Moscow and executed in 1945.

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Philby said in the transcripts that "the overruling inspiration was the other side [U.S.S.R.]" for him despite his feelings of "tremendous loyalty" to Britain's MI6 spy agency, where he served as a high-ranking officer early in the Cold War.

Blunt, an art historian and the Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures overseeing the official Royal Art Collection, confessed in 1964 that he had been a Soviet agent since the 1930s.

Blunt was a senior MI5 officer during World War II and passed vast quantities of secret intelligence to his handlers from the KGB Soviet spy agency.

He was questioned several times after Maclean and Burgess fled to the Soviet Union in the 1950s. But without a confession, he was allowed to keep his position at the heart of the British establishment until the early 1960s.

Queen Elizabeth II was not told that Blunt had admitted he was a Soviet spy until 1973, when ministers became concerned that the truth would become public when Blunt died. He was publicly unmasked by former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in a parliamentary statement in 1979 and he died four years later.

Cairncross made his confession, including on his first encounters with Maclean, Burgess and Philby, after being confronted in 1964.

The previously secret files are being released ahead of the opening of an exhibition focusing on the work of MI5 at the National Archives in West London.

AFP contributed reporting.

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