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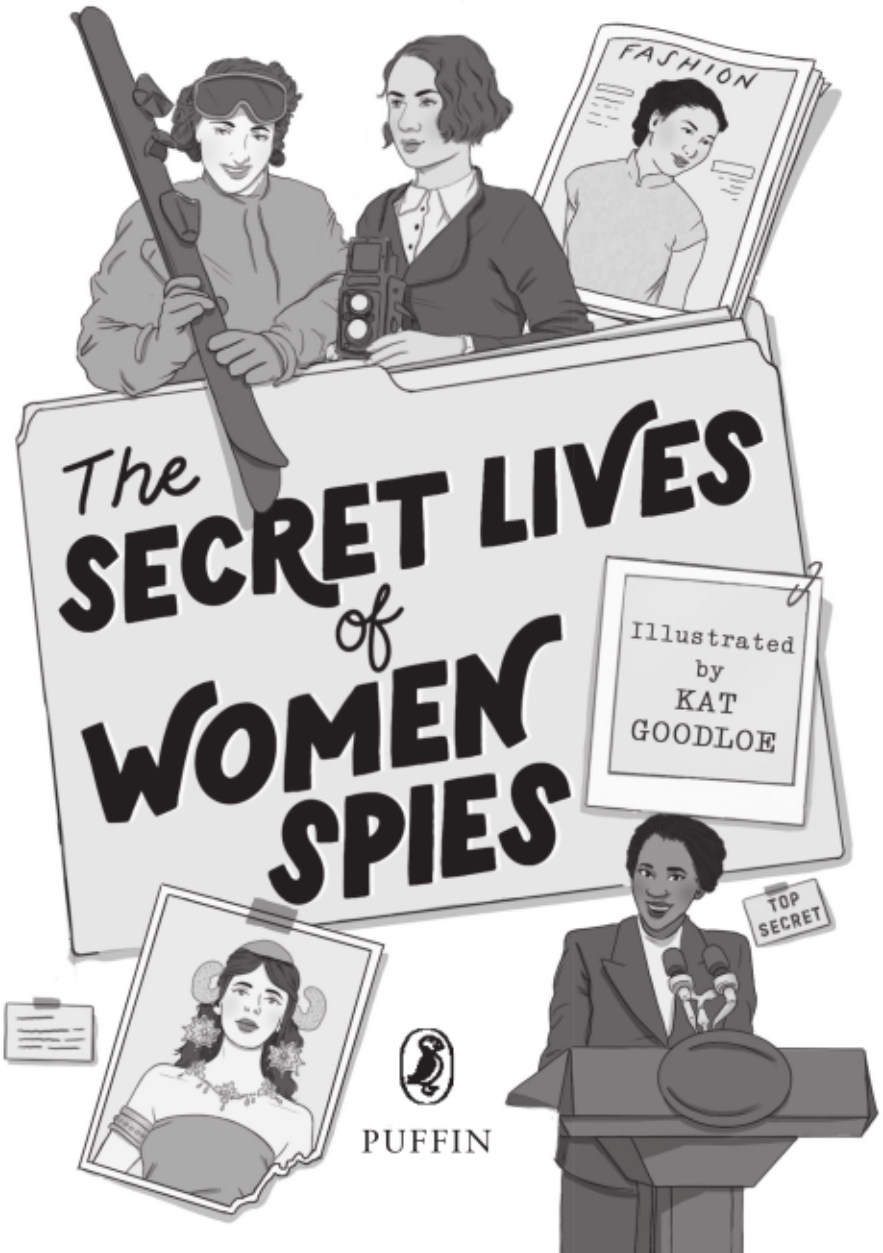
The SECRET LIVES of WOMEN SPIES

WRITER AND SPY-WATCHER

CHARLOTTE PHILBY



The SECRET LIVES of WOMEN SPIES

Illustrated by KAT GOODLOE

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First published 2025

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Set in 11/17pt Nietos
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–70943–6

All correspondence to:
Puffin Books
Penguin Random House Children's
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

FSC www.fsc.org MIX Paper | Supporting responsible forestry FSC® C018179

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For those women who hid in the shadows,
and deserve to stand in the light.

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INTRODUCTION

When I was a child (probably younger than you are now) I had two sets of grandparents. One set lived in Somerset, and on weekends my parents and I would jump in the car after school and drive three or so hours from London to see them. We'd eat peanut butter sandwiches and listen to story tapes on the way, our black and white Border collie, Bryn, whimpering on the back seat beside me.

It didn't seem particularly strange at the time, but going to visit my dad's father, Kim – or Grandpa Kimsky, as I knew him – was not so easy.

For one thing, we didn't know his address. Later in my life, my aunt drew me a map on the back of a napkin one lunchtime, to try to help me track down my grandfather's apartment in Moscow. By this

time I was working as a newspaper journalist and planning to return to Russia for the first time as an adult, to learn about the man about who had become a mystery to me.

But we'll get to that.

What I did know back in the 1980s, as a kid with a heavy fringe and pink Converse boots, was that Kimsky and his wife lived in a city called Moscow, in Russia. If we wanted to write him a letter (which we did, regularly), we sent it from the letter box at the end of our road in London, addressed to a mailbox in the central post office in Moscow, on a street called Tverskaya.

Once a year, from when I was just three weeks old until Grandpa Kimsky's death when I was five and a half, my mum and dad and I flew to Russia to visit my grandfather and his wife, Rufina. Or as we knew her, Rufa.

I remember those moments clearly. Or maybe I'm remembering the photographs that exist from those days, kept behind plastic sheets in a thick leather album with gold trim. You know how that happens – sometimes you look at a photo you've seen many times before and you're not sure if it's the photo you're remembering, or the memory itself?

Rufa spoke little English and had bright red hair, which was cut just below her chin. She wore red lipstick and round glasses. Kim was older. On those family trips to Russia, he and my dad played chess for hours on the sofa in the living room with a pair of musket guns hanging on the wall behind them. As the men played, my mother drank tea and chatted with Rufa's family. I remember the constant swirl of cigarette smoke from the ashtray (I'm sad to say that my dad eventually died of lung cancer), and classical music booming from the record player. I remember snow falling on the school playground, which was visible through the window in my grandfather's study. I remember outings to a playground with carved wooden statues of bears.

But, on those family holidays, it was the journey from Sheremetyevo airport (the main airport in Moscow) to my grandfather's flat that has always stuck with me. As the plane touched down, my parents and I, unlike the other passengers, were met by men in grey suits, who led us away from the exit and ushered us into a car. From the back seat, they took out a blue light which they secured to the roof. The light was turned on, as was a siren, and we were driven down the motorway at full speed.

We were special guests.

Because Grandpa Kimsky was both my grandpa and the most infamous spy in history. He was two people at once.

On the one hand, Kim Philby was a loving father of five, who wore a white vest and braces while he played with me. On the other, he was a man who betrayed his country and his friends, and who was responsible for the deaths of countless people.

Born in India – where his father was working for the British government – Kim grew up in London, attending the famous Westminster School and then the University of Cambridge. His friends from this time remember him as charming and sometimes shy.

A handsome young man, Kim Philby was a typical upper-class Englishman – well-connected, with friends in high places. And this was precisely how he became a double agent.

While studying at Cambridge, Kim was one of a number of students who became interested in communism, and five of these students (including Kim) would go on to become a group of spies known as the 'Cambridge Five'.

Communism is a set of ideas for how the world should be run. It states that everyone should be equal and share things equally. In a communist

country, or society, individual people do not own land or factories or machinery. Instead, the government who runs the society or country owns these things, and everyone is supposed to share them with everyone else, along with any money the government makes from it.

The problem is that often it doesn't work out like that. If you have a group of people telling everyone they have to be equal – or else! – it can create a system where some people are very powerful and have lots, and some people have nothing.

And if there are, right from the beginning, only a few people at the top of chain telling everyone else what to do, then the system is already broken. This is what happened in the Soviet Union during what became known as the Cold War (see page 159).

My family and I saw this when we visited Kim in Soviet Russia, the country that basically ran the Soviet Union, many years after Kim first learned about communism. There were queues of people around the block, waiting for the small amounts of food they were allowed to buy. Meanwhile, because we were guests of my grandfather – a person who was important to the government – we were given as much as we wanted, without having to wait in line.

So much for everyone sharing everything, equally.

Kim lived a very different life to this when, at the age of just 21 and having graduated from the University of Cambridge, he took off on his motorbike and headed to Austria. A professor at Cambridge had taught him about communism and how it could provide a better, more equal, world, and Kim liked the sound of it. So, with a little money in his pocket, he headed to Vienna, the capital of Austria, to help fight the Nazis and stop the rise of fascism through Europe.

Fascism is sort of supposed to be the opposite of communism. Where communism claims that everyone is equal, fascism says that some people are of less value than others, usually because of their race – and this was the ideology of Nazi Germany and its leader, Adolf Hitler. But actually there are strong similarities between the two systems. Both give the government strict control over their people, and the leaders who follow these ideas often rule through violence and fear.

The year that my grandfather travelled to Vienna, in 1933 (some years before the Second World War), fascism seemed to be everywhere. In Vienna, Kim secretly helped the communists fight against fascism. He spent time meeting with other

communists and plotting a revolution to overthrow the fascist rulers. Posing as a tourist, he helped important communists, who were at risk of being arrested, travel through secret tunnels across the border to Czechoslovakia.

In top-secret meeting rooms across the city, he took apart weapons and smuggled their parts from one place to another on his motorbike. If he was stopped by the police, he would smile and show them his British passport and they would wave him on. They didn't believe a well-spoken Englishman could be part of the communist revolution.

It was in Vienna that summer when Kim became convinced he wanted to spend his life fighting for communism. And that the best way to do that would be to work for Soviet Russia, where communism had first properly been put into practice – even if it meant betraying Britain. The leaders of the NKVD (secret police whose role was to protect the Soviet Union) were desperate for someone like him. Someone who was English, who knew lots of people and who would never be suspected of working for another country. They couldn't have hoped for a better man for the job.

Kim was so good as a Soviet spy that in the years that followed, he managed to join the British

Secret Intelligence Service – the British spies – and climb his way up to become the head of its anti-Soviet section, which was the bit that was supposed to fight against communism. And while Kim was working for them, supposedly helping gain the upper hand against the Soviets, he was also working as a double agent, handing everything he discovered straight back to his Soviet bosses.

To some, Kim was a traitor, to others he was a hero.

The exact moment I learned the truth about my grandfather is hazy. But I do know that in the years that followed, I spent a lot of time reading about him. And the more I learned about him, the more questions opened up before me. Among them: *Where were all the women?*

In the many books and plays and films and true stories I found about the Cold War and the Cambridge Five, the stories all seemed to be about men.

There were a few female faces, but they were generally the secretaries or the wives or the girlfriends.

Could it be true, I wondered, *that the women were never really part of the action*? It didn't seem

possible. Also, I knew that stories told from a certain point of view could overlook some of the important parts. Kim Philby, the legendary spy, had a wife and five children, for instance. He had also deceived them, and this seemed like a big deal to me.

But the family is rarely mentioned in any of the books or papers I have read about Kim Philby, the infamous double agent.

Women didn't just play small roles in Cold War history, of course. In fact, female spies have played some of the most important roles in espionage throughout the ages, as I will soon show you.

Why these women's amazing stories remain untold is harder to say. Perhaps it's because books about spying have mostly been written by men. Or maybe it's because female spies have rarely been caught? They're just that good.

One spy – a woman called Ursula Kuczynski, also known as Agent Sonya – was one day seen hanging out washing in her garden by the spy catchers (or 'rat-catchers' as they were sometimes known). *How could a mere housewife be any danger to us*, they thought. They just didn't believe she was a threat.

And this is part of the magic of women spies. The ability of the wife or mother or secretary to disappear into the background, unsuspected . . .

Thankfully, recent historians like Shrabani Basu, Clare Mulley, Amy Butler Greenfield, Anne Sebba, Claire Hubbard-Hall and Dr Helen Fry are helping to shine a light on these largely unheard stories. I believe they teach us as much about how we think and talk about history, because of who gets to record it, as they do about the women themselves.

In my research about my grandfather, I learned about an extraordinary woman and secret agent so important to the Cold War that she was named by Anthony Blunt, one of the Cambridge Five, as 'the grandmother of us all'. I eventually wrote her story in my novel for adults *Edith and Kim*.

Edith Tudor-Hart was the woman who introduced and recruited Kim to the NKVD, so that he could go on to spy for the Soviets. She was never caught by the British. Until recently, her life was barely mentioned in the history books. If you have an interest in spying or in history – or indeed in anything! – you can visit the National Archives in London. There, among countless secret documents, is a mountain of files about Edith and her life, which were collected by the British secret service over the course of four decades. That's most of her adult life . . .

In 2015, as part of a project to release certain top-secret documents to the public, the files held

on Edith Tudor-Hart were made available. My goodness, were there a few!

Edith was often accused by her friends and family of being paranoid when she said she was being watched by the British government. She was not being paranoid. The files the British secret service held on Edith go on for pages and pages and pages, and were collected over decades. There are notes about exactly what she did on the many days they followed her from her flat to her work. Or when she took her son, Tommy, who had a mental health condition, back and forth to the doctor for treatment.

British spies recorded her phone calls, and acted as moles, pretending to be Edith's friends or colleagues while feeding information about her back to the British government.

Edith first met my grandfather, Kim, during that summer of 1933. She moved to England the following year and then, throughout the Second World War, Edith passed on many secrets to the Soviet Union, often taking Tommy with her on her missions. Who would question why a young mother with a pushchair might be sitting alone on a park bench? Why would they bother lowering their voices

to avoid sharing secrets in front of a woman nursing a baby in a station? She hid in plain sight.

Edith was also an amazing photographer, who used her camera as a tool for spying, photographing important and secret documents.

She even helped pass secrets to the Soviets about the development of the first atomic bomb. And all the while she was a devoted single mother.

Learning about Edith got me thinking about which other women spies might have been left out of history, and how incredible their tales might be. Because being a woman and a spy means being many people at once.

It turns out that there are more than a few examples of women secret agents at the centre of the action. Lots, in fact, and I couldn't possibly fit them all into a single book. So I have selected the ones whose story spoke to me, and those whose work helps bring to life the world in which they lived.

Brave, complicated, brilliant, terrible, inspiring, ruthless, passionate and tragic – the women whose lives I have written about in this book are nothing if not fascinating.

For each of them, I have included an introduction to our spy, followed by the story of their lives, looking

back on what made them so remarkable. These read like the most extraordinary works of fiction, but they are all true. In order to write these stories, I have read and listened to various accounts of these women's lives – revealed in personal papers like letters and diaries, and in documents that governments once kept secret.

These women have led very different lives to me. So although what follows has all the historical facts correct, the emotions and feelings and smaller details have had to be imagined. But I hope, by attempting to bring them to life in this way, I can help us understand what it was like for these women to live in such extreme and often dangerous ways. To understand why they became spies, and the impact their choices had on themselves and those around them. And for some of the spies in this book, I instead thought the best way to tell their story was in imagined newspaper articles, which give an account of sometimes complicated lives, and decisions that sometimes had terrible consequences. You'll see these cropping up among the longer stories.

Ultimately, I hope this book helps shine a light on some of the lesser-known people in spying history. And in trying to understand the reasons why they

were willing to risk their lives, and the lives of others, I hope it helps you understand a little more about the world we live in.

And remember, if you suspect a woman in your life of being a secret agent: Mum's the word.

TOOLS OF HER TRADE

It is understandable that those involved in spying want to make their world as tricky to understand as possible. That's the whole point of being a spy – to be mysterious.

But sometimes the language we use to talk about the business of spying makes it almost impossible to get a sense of who is doing what to whom, and when. Let alone how. For that reason, I have included a glossary at the end of this book – a sort of mini dictionary which explains certain words and terms. Words that are included in the glossary will appear in bold (**like this**).

Once we've heard the extraordinary stories of each of our spies, we will also learn *the tools of her trade* – the tricks that our agents used to complete their work. These range from a talent for code-breaking to having friends in high places.

However, to give you a clear view into the murky world of espionage, we are going to start with a little masterclass of our own: our own spy toolbox. You might wish to refer back to this when you're reading later sections.

From explaining confusing spy speak, to outlining some important wars and events our secret agents were involved in, the section in the following pages will give you one of the most important tools of all: knowledge.