

Russian Roulette: How British Spies Thwarted Lenin's Plot for Global Revolution

Giles Milton. (Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 378 pp., illustrations, maps

Reviewed by J. R. Seeger

In *Russian Roulette*, Giles Milton provides an entertaining and well-researched introduction to the “Great Game” between Great Britain and the Soviet Union during the last years of WW I and the early years of the Bolshevik Revolution. Milton is a prolific writer of histories that center on the activities of individuals—for example, *Nathaniel's Nutmeg: Or the True and Incredible Adventures of the Spice Trader Who Changed the Course of History* (1999), *Samurai William: The Englishman Who Opened Japan* (2011), and many in between. But this is his first foray into the world of intelligence operations. Overall, it is an excellent work, one that should be considered for any intelligence officer's personal library.

As we enter the centenary of the beginning of WW I and approach that same milestone for the Russian Revolution, a number of books have been published about the war and the intelligence operations of allies and adversaries on all fronts. Milton's work fits easily in this genre as he describes British intelligence operations through the period—first, those designed to keep the Russians in the war against Germany, and second, those that supported White Russian forces fighting the Bolsheviks after the signing of the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty. Still later, these operations would involve a mix of collection, covert action and paramilitary disruption operations against the Communist International (COMINTERN), actions Milton describes at the culmination of his book. The British operations were designed to combat the COMINTERN's stated plan to expand beyond Central Asia into South Asia and to eventually destroy British political and military control of all Southwest and South Asia.

Russian Roulette is at its best when Milton focuses on the UK's audacious intelligence operations in Russia proper—especially in St. Petersburg and Moscow. The book begins with a vignette suggesting direct British involvement in the murder of Grigori Rasputin in December 1916 and describing the cover-up by both the British

and the Russian Imperial governments that followed. For details of this case, Milton draws on Richard Cullen's *Rasputin: The Role of Britain's Secret Service in his Torture and Murder*,^a which used forensic sciences to create a plausible argument for British involvement at a time when London was concerned that its Russian ally was near collapse.

Following this chapter of true cloak-and-dagger, Milton takes the reader through a brief description of the British Secret Service (MI6) during WW I, its charismatic and eccentric commander, Mansfield Cummings, and the team he assembled to collect political and military intelligence in Russia as the Imperial government collapsed and the revolution began in earnest. Each chapter contains one outrageous tale after another of British officers assigned to St. Petersburg (soon to be Petrograd) and Moscow, including well-known characters such as Sidney Reilly and Robert Bruce Lockhart,^b and some less well known (at least to this reviewer), such as George Hill, Arthur Ransome, and Paul Dukes.^c

While Lockhart and Ransome used their true identities throughout the revolution, Reilly, Hill, and Dukes used multiple identities, multiple safe houses, and passports from several different countries to conduct collection operations as the newly established Soviet secret police hunted them. Probably the most amazing discussion of these operations is the story of Dukes's exfiltration from

a. Richard Cullen, *Rasputin: The Role of Britain's Secret Service in his Torture and Murder* (Dialogue Books, 2010).

b. For details on Lockhart and Reilly, see Robin Bruce Lockhart's *Reilly: Ace of Spies* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1967) or Andrew Cook's *Ace of Spies: The True Story of Sidney Reilly* (History Press, 2004).

c. Sir Paul Dukes, *Red Dusk and the Morrow: Adventures and Investigations in Red Russia* (Doubleday, 1922).

the Russian coast by a motor boat, involving multiple couriers, chance encounter, and his eventual recovery.

Milton demonstrates his scholarship in the chapter on British covert support to the White Russians, a program that was part of a larger effort to defeat the Red Army and support regional resistance leaders in states trying to establish themselves after the war. For this chapter, Milton's extensive research started with a report from the Imperial War Museum and moved to detailed work in the British National Archives in Kew, where he went through nine file collections from the War Office, covering the years 1919–20. Among other things, he learned the program included delivery of chemical weapons to the White Russians. As minister of war, Churchill had authorized the delivery of an arsenic-based gas weapon known as the "M Device." Milton describes the delivery of 2,718 separate chemical devices in a single month (from August to September 1919) and the results reported through British military intelligence officers assigned to the White Army.

Russian Roulette is less successful in describing British intelligence operations in Central Asia. Milton focuses his attention almost exclusively on the operations of a famous Indian Army officer, Frederick Bailey, who traveled to Tashkent to determine if the Soviet government in "Turkestan" would be a threat to British India. Once in Tashkent, Bailey determined the Soviet commissars were hostile to Britain, and he used multiple identities to obtain intelligence on COMINTERN efforts to equip and train an Indian resistance force under the command of Manabendra Nath Roy. While the details in *Russian Roulette* are well written and the COMINTERN operations well researched, Milton's work in these chapters is less detailed than Peter Hopkirk's seminal works, *Setting the East Ablaze* and *On Secret Service East of Constantinople*.^a In the second, Hopkirk describes an equally important part of the MI6-COMINTERN conflict in Baku, which involved another British Indian Army intelligence officer, Reginald Teague-Jones, who had to live under the assumed name of Ronald Sinclair for the rest of his life as a result of his actions.^b

Milton uses his closing chapters to demonstrate how the operations of British intelligence officers in the early days of the Russian revolution resulted in a strategic success for London as it negotiated with the Soviet Union during the 1920s. Soviet economic failures in the 1920s forced the Kremlin to negotiate with the British for economic assistance, and the British were able to use intelligence from Dukes, Hill, and Bailey to demand a quid pro quo from the Soviets—shutdown of COMINTERN support for Indian resistance training in Tashkent. The detailed intelligence reports allowed the British to come to the negotiating table with powerful evidence to force the Soviets to end their plans to undermine British authority in South Asia.

Milton's book is an excellent introduction to the conflict between the United Kingdom and the early Soviet Union. The book is filled with stories underscoring the courage and intrepidity of British agents and the commitment of MI6 to defeat the Bolshevik threat. *Russian Roulette* has excellent endnotes and a very detailed bibliography, so further academic research on this era will be easy to accomplish for any intelligence professional. For individuals interested in early 20th century history of European intelligence and those not familiar with this era of the *Great Game*, Milton has done a great service.



a. Peter Hopkirk, *Setting the East Ablaze* (Oxford University Press, 1986) and *On Secret Service East of Constantinople* (Oxford University Press, 1994).

b. Reginald Teague-Jones and Peter Hopkirk, *The Spy Who Disappeared* (Gollancz, 1991).