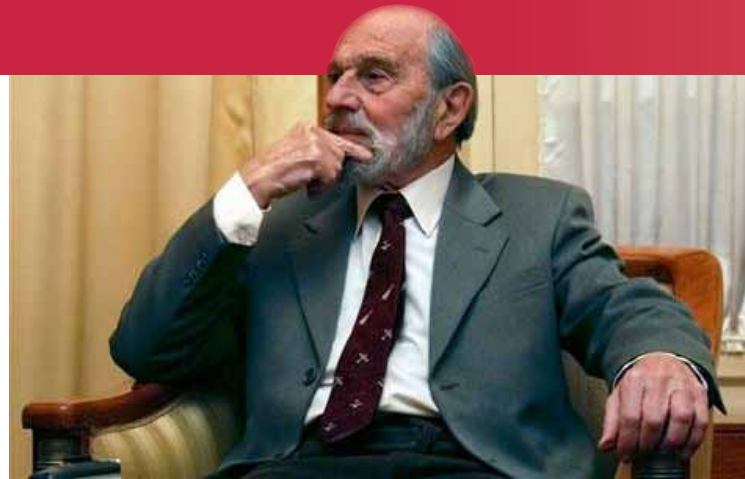


INTERVIEW

The Last Man:

Hugh Barnes in Moscow talks to the former spy George Blake about his past and present



The double life of George Blake is one of the legends of the Cold War. A high-flying agent with MI6, he secretly became a Communist during the Korean War and for almost a decade, until his arrest in 1961, was the perfect spy. Not only did he betray the Berlin Tunnel, which promised to be the CIA's greatest coup against the Soviet Union. His treachery also cost the lives of dozens of British agents.

The judge at his trial described Blake's case as "one of the worst that can be envisaged in times of peace" and gave him a 42-year jail sentence – still the longest ever handed out to a spy. Yet the story of Blake's imprisonment, and his mysterious escape from Wormwood Scrubs five years later, now has an almost novelettish glamour that can't help but revive Le Carré-type memories of espionage in the years before al-Qaeda, a more innocent time when at least you knew who the enemy was, even if you couldn't always find him.

Now 88, and a resident of Moscow, where he continues to outlive the more famous "Cambridge spies" – Kim Philby, Guy Burgess, Anthony Blunt and Donald Maclean – Blake always declines journalists' requests for interviews. Recently, however, after I was given his telephone number by an ex-KGB contact, and explained that another friend was the daughter of the journalist Philip Deane, with whom Blake had been captured in Korea, he invited me to come and have a cup of tea in his spacious top-floor apartment overlooking Prospekt Mira.

The first thing I noticed as I walked into his study was the pair of old slippers on his feet and the copy of Walter Bagehot's The

English Constitution in his hand. "What would you like," he asked, speaking Russian in a thick foreign accent – Blake's father was an Egyptian Jew, his mother came from the Netherlands: overly patriotic to Britain, his parents named him after King George V. "Tea? Coffee? Do you like biscuits? You can have anything."

Few people in Britain would describe Blake as a patriot, or perhaps even understand why such a notorious traitor would be reading Bagehot in his Moscow apartment where he lives rent-free on a KGB pension. But the former spy describes himself as "totally happy man" more interested in the present (and even the future) than the past.

"Nobody can pretend that my actions didn't involve treason, so I won't try, and treason is always something that many people don't approve of – that's putting it mildly. But you just have to look at the terrible things happening in the world today and the Cold War seems a long time ago. Don't get me wrong. In the same circumstances, I would do exactly the same thing again.

I regret nothing. I have not lived my life in vain," Blake said, almost as an afterthought, before he vanished into the kitchen to make the tea.

Left alone in the book-lined study, with its assortment of gold-framed Russian icons and family photographs, I began to inspect the titles on the shelves. It was an odd collection – Winston Churchill's History of the Second World War, the works of Arnold Toynbee, Max Beerbohm, that sort of thing, many of them first editions, the kind of books people in England used to read in the middle of the last century but don't very much any more.

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When Blake returned with tea and biscuits, I commented on these literary, political and historical books of a certain vintage, adding that I always found it very difficult to get hold of English books in Moscow. "Oh," he said, "I inherited these from Donald Maclean when he died."

Blake talked at length about his fellow spies but always reserved his greatest admiration for Maclean whom he described as "saintly", adding: "His commitment to communism was absolute and I respected that. With Philby and Burgess, you always felt there was something else going on. Perhaps they liked the idea of a secret club. It was fun for them to know things other people didn't. It made them special but Maclean was different. He didn't like being a spy or the sense of adventure. He was simply committed to Communism and he was ready to do what was necessary."

Nor has Blake lost his faith in the Communist ideal, though he concedes that the Soviet Union was ultimately a failure. "The Communist ideal still has a future, in future generations. It's a dream but I believe that society will become more humane than it is today.

"Perhaps I was disappointed in the reality of life in Russia when I came here. I believed that the Communist system and the education system was developing a new kind of person, a Soviet man, who was going to be different from and better than his counterparts in the West, almost as if he was living on a higher plane. But you don't have to be here very long to realise that human nature doesn't change from place to place. People in the Soviet Union were ordinary like everybody else."

"But even so, I'm optimistic that one day the Communist ideal will prevail – it may take hundreds of years – and people will see the virtue of living in a society where everybody is like everybody else in the sense of being equal."

Blake said his only real regret was that he never told his first wife, a secretary who worked for MI6, that he was a Soviet spy. For many years he didn't see his three sons, who live in England, though a reconciliation has taken place within the family in recent years, and his apartment is full of pictures of his seven grandchildren.

He says he decided to become a double agent, in 1951, after being taken prisoner during the Korean War. He was captured by the North Koreans after the invasion of Seoul and read Marx's *Kapital* in jail where he also got to witness the bombing of Korean villages by American Flying Fortresses. "The same thing is happening today in Afghanistan and Iraq," he added.

"As soon as I was released, I went back to my normal life and work for British intelligence, though now my loyalty was to the Soviet Union. The Russians gave me a Minox camera, and I carried that Minox camera with me whenever I went to work," Blake explained. "It was like never going out without your wallet, because I never knew

what important documents I might find on my desk. I'd take photographs of documents whenever I could and then hand them over to my contact."

Most accounts of Blake's treachery concentrate on his betrayal of the Berlin Tunnel, "Operation Gold", which was meant to be the CIA's biggest coup in the spy war. The idea was to tap into the phone lines linking East Berlin with Moscow at a point where they ran close to the Western sector. It was an enormous operation involving tunnelling experts, telephone engineers, recording experts and teams of transcribers and translators. The joint Anglo-American intelligence committee responsible for

running the operation had a planning secretary, an SIS officer who kept the minutes of the meetings and organised its records. That officer was George Blake and he systematically passed on to the KGB the committee's every decision, its every move.

On the bizarre circumstances of Blake's escape from Wormwood Scrubs in 1966, the former spy said he owed his freedom to

a petty Irish criminal, Sean Bourke, and two anarchists, Patrick Pottle and Michael Randle, who were members of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. In one of the most astonishing jailbreaks in British history, Blake was sprung from jail by means of a rope thrown over the wall, though he admits he damaged his ankle jumping to freedom and had to recuperate in a safe house round the corner in Highlever Road while police searched the airports and the docks. Once the coast was clear, Blake was smuggled to East Berlin in a van.

"The British never wanted to admit that I was freed by amateurs," Blake recalls. "They would rather imagine that it was the mighty KGB. But, in fact, it was an Irishman and some militant peaceniks who did the trick."

The five years he spent in prison helped Blake to adapt to the Soviet Union, he believes. "In a way, I was more prepared for the hardship than Burgess or Maclean. I'd been in Wormwood Scrubs!"

During his spell in prison he met another infamous Soviet spy, of whom he still has fond memories. "When we were in jail, [Gordon] Lonsdale used to say to me that we would meet again in Moscow," Blake recalls, "and sure enough on the fifth of July 1967, after Lonsdale was released in a spy-swap, we cracked open a bottle of champagne in Red Square."

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"The British never wanted to admit that I was freed by an amateur," says Blake, of Sean Bourke, pictured here in 1969.