



Espionage, Double-Dealing and Mystery: Kim Philby in Turkey, 1945-48*

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The double agent, the ‘mole in the circus’ who pretends to be working for the intelligence service of his or her country, while secretly working for its enemies, is a central character in spy novels and their cinematic and television off-shoots. In the British case, this theme is not pure fiction. Between 1939 and the early 1950s Britain’s Special Intelligence Service (SIS, or MI6) was penetrated by a subsequently notorious group of double agents, known as the ‘Cambridge Five’. As students or later, they were recruited by Soviet intelligence in the 1930s, only to gain crucial postings in its British equivalent, or in the diplomatic corps, during the second world war. As such, they succeeded in sabotaging a large part of post-war Britain’s attempted resistance to Stalin’s dictatorship, and were not unmasked until the 1950s and ‘sixties.

Chief among the ‘Five’, Kim¹ Philby was the son of the noted Arabist H. St. John Philby. Converted to communism while a student at Trinity College Cambridge, he had been recruited by Soviet espionage in 1934.² There is a whole library of books on his subsequent career,³ which can be briefly recounted. In 1940 Philby joined MI6, being first involved in preparing clandestine attacks on enemy targets, and counter-espionage. By the end of the second world war, he was the head of Section 9 of MI6, dealing with anti-Soviet operations, with the scandalous result that the section which was supposed to prevent Soviet espionage was itself headed by a Soviet agent.

Philby and the Volkov affair, 1945

In the late summer of 1945 Istanbul was the scene of a dramatic series of events which nearly (and by rights should have) ended Philby’s career. On 27 August Konstantin Volkov, nominally Vice-Consul in the Soviet Consulate General, penned a letter to his British opposite number, N. H. Page, requesting an interview. Amazingly, Page failed to respond (he was apparently prone to memory lapses, lost the letter, and then forgot about it). The delay lasted until 4 September, when Volkov appeared personally in Page’s office with his wife Zoya. Volkov explained that his job as Vice-Consul was actually a cover for his real work as

*Invited article.

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¹ Strictly speaking, a nickname, drawn from the eponymous hero of Rudyard Kipling’s novel: (Philby’s real forenames were Harold Adrian Russell).

² Edward Harrison, *The Young Kim Philby: Soviet Spy and British Intelligence Officer* (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2012) pp. 16-27, 34-5.

³ Among the more recent and informative are Harrison, op. cit., Ben Macintyre, *A Spy Among Friends: Kim Philby and the Great Betrayal* (London, Bloomsbury, 2014) and Tim Milne, *Kim Philby: the Unknown Story of the KGB’s Master Spy* (London, Biteback Publishing, 2014). Earlier accounts include E. H. Cookridge, *The Third Man: the Truth about Kim Philby, Double Agent* (London, Arthur Barker Limited, 1968); Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville, *Philby: the Long Road to Moscow* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1978) and Bruce Page, David Leitch and Philip Knightly, *Philby: the Spy who Betrayed a Generation* (London, Andre Deutsch, 1968). Philby’s own account, *My Silent War, the Autobiography of a Spy* (London, Arrow Books, 2002, originally published in 1968 and written during his exile in Moscow after 1963) gives his version of his ‘overground’ activities for British intelligence and counter-espionage, but very little on his relations with his Soviet controllers.

deputy-chief of Soviet intelligence in Turkey and that he now wished to defect to the West. Nine days later, he returned with a letter setting out his terms. In return for asylum for himself and his wife in Britain under new identities, plus a payment of £50,000 (around £2.1 million, or \$2.7 million at today's values) he offered, besides other crucial information, the names of 314 Soviet agents in Turkey and a further 250 in Britain. The latter included two Foreign Office diplomats (later revealed as Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, who were not uncovered until 1951, when they fled to Moscow) and an official 'fulfilling the function of head of a section of the British counter-espionage in London' (almost certainly, a reference to Philby).⁴

According to Volkov, Soviet intelligence had cracked the British diplomatic code. Hence, he insisted that all correspondence with London about his case must be sent via the diplomatic bag, causing further delay. The Consulate's report on his offer did not reach London until 9 September, when Philby's immediate superior, Sir Stewart Menzies, handed it to him.⁵ Philby evidently looked at the report with horror, since it could have rapidly ended his career and probably have led to treason trials for him and the rest of the 'Cambridge Five'. As he later admitted, he 'stared at the papers rather longer than necessary to compose my thoughts', but decided to 'put a brave face on it' by pretending to follow the report up.⁶ He realised that his best chance of escape would be to go to Istanbul himself, nominally to interview Volkov, and he persuaded his chief to agree to this. After further delays, he finally arrived in Istanbul around 26-28 September, and went through the motions, with Page, of twice trying to contact Volkov by telephone via the Soviet Consulate (apparently, on 1-2 October). This proved fruitless since, as Philby must have known, Volkov had left Istanbul, possibly before Philby had arrived, or at any rate before anyone on the British side could prevent his departure. As it later turned out, Volkov and his wife had been heavily sedated and carried in stretchers to a waiting aircraft bound for Moscow, where they were tortured and executed in the notorious Lubyanka prison. Philby thus escaped discovery by what he later described as 'a very narrow squeak indeed'.⁷

In explanation, Philby maintained that Volkov must have changed his mind about defecting at the last minute, and this idea was accepted by Menzies.⁸ A member of the Istanbul Consulate admitted to mentioning Volkov's name in a telephone call to the British embassy in Ankara. Since the telephones were tapped, it was assumed on the British side that the Soviets had

⁴ Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB: the Inside Story of its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1990) p.305. See also Macintyre, op. cit., pp.95-6.

⁵ Andrew and Gordievsky, op. cit., p. 305; Macintyre, op. cit., p. 97.

⁶ Philby, op. cit., p.119.

⁷ Philby, op. cit., p.118. There is some uncertainty about the exact sequence of these events. Macintyre (op., cit. pp.99-100) states that Philby arrived in Turkey on 26 September (a Wednesday) and that he and Page called the Soviet Consulate on the following Monday and Tuesday (would be 1-2 October). Philby (op. cit., pp124-7) states that he reached Istanbul on 'a Friday' (would be 28 September) but appears to confirm the dates of the calls to the Soviet Consulate as the following Monday and Tuesday. Macintyre dates the Volkov's abduction to 'a few hours' before the second call (would be 2 October: op. cit., p.100). Against this, Andrew and Gordievsky (op. cit., p. 306) report that the Volkov's abduction took place two days before Philby arrived in Istanbul (i.e., 24 or 26 September). Similarly, Barry Rubin reports that the Volkovs were abducted 'well before Philby arrived': (Barry Rubin, *Istanbul Intrigues* [New York, Pharos Books, 1991] p. 270). He also relates that in later years, pictures of the Volkovs' abduction from Istanbul were shown to KGB recruits, as a warning of what would happen to them if they defected: (ibid, p. 270).

⁸ Macintyre, op. cit., pp. 100-101.

detected Volkov's attempted defection and rapidly removed him.⁹ According to Philby, '[A]nother theory – that the Russians had been tipped off about Volkov's approach to the British – had no solid evidence to support it. It was not worth including in my report'.¹⁰ Almost certainly, this was an outright lie. There can be little doubt that the tip-off came from Philby himself. It was later related from Soviet sources that he had an urgent meeting with his Soviet controller, Boris Krotov, soon after the report from Istanbul had arrived on his desk in London on 9 September.¹¹

While the Volkov story has been frequently re-told, it still leaves several unanswered questions. One is why Volkov did not turn himself over to the Turkish security authorities, granted that he could easily have done so, and that they could then have quickly spirited him and his wife away to a distant part of Turkey, with changed identities and close protection. (In fact they had done exactly that in 1942 when İsmail Akhmedov, a Lieutenant-Colonel in the GRU, the Soviet military intelligence directorate, and nominally Soviet press attaché in Turkey, had defected to the Istanbul Police Department).¹² More inexplicable is the failure of British officialdom to act more effectively and quickly in what could have been one of Britain's greatest counter-espionage coups, had it been properly handled. At the operational level, they delayed communications with London by using the diplomatic bag, as Volkov had suggested, but continued to use coded wire traffic for all other messages, although Volkov had claimed that these were being read by Soviet intelligence. More crucially, Cyril Machray, the SIS station chief in Istanbul, who could and almost certainly would have acted swiftly and effectively to secretly transfer the Volkovs to a safe house in Istanbul and thence to Britain, was kept out of the loop until Philby's arrival in Istanbul, by which time it was probably too late to prevent their abduction.¹³ Rivalry and distrust between the diplomats and the spies appears to have been the explanation. According to one account, the British ambassador in Ankara, Sir Maurice Peterson, was 'allergic to spies', proclaiming that 'no-one's going to turn my embassy into a nest of spies... do it through London' – and cutting out Machray until it was too late.¹⁴ Finally, those responsible never explained why they had placed their report on Volkov in Philby's hands, and even gave him the job of interviewing the defector, granted that he was fairly clearly one of the Soviet agents identified by Volkov, and could be expected to sabotage any official follow-up of the case.

Philby in Istanbul, 1947-49

The Volkov affair was not the end of Philby's involvement in espionage in Turkey. In February 1947, he arrived in Istanbul, nominally as First Secretary in the British diplomatic service, attached to the Istanbul Consulate General, but actually as the SIS station chief in

⁹ Seale and McConville, op. cit., p.221.

¹⁰ Philby, op. cit., p.128.

¹¹ Andrew and Gordievsky, op. cit. p. 306.

¹² İsmail Akhmedov, *In and Out of Stalin's GRU: a Tatar's Escape from Red Army Intelligence* (London, Arms and Armour Press, 1984) pp. 170 ff. In the summer of 1948, Akhmedov was interviewed at length by Philby, albeit to no apparent effect (ibid, pp. 188-97). Writing four years before Philby's death, he concludes that 'he will pass into oblivion, into an empty abyss during one of his drunken hours, as did Burgess, and join the company of butchers, henchmen, headhunters.... the despised enemies of the unfortunate Soviet people' (ibid, p. 198).

¹³ See above, note 7.

¹⁴ Quoted, Macintyre, op. cit., p. 97: see also Andrew and Gordievsky, p. 306.

Turkey. This appointment was a crucial one. During the second world war, at the crossroads between Europe and the middle east, Istanbul had become a hotbed of international espionage, with the intelligence services of no less than seventeen countries or exiled governments, including the Axis, allied and neutral states, operating in the city. ‘A whole industry arose on the basis of forged and phony information sold to multiple clients... The stakes were high and the measures taken were desperate’.¹⁵ At the start of the cold war, Turkey’s international position remained crucial, as Stalin demanded effective control of the Dardanelles and Bosphorus, with Soviet bases at the straits giving the USSR free naval access to the Mediterranean, besides territorial concessions on Turkey’s north-eastern frontier¹⁶ and, in all probability, the conversion of Turkey into something like a Soviet satellite.¹⁷ These demands were rejected by Turkey, and before long by the western powers, who insisted on preserving Turkey’s territorial integrity, as well as the international rules regarding the straits established by the Montreux Convention of 1936, which had been accepted by the Soviet government at the time.

While secretly working for Soviet intelligence, Philby had to continue to direct British intelligence operations in Turkey, or at least pretend to do so, so as to maintain his credibility in London. As Ben Macintyre aptly puts it, he ‘made elaborate plans to combat Soviet intelligence, and then immediately betrayed them to Soviet intelligence’.¹⁸ According to one account - written before Philby’s own memoirs were published - his connection with Soviet intelligence was known to his superiors in London, who had ‘given permission to play the full double game with the Russians’, but there is no clear evidence that this was so, and good reasons to conclude it was not.¹⁹ What is certain is that Istanbul was a vital centre for MI6, since it was, in Philby’s words, ‘the main southern base for intelligence work directed against the Soviet Union and the Socialist countries of the Balkans and Central Europe’.²⁰ His duties for the British included activities in neighbouring Arab countries, to which he made regular journeys.²¹ In the Balkans, Istanbul was a base for operations in Albania, into which the British and Americans infiltrated numerous guerrilla fighters between 1947 and 1951, in an abortive attempt to overthrow Enver Hoxha’s hard-line communist regime. Nearly all these

¹⁵ Rubin, op. cit., p. 5.

¹⁶ That is, the retrocession of the north-eastern Turkish provinces of Kars and Ardahan. Following the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-8, these had been ceded to Russia under the Treaty of Berlin of 1878. Under the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk of 1917 between Russia and the central powers, they were returned to Turkey, although not actually re-occupied by Turkish forces until October 1920.

¹⁷ There is an extensive literature on this topic: see, in particular, Bruce Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2nd edn., 1994); Ekavi Athanassopoulou, *Turkey – Anglo-American Security Interests, 1945-1952* (London, Routledge, 2012); Harry N. Howard, *Turkey, the Straits and US Policy* (Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins Press, 1974).

¹⁸ Macintyre, op. cit., p. 101.

¹⁹ Page, Leitch and Knightly, op. cit., p. 192: no source is given for this information, which is not confirmed by other accounts of Philby’s career, or his own memoirs. If Philby had really been acting as a ‘triple agent’ for MI6, then he would presumably have been used as a means of feeding false information to Soviet intelligence. Given that the KGB could quite possibly have realised this, it is extremely unlikely that he would have fled to the USSR, as he eventually did in January 1963. Equally, British intelligence would have protected him at this point. According to Philip Knightly, within the KGB there was also a group, led by the counter-intelligence officer Elena Modrzhinskaya, which suspected that Philby was actually a ‘triple agent’ for the British: Philip Knightly, ‘Introduction’ in Philby, op. cit., pp. xi-xii.

²⁰ Philby, op. cit., p. 131.

²¹ Cookridge, op. cit., p.142.

were caught and killed by the Albanian security forces. There had clearly been security leaks on the British side, and Philby was later regarded as a prime suspect – a role which he later admitted, saying that he had no regrets.²²

Aside from the Albanian fiasco, the many books on Philby say relatively little about his activities in Turkey between 1946 and 1949, and we are mainly reliant on what he tells us himself in his memoirs. Hence, while we know something of his work for British intelligence, we know little about what he was passing on to his controller in the Soviet embassy in Ankara, Yuri Feotkisov. By his own account, his activities involved regular cooperation with the Turkish intelligence service, or National Security Services Directorate (Milli Emniyet Hizmetleri Riyaseti), predecessor to the current National Intelligence Organisation (Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı or MİT). On Philby's admission, the Emniyet knew of and tolerated the activities of SIS in Turkey on the understanding that they were directed solely against the Soviet Union and the Balkans, and not against Turkey. To ensure its cooperation, the British paid the Istanbul office of the Emniyet a monthly subsidy, camouflaged as payment for enquiries carried out on behalf of the SIS. Philby's main contact in the Emniyet office in Istanbul was an agent whom he nicknames 'Uncle Ned', with regular business being conducted by a member of the Whittal family, leading and long-established members of the British community in Turkey. Uncle Ned's superior, and the head of the Istanbul office, is referred to as 'Aunt Jane'. Philby is patronising and arrogant about the Emniyet, saying that his 'contacts with Uncle Ned, Aunt Jane and their colleagues confirmed a suspicion I had already formed, namely, that the security services of the minor powers lack the resources and experience for effective action'.²³ What he does not say, of course, is that at least they had not been penetrated at the top by Soviet agents, as the SIS had been.

Besides the Albanian débacle, and regular intelligence gathering, Philby's other activities in Turkey included organising the establishment of resistance organisations in the neighbouring republics of Georgia and Armenia, and assessing how to resist a possible land invasion of Anatolia by the Soviet Union. On the first score, the aim was to establish resident agents in Tbilisi and Yerevan, who could then organise resistance movements. In fact, the Georgian project was the only one which started to get off the ground. This required a preliminary infiltration into Georgia of volunteers from the Georgian refugee community. They would attempt to discover whether safe houses could be found in Georgia, whether legal identities could be obtained 'by purchase or otherwise', and reliable courier lines established.²⁴ In the attempt to achieve this, the cooperation of 'Tefik Bey' (presumably Tefik), the Emniyet director in Erzurum, was essential. Eventually, two young members of the Georgian emigré community in France were recruited. Both of them had been born in Paris and, in Philby's words 'knew Georgia only by hearsay'. At some point – Philby does not give us the date, but it would appear to have been in 1948 or early 1949 – they were sent over the border, armed with weapons and gold coins, 'in the neighbourhood of Pozov' (sic, should be Posov, now a road crossing point between Turkey and Georgia). This was dangerously near the then Soviet garrison town of Akhaltsikhe. According to Philby's account of a report from the Emniyet, '[The] two agents had been put across at such-and-such a time, so many minutes later there had been a burst of fire, and one of the two men had fallen - the other was last seen striding

²² Macintyre, op. cit., p. 138.

²³ Philby, op. cit., pp. 134-5.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 140.

through a sparse wood away from the Turkish frontier. He was never heard of again'.²⁵ There is no clear evidence that Philby had betrayed them, but it seems extremely likely that he had.

Another project in which Philby was engaged, and which he tells us something about, was a survey of eastern Anatolia, and Turkey's border with the then USSR, which was again carried out in collaboration with 'Tefik'. To this end, he acquired a special camera with which he photographed the Turkish-Soviet frontier, in the company of 'Major Fevzi, one of Tefik's officers'. By the time, Philby left Istanbul in 1949 only about half the frontier had been covered, however.²⁶ More broadly, he surveyed the territory east of Ankara, with a view to assessing whether a possible Soviet invasion of Turkey could be resisted. With the weakness of Turkey's armed forces at the time – one of the main reasons why President İsmet İnönü had kept Turkey out of the second world war – 'the prospect of successful resistance anywhere east of Ankara were rated very low. The best we could hope for in Turkey, therefore, was the establishment of guerrilla bases from which the Soviet communications, running through the plains, could be harried'. This implied 'an Anglo-American intention to abandon Turkey to its fate as soon as war broke out'. This intention would have to be hidden from the Turks, otherwise 'the resulting storm would blow away their illusions about the West and force them to come to terms with the Soviet Union.'²⁷

The aftermath, 1949-63, and more unanswered questions

In September 1949, Philby reached the summit of his career, when he arrived in Washington, officially as the First Secretary at the British Embassy, but actually the chief of MI6 in America, as well as one of the USSR's most important secret agents.²⁸ Since his posting involved liaison with the CIA, he was now in a position to betray American as well as British secrets to Soviet intelligence. His career unravelled in 1951 when Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean were unmasked as Soviet agents. Following a tip-off from Philby, they escaped to Moscow before they could be arrested. At this stage, Philby was strongly suspected, so that he was obliged to resign from MI6 in July 1951. Over the following years, he worked as a journalist, and in 1955 he was officially exonerated in a statement to the House of Commons by the then Foreign Secretary, Harold Macmillan. At this stage, as Philby later put it, '[T]he evidence was inconclusive; they could not charge me and did not want to clear me'.²⁹ In August 1956, he was appointed Middle East correspondent of the British weeklies *The Observer* and *The Economist*, based in Beirut, where he resumed some work for MI6. However, by 1962 the clouds of official suspicion were again gathering. Accordingly his former friend and MI6 colleague Nicholas Elliot, never a member of the Soviet espionage group, was sent to Beirut to interview him, arriving on 10 January 1963 Philby made a partial confession, but before any further steps were taken he escaped to Moscow on 23 January 1963, where he died in 1988.³⁰

²⁵ Ibid, pp. 143-4.

²⁶ Ibid, pp. 141, 144.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 137.

²⁸ This final phase in Philby's career is covered in a number of sources, but see in particular Macintyre, op. cit., Chs. 13-18.

²⁹ Philby, op. cit., p. 197.

³⁰ Macintyre, op. cit., pp. 249-60. Macintyre concludes that MI6 deliberately allowed Philby to escape, since his trial would have brought out 'politically damaging and profoundly embarrassing' evidence: *ibid.*, p. 260.

While the final stages of Philby's career are quite well known, mystery surrounds important aspects of his work in Turkey between 1947 and 1949. The first is that his analysis of western defence plans for Turkey, such as they were at the time, leaves out the likelihood that if they had invaded Turkey, the powerful Soviet force in Bulgaria could have been used for a relatively easy advance on Istanbul from the north-west. The Soviet invasion, if it had happened, could thus have been a pincers movement, with simultaneous advances from both east and west. Why Philby neglects this point is unclear, although it can be assumed that it would have strengthened his conclusion that the western powers would quickly 'abandon Turkey to its fate' if the USSR invaded.

Second, since it can be assumed that Philby forwarded his analysis to his Soviet controllers, we need to know why they never acted on them. Even without information from Philby, Soviet intelligence could easily have reached similar conclusions about Turkey's weak defences. Hence, why did Stalin not launch the invasion which the West apparently feared? Put alternatively, how did Britain and the US fend off this threat in perilous conditions? The point is crucial since, while the apparent Soviet threat to Turkey arose in 1945, it was not until 1952, when it became a member of NATO, that Turkey had a clear and unequivocal commitment to its defence from the western powers.

Answering these questions is difficult, since we do not know exactly when its demands to Turkey of 1945-6 were abandoned by Moscow. Officially, they were not given up until May 1953, shortly after Stalin's death, when the Soviet government publicly announced that it had withdrawn its territorial claims on Turkey,³¹ although it was not absolutely clear even at this point that the demand for changes in the straits regime was being dropped.³² However, in October 1946, while not explicitly abandoning the idea, Moscow informed the British government that convening a conference to consider changes to the Montreux Convention would be 'premature', and did not clearly press for this thereafter.³³ When a new Soviet ambassador was appointed to Turkey in 1948 'he was instructed to maintain Soviet demands and to be reserved in his relations with the Turks, but not to undertake any positive actions'.³⁴ All that we can say, therefore, is that Stalin decided to soft-pedal his demands sometime during the autumn of 1946.

The timing is crucial, since not long before he had also undertaken to withdraw the Soviet troops from northern Iran. These had originally been stationed as part of the allied occupation of Iran beginning in 1941, and were supposed to have been withdrawn within six months of the end of the second world war (i.e., 2 March 1946). Their continued presence was apparently intended to secure the separation of the Iranian province of Azerbaijan under Soviet control and to establish a Russian oil company in the north of the country. Stalin's plans for Iran, and his demands from Turkey were thus quite similar, as well as simultaneous, and it is thus likely that his decisions to back down over both were closely connected.

³¹ See above, note 16.

³² Ferenc A. Vali, *Bridge across the Bosphorus: the Foreign Policy of Turkey* (Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins Press, 1971) pp. 174-5. See also Alvin Z. Rubinstein, *Soviet Policy toward Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan: the Dynamics of Influence* (New York, Praeger, 1982) pp. 14-15.

³³ Kuniholm, op. cit., pp. 372-3.

³⁴ Geoffrey Roberts, 'Moscow's Cold War on the Periphery: Soviet Policy in Greece, Iran and Turkey, 1943-8', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.46, No.1 (2011) p. 78.

Unlike that over Turkey, the apparent Soviet retreat over Iran has been the subject of a good deal of scholarly enquiry, but with conflicting interpretations. On one side of the argument, Geoffrey Roberts suggests that Stalin's main concern was to preserve Soviet power in Eastern Europe, and he was reluctant to jeopardise this by pressing his claims over the 'periphery', including Iran and Turkey – in effect that he never pursued his claims against Turkey and Iran seriously.³⁵ However, in an article published in the *New York Times* in 1957, former President Harry Truman claimed that 'I personally saw to it that Stalin was informed that I had given orders to our military chiefs to prepare for the movement of our ground, sea and air forces. Stalin then did what I knew he would do. He moved his troops out [of Iran]'.³⁶ In January 1980, Senator Henry Jackson went further than this, by claiming that Truman had summoned Soviet Andrei Gromyko to the White House, and 'told him that the United States would use the atomic bomb if the Red Army failed to evacuate Iran immediately'.³⁷

Against this, Barry M. Blechman and Douglas M. Hart report that Truman never issued Stalin with an ultimatum over Iran; there were no military threats and 'not even the hint of a nuclear threat'.³⁸ In between, Kuross A. Samii and J. Philipp Rosenberg draw attention to the meeting between Stalin and General Walter Bedell Smith, the newly appointed US ambassador in Moscow, on 4 April 1946 – that is, over a month after the 2 March deadline for withdrawal had passed to no effect. Smith reported that at this meeting he had warned Stalin that '[I]f the people of the United States were ever to become convinced that we are faced with a wave of progressive aggression on the part of any powerful nation or group of nations, we would react exactly as we have in the past'.³⁹ Ten days later, the Soviet ambassador in Tehran announced that there would be an 'unconditional' Soviet troop withdrawal from northern Iran, and on 21 May, the Iranian government confirmed that this had been done.⁴⁰ It was evidently in this spirit that a few months later Stalin decided to put his demands over Turkey on the back burner, even if he did not abandon them entirely.

Hanging over these events was the brutal fact that in 1946 the US had the atomic bomb, whereas the USSR did not. It may be argued that Truman did not intend to launch a nuclear war, but Stalin could not have been certain that this was not the case, and it seems overwhelmingly likely that this was responsible for his diplomatic-cum-military retreat. As Kuross Samii concludes:

[W]hat makes any threat persuasive is the perception of the power required to carry out the threat and the willingness to use that power. In 1946, despite the demobilization process, the United States was perceived to be the greatest military power in the world. As for the willingness to use that power, it may be suggested that any sane government must have taken

³⁵ Ibid, p. 59.

³⁶ Quoted, Kuross A. Samii, 'Truman against Stalin in Iran: a Tale of Three Messages', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.23, No.1 (1987) p. 95.

³⁷ *Time* magazine, 28 January 1980: quoted, ibid, p.96.

³⁸ Barry N. Blechman and Douglas M. Hart, 'Afghanistan and the 1946 Iran Analogy', *Survival*, Vol.22, No.6 (1980), p. 25. A similar argument is advanced by James A. Thorpe, 'Truman's Ultimatum to Stalin on the 1946 Azerbaijan Crisis: the Making of a Myth', *Journal of Politics*, Vol.40, No.1 (1978) pp.188-95.

³⁹ Quoted, J. Phillip Rosenberg, 'The Cheshire Ultimatum: Truman's Message to Stalin in the 1946 Azerbaijan Crisis', *Journal of Politics*, Vol.41, No.3 (1979) p. 937, and Samii, op. cit., p. 103.

⁴⁰ Samii, op. cit., p. 105.

seriously the slightest hint of a threat by a man who some months earlier had ordered atomic bombs to be dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.⁴¹

Ironically, some 42 years after the event, Kim Philby pointed to the same conclusion. As he told the British journalist Phillip Knightly, in an interview in Moscow just three months before his death in 1988, ‘In 1945 the Soviet Union was exhausted. The United States had the atomic bomb. What would we hope to gain by deliberately attacking Western Europe? No one wants to be incinerated’.⁴² Philby may have been a calculating liar, but his judgements could still be sharp and accurate.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 103

⁴² Knightly, op. cit., p. ix.