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# The Spy to End Spies

*On Richard Sorge – By John Le Carré*

THE RUSSIAN ARMIES were driving in triumph into the heart of Germany. Jubilant Moscow crowds proclaimed the anniversary of the Russian revolution. In Sugamo prison, in Tokyo, Richard Sorge, subject of the vanquished, agent of the victors, denied by both, walked to his execution: the date was 7 November 1944.

This was not the only irony. In 1941 Sorge had given to his Russian masters the exact date on which the German armies would invade the Soviet Union. At the hour of victory, this report was still rotting in a file marked "dubious intelligence," and the two Soviet officers who had controlled Sorge's activities lay in their graves, purged as enemies of the people.

On 5 November 1964, Richard Sorge was awarded the supreme decoration of "Hero of the Soviet Union." The Soviet press burst into song about his great contribution to the war effort; a Moscow street, a Russian tanker, and a four-Kopek stamp now all commemorate his name. General Berzin and Colonel Borovich of Soviet Military Intelligence have been awarded posthumous recognition. In the atheists' paradise, their souls, like Sorge's, may survive in peace.

In recognising Sorge the Soviet Union has made an unprecedented recognition of his profession:

> A spy is above all a man of politics [...] he must have the breadth of thought of a strategist, and meticulous powers of observation. Espionage is a continuous and demanding labour which never ceases [...]
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> Least of all was Sorge like those secret agents whom certain Western authors have created. He did not force open safes in order to steal documents. the documents were shown to him by their very owners. He did not fire his pistol to penetrate the places which he had to penetrate: the doors were graciously opened to him by the guardians of the secret [...]

The doors were indeed open to Sorge in Tokyo: in Moscow they were closed at the only time it mattered.

Two Oxford dons, Deakin and Storry, have at last achieved what eluded all other biographers of this strange man, a cool, historical narrative, scrupulously documented, of Richard Sorge's life and work.[1] It is not a book exclusively for students of espionage. Like the Soviet commentator, the authors see Sorge as a man of politics; their admirable quest took them from the hectic, maladroit conspiracies of German Underground Communism in the 'twenties to the little drawing rooms of commercial hotels in Saigon; their researches zigzag to England and America; in pursuing the early life of their subject, they breathe the common air of Hiss, Chambers, and Maclean; their world, in these early pages, is animated not only by the great historical movements between the wars, but by

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[1] *The Case of Richard Sorge*. By Frederick William Deakin and Richard Storry, Chatto & Windus, 35 s.

the lonely deciders who haunt the fringes of the political desert. A lost community of displaced dreamers is here revealed; Sorge's ghost has marched to glory, but behind him in wretched procession come the lost intellectuals, the lost patriots, the lost priests, defending countries and religions of which our children may never hear, a fanatic riff-raff from a ruined century.

What man emerges? Deakin and Storry offer no real analysis of Sorge's motive. Perhaps that is the book's great merit: it leaves us to write the last chapter for ourselves. The material for doing so is there in plenty. Sorge was an intellectual of sorts; he had at least a robust and competent intelligence. He says of himself – he was not a modest man – that in peaceful times he would have been a scholar. He was a comedian in the sense of Graham Greene, an artist in the sense of Thomas Mann. Like Spinell in Thomas Mann's *Tristan* he is always working at an unfinished book. It was at his bedside, together with an open volume of 16th-century Japanese verse, at the time of his arrest. He played the Bohemian, keeping a pet owl in a cage in his room, drinking and whoring his way to triumph. He was an entertainer; people (even his victims) loved him; soldiers warmed to him immediately. He was a man's man, and like most self-appointed romantics, had no use for women outside the bedroom. He was an exhibitionist, I suspect, and the audience was always of his own sex. He had courage, great courage, and a romantic's sense of mission: when his colleagues were arrested he lay in bed drinking saké, waiting for the end. He wanted to train as a singer; he is not the first spy to be recruited from the ranks of failed artists. A French journalist describes him as possessing a "strange combination of charm and brutality." At times, he undoubtedly betrayed the symptoms of an alcoholic.

These then are the characteristics he brought to spying. What did spying give to him? A stage I think; a ship to sail upon his own romantic seas; a string to tie together a bundle of middle-range talents; a fool's bladder with which to beat society; and a Marxist whip with which to scourge himself. This sensual priest had found his real métier; he was born wonderfully in his own century. Only his Gods were out of date.