

# Star spies come in out of the Russian cold

Edmund Stevens, Moscow, Saturday

THE SOVIET decision to glorify some of their own star spies, may well have been sparked by the publicity surrounding the case of Oleg Penkovsky, the high official executed on charges of spying for Britain and the US in the spring of 1963. The object of the new publicity was presumably to deaden the impact of such past and future relations by demonstrating that the Russians' own spies are no slouches.

The hero first chosen for glorification was Richard Sorge, head of the Soviet wartime espionage ring in Tokyo. First as correspondent for the "Frankfurter Zeitung" and later as German Embassy press attaché, Sorge had followed top military secrets to Moscow, including advance notice of the scheduled date of the Nazi invasion of the U.S.S.R. which Stalin chose to ignore.

Sorge was executed by the Japanese in 1944 and for 20 years thereafter the Soviets made no gesture of recognition and appeared to ignore his very existence though the Sorge case was widely reported throughout the rest of the world.

## Film last year

The curtain-raiser on Sorge was the film titled "Who are you, Dr Sorge?" released in the summer of 1964. Billed as a joint Franco-Italo-Japanese production, it was presumably Soviet inspired.

Thereafter, all the stops were pulled. Sorge was posthumously proclaimed a Hero of the Soviet Union. Newspapers, periodicals and bookstores were suddenly awash in a flood of Sorge literature. There were a dozen serialised biographies, scores of interviews with people who had allegedly known him and a long list of books; a play about Sorge was written and produced by several theatres.

The Sorge cult has since simmered down in the Moscow Press but the pot continues to boil in the provinces.

The runner-up in the Soviet spy popularity contest is Col. Rudolph Abel. He still has a long way to go to achieve anything like Sorge's fame and glamour, but he has the considerable advantage of being still alive. Convicted and sentenced to 30 years by a US court, Abel was later exchanged for U2 pilot, Gary Powers. No articles or books directly naming Abel have yet been published, but he has been lionised on television.

A novel by Vadim Kozhevnikov, titled "Shield and Sword" about Soviet wartime intelligence inside Germany is currently being serialised in the literary monthly "Znamy."

The hero, Alexander Belov, is frankly modelled on Abel's career at the time. It does not go into his post-war activities, but there are rumours that Abel himself plans to publish his more recent American memoirs.

## Russian 'Holmes'

While publicising real master spies is a new and radical departure (until not long ago, their very existence was officially denied) detective and intelligence fiction is no novelty in Soviet Russia. The best known and most durable character in this field is Major Nikolai Ivanovich Pronien. His creator, Lev Ovalov, has obviously read Western fiction. For a time, Pronien behaves rather like a poor man's Sherlock Holmes, complete with his own Doctor Watson, his assistant, Victor Zheleznov.

Basically, Pronien is more of a Soviet James Bond. No dashing figure but a rather seedy greying man in his fifties whose one recorded romantic memory is of a gipsy singer he once rescued from a fate worse than death.

The bond between Ovalov and Fleming seems at times too close for mere coincidence. This is especially true of Fleming's "On Her Majesty's Secret Service," and Ovalov's "Dusya's Chickets."

Both stories deal with bacteriological warfare. Fleming's villain is out to decimate Britain's turkey and poultry population. Ovalov's villain seeks to do exactly the same thing to Russia's chickens.

## Same weapons

The weapons they use are virtually identical: test tubes containing deadly viruses administered to the feathered victims by unsuspecting girls in the naive belief that this some kind of tonic or elixir intended for improving the breed.

Ovalov and Bond and their respective heroes were lined up on opposite sides of the cold war. This political angle explains the sharpness of Soviet attacks on James Bond books. It should be pointed out in fairness, that Ovalov's stories, including the one on poultry, was published several years before Fleming got around to creating James Bond.

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