

## T h e V o l k o v C a s e

I now come to the Volkov case, which I propose to describe in some detail, both because of its intrinsic interest and because it nearly put an end to a promising career. The case began in August and ended in September of 1945. It was a memorable summer for me because it yielded me my first sights of Rome, Athens, and Istanbul. But my delighted impressions of Istanbul were affected by the frequent reflection that this might be the last memorable summer I was destined to enjoy. For the Volkov business, which was what took me to the Bosphorus, proved to be a very narrow squeak indeed.

I had scarcely settled down to my desk one August morning when I received a summons from the Chief. He pushed across at me a sheaf of papers and asked me to look them through. The top paper was a brief letter to the Foreign Office from Knox Helm, then Minister at the British Embassy in Turkey. It drew

attention to the attachments and asked for instructions. The attachments were a number of minutes that had passed between and within the British Embassy and Consulate-General, from which the following story emerged.

A certain Konstantin Volkov, a Vice-Consul attached to the Soviet Consulate-General in Istanbul, had approached a Mr. Page, his opposite number in the British Consulate-General, and asked for asylum in Britain for himself and his wife. He claimed that, although nominally a Vice-Consul, he was in fact an officer of the NKVD. He said that his wife was in a deplorably nervous state, and Page remarked that Volkov himself was less than rock-steady. In support of his request for asylum, Volkov promised to reveal details of the headquarters of the NKVD, in which apparently he had worked for many years. He also offered details of Soviet networks and agents operating abroad. *Inter alia*, he claimed to know the real names of three Soviet agents working in Britain. Two of them were in the Foreign Office; one was head of a counter-espionage organisation in London. Having delivered himself of his shopping list, he stipulated with the greatest vehemence that no mention of his approach should be relayed to London by telegram, on the ground that the Russians had broken a variety of British cyphers. The rest of the papers were of little interest, representing only off-the-cuff comments by various members of the Embassy, some of them quite flippant in tone. What proved to be of some importance later was that the Embassy had respected Volkov's stipulation about communications, and had sent

the papers home, securely but slowly, by bag. Thus it was over a week after Volkov's approach to Page that the material was examined by anyone competent to assess its importance.

That "anyone" was myself; and the reader will not reproach me with boasting when I claim that I was indeed competent to assess the importance of the material. Two Soviet agents in the Foreign Office, one head of a counter-espionage organisation in London! I stared at the papers rather longer than necessary to compose my thoughts. I rejected the idea of suggesting caution in case Volkov's approach should prove to be a provocation. It would be useless in the short run and might possibly compromise me at a later date. The only course was to put a bold face on it. I told the Chief that I thought we were on to something of the greatest importance. I would like a little time to dig into the background and, in the light of any further information on the subject, to make appropriate recommendations for action. The Chief acquiesced, instructing me to report first thing next morning and, in the meanwhile, to keep the papers strictly to myself.

I took the papers back to my office, telling my secretary that I was not to be disturbed, unless the Chief himself called. I very much wanted to be alone. My request for a little time "to dig into the background" had been eyewash. I was pretty certain that we had never heard of Volkov; and he, presumably to enhance his value to us, had framed his shopping list in such vague terms that it offered no leads for immediate investigation. Still, I had much food for

thought. From the first, it seemed to me that the time factor was vital. Owing to Volkov's veto on telegraphic communications, the case had taken ten days to reach me. Personally, I thought that his fears were exaggerated. Our cyphers were based on the one-time pad system, which is supposed to be foolproof, if properly used; and our cypher discipline was strict. Yet, if Volkov so wished, I had no objection to ruling out swift communication.

Another train of thought soon claimed my attention. The case was of such delicacy that the Chief had insisted on my handling it myself. But, once the decisions had been taken in London, all action would devolve on our people in Istanbul. It would be impossible for me, with slow bag communications, to direct their day-to-day, hour-to-hour actions. The case would escape my control, with unpredictable results. The more I thought, the more convinced I became that I should go to Istanbul myself, to implement the course of action that I was to recommend to the Chief. The action itself required little thought. It involved meeting Volkov, bedding him down with his wife in one of our safe houses in Istanbul, and spiriting him away, with or without the connivance of the Turks, to British-occupied territory in Egypt. By the time I put the papers in my personal safe and left Broadway, I had decided that my main recommendation to the Chief would be that he should instruct me to go to Istanbul to continue handling the case on the spot. That evening, I worked late. The situation seemed to call for urgent action of an extra-curricular nature.

Next morning, I reported to the Chief that, although we had several Volkovs on file, none of them matched our man in Istanbul. I repeated my view that the case was of great potential importance. Dwelling on the delays involved in communication by bag, I recommended, rather diffidently, that somebody fully briefed should be sent out from London to take charge of the case on the spot. "Just what I was thinking myself," replied the Chief. But, having raised my hopes, he promptly dashed them. The previous evening, he said, he had met Brigadier Douglas Roberts in clubland. Roberts was then head of Security Intelligence (Middle East), MI5's regional organisation based in Cairo. He was enjoying the fag-end of a spell of home leave. The Chief had been well impressed by him, and his intention, so he told me, was to ask Sir David Petrie, the head of MI5, to send Roberts straight out to Istanbul to take charge of the Volkov case.

I could find nothing to say against the proposal. Although I had formed no very high opinion of Roberts's ability, he had all the paper qualifications for the task on hand. He was a senior officer; his Brigadiers uniform would doubtless impress Volkov. He knew the area and had worked with the Turkish secret services, whose cooperation might prove to be necessary. Above all, he spoke fluent Russian—an unassailably strong point in his favour. In despondent mood, I went through other aspects of the case with the Chief, notably the need for getting Foreign Office approval for our plan of action. As I left, the Chief

asked me to be available in the afternoon, since he hoped to see both Petrie and Roberts in the course of the morning.

During the lunch interval, I railed against the wretched luck that had brought the Chief and Roberts together the previous evening. There seemed nothing that I could do. Suspenseful as it would be, I just had to sit back and let events take their course; hoping that my work the night before would bear fruit before Roberts got his teeth into the case. But I was in for yet another lesson in everyday philosophy. On return to Broadway, I found a summons from the Chief awaiting me. He looked thoroughly disconcerted and plunged immediately into his story; from his first words, I realised that luck, against which I had railed so bitterly, had veered sharply in my favour. Roberts, it appeared, though doubtless as lion-hearted as the next man, had an unconquerable distaste for flying. He had made his arrangements to return by boat from Liverpool early the following week. Nothing that the Chief or Petrie could say would induce him to change his plans. So we were back where we started from that morning.

I had originally hoped that I could so manoeuvre the discussion with the Chief that he himself would suggest my flying to Istanbul. But the Roberts interlude spurred me to direct action. So I said that, in view of the Brigadier's defection, I could only suggest that I should go out in his place. It would not take me long to brief my deputy on any outstanding business. I could leave as soon as all the necessary clearances had been obtained. With obvious relief,

the Chief agreed. Together we went to the Foreign Office, where I was given a letter to present to Knox Helm, asking him to give me all reasonable facilities for the fulfilment of my mission. My only other call was on General Hill, the head of our Coding Section. He supplied me with my own personal one-time cypher pads, and lent me one of his girls to refresh me in their use. This caused a little extra delay—not altogether unwelcome, since it gave me more time to adjust my thoughts to action in Istanbul. Three full days elapsed between the arrival of the Istanbul papers in Broadway and the take-off of my aeroplane bound for Cairo en route for Istanbul.

My neighbour on the aeroplane was taciturn. Few aircraft companions bother me long, however talkative they may be by nature. For me, flying is conducive to reflection, and I had plenty to occupy my mind. For some time, I tossed around in my mind a problem which baffled me then and baffles me to this day: namely, the oddness of the reaction, shared by the Embassy in Turkey, the Foreign Office, the Chief and Sir David Petrie, to Volkov's terror of communication by telegraph. The oddness of their reaction consisted in the fact that they eschewed telegrams mentioning Volkov, and *only* telegrams mentioning Volkov. Telegraphic correspondence on every other subject under the sun, including many that must have been Top Secret, went on gaily as before. If we believed Volkov's warning, we should have concluded that all telegraphy was dangerous. If we disbelieved it, we should have instructed our station in Istanbul to take the necessary action without delay. As it was,

the only result of Volkov's tip was to delay, by two or three weeks, action on his own behalf. The answer obviously lay deep in the psychology of wishful thinking. Not being an expert on codes and cyphers, I concluded that it was no business of mine to draw attention to the gross inconsistency of our conduct. Anyway, there were more immediate problems to be considered.

It had been agreed at the Foreign Office that I should use Page for the purpose of re-establishing contact with Volkov and arranging a rendez-vous. To the latter, I would be accompanied by John Reed, a First Secretary of the Embassy, who had earlier served in Moscow and passed one of the Foreign Office exams in Russian. These arrangements were made subject to the approval of the Ambassador, Sir Maurice Peterson, whom I knew from Spanish days; but the Foreign Office warned me in pressing terms to approach Helm, the Minister, first. Helm, it appeared, had begun life in the Consular Service, and was still touchy about matters of status and protocol. I did not anticipate much difficulty from Helm, in which I was not altogether right. The crux of my problem, it seemed to me, was the interview between Volkov and myself, with Reed in attendance. If it ever took place, Reed would get the shock of his life if Volkov started reeling off names of Soviet agents in British Government service. It would be charitable, I thought, to spare him such surprises. How to make sure?

There was obviously no means of making sure. But I thought that I had a slender chance if I played it

right. I decided that my first objective was to get hold of Reed and convince him that my mission was of a severely restricted scope. I was not authorised to discuss with Volkov the details of his information. It would be positively dangerous if he made disclosure prematurely, that is, before he was safe on British soil. My instructions were to prevent at all costs any deviation of the interview into such channels. I was in Istanbul solely to get Volkov away to safety, where he could be interrogated by those qualified for the job. I thought that I could string Reed along further by hinting that we were by no means satisfied that Volkov was not a provocateur. It would be most unfortunate, therefore, if his information was given currency before we could assess its authenticity. I felt that I could do no better. An expert, of course, could have driven a coach-and-four through my fabrications. But Reed was not an expert, and he might prove pliable. Towards evening, my rising spirits were given another boost. The pilot announced on the intercom that, owing to electrical storms over Malta, we were being diverted to Tunis. Subject to improved weather conditions, we would fly on to Cairo via Malta next day. Another twenty-four hours! My luck was holding.

On the afternoon of the following day, we arrived at last in Cairo, too late to catch the onward plane for Istanbul. So it was not until the day after that, Friday, that I reached my destination. I was met at the airport by Cyril Machray, the head of our Istanbul station, whom I had to brief on the nature of my mission. Such were the relations between the Foreign Service and SIS in those days that nobody on the

Embassy or the Consulate-General had thought of consulting him about Volkov—and, of course, we had not dared to telegraph him from London. We called together that afternoon on Knox Helm, to whom I presented the letter from the Foreign Office. But if I expected enthusiastic support for our plans, I was soon disabused. Some years later, after Helm had got his Embassy, in Budapest, a colleague told me that he was the most helpful and understanding of Ambassadors. But when I saw him, he was still only a Minister, and as prickly as a thorn-bush. He demurred stubbornly. Our suggestions might well cause embarrassment to the Embassy; he would surely have to consult the Ambassador before I went any further. He asked me to call on him next morning (another day wasted), then hospitably took me home for drinks. Also of the party was the Military Attache, who suggested that I should dine with him at the Park Hotel. We had scarcely taken ten paces from Helm's residence when he turned to me and said; "Of all the bastards . . . !" He, too, evidently had his troubles with Helm.

When I called on Helm next morning, he looked at me accusingly. "You never told me that you knew the Ambassador!" After that, our conversation scarcely got off the ground, but I gathered from Helm's manner that there were also reservations in Peterson's mind. Rather grudgingly, he told me that the Ambassador wanted me to spend the following day, Sunday, with him on the yacht "Makouk." It would put off from the Kabatash landing-stage at 11 A.M. Mean-

while, I was to do nothing. So the whole weekend was shot.

Most visitors to Istanbul know the "Makouk," the Ambassadorial yacht, originally built for Abbas Hilmi of Egypt. It was a large, flat-bottomed vessel, well suited to the smooth waters of the Nile, but it rolled somewhat in the swell of Marmara. There were several other guests on board, and it was not until after lunch, when we were anchored off Trotsky's Prinkipo, that I could talk to Peterson in conditions of reasonable privacy while the other guests gambolled with the porpoises. As he did not break the ice, I did so myself, remarking that I had heard that he had some objections to the plans I had brought with me from London. What plans? he asked—a question that gave me another sidelight on Helm. He listened attentively to my exposition, and then asked one question: had we consulted the Foreign Office? But yes, I answered. The Foreign Office had approved everything, and I had brought Helm a letter asking him to offer all reasonable facilities. "Then there's no more to be said," he replied. "Go ahead." The last excuse for delay had gone.

That evening, Machray and I discussed the plan of campaign in detail. We exchanged several ideas for spiritedly Volkov away, some involving Turkish cooperation, some not. It seemed clear that we could not decide definitely which was the best plan until we had spoken to Volkov himself. Much might depend on his own position and his particular circumstances—his hours of work, the degree of freedom of move-

ment he enjoyed, etc. The first step was to establish contact with him, and clearly our best instrument was Page, of the Consulate-General, whom Volkov had approached in the first place. Next morning, accordingly, Machray invited Page to come over to his office, and I explained to him as much as he needed to know, namely, that I would like him to make an appointment for me to see Volkov some time that afternoon in conditions of greatest secrecy. (I did not want a morning appointment, because I needed time to brief John Reed on the lines already described.) We discussed several possible places for the meeting, but opted finally for the simplest. Page said that he frequently had routine consular business with Volkov. It would be perfectly normal practice for him to invite Volkov over to his office for a talk. At long last, as Page reached for the receiver, zero hour had arrived.

Page got on to the Soviet Consulate-General, and asked for Volkov. A man's voice came faintly on the line, but Page's half of the conversation meant nothing to me. But Page's face was a study in puzzlement, telling me that a hitch had developed. When he put the receiver down, he shook his head at me. "He can't come?" I asked. "That's funny." "It's a great deal funnier than you think," Page answered. "I asked for Volkov and a man came on, saying he was Volkov. But it wasn't Volkov. I know Volkov's voice perfectly well, I've spoken to him dozens of times." Page tried again, but this time got no further than the telephone operator. "She said he was out," said Page indignantly. "A minute ago, she put me on to him!" We looked at each other, but none of us could find a constructive

idea. I finally suggested that there might be some flap on at the Soviet Consulate-General, and that we had better try again the following day in hopes of better luck. I began to feel strongly that, somewhere along the line, something decisive had happened. I whiled away the afternoon by personally encyphering a brief report to the Chief.

Next morning, we met again, Machray, Page and myself, and Page telephoned the Soviet Consulate-General. I heard the faint echo of a woman's voice, then a sharp click. Page looked foolishly at the silent receiver in his hand. "What do you make of that?" I asked for Volkov, and the girl said 'Volkov's in Moscow.' Then there was a sort of scuffle and slam, and the line went dead." On hearing this, I was pretty certain that I knew what had happened. The case was dead. But I was anxious to clinch the matter, even if only to make my report to the Chief look better. I therefore asked Page to make one final, desperate effort. Would he mind calling at the Consulate-General and asking for Volkov in person? Page by now was determined to get to the bottom of the matter, and readily agreed to call on the Russians. Within an hour, he was back, still puzzled and angry. "It's no bloody good," he reported. "I can't get any sense out of that madhouse. Nobody's ever heard of Volkov!" We broke up, and I sat down to encypher another telegram for the Chief. After confessing defeat, I asked his permission to wind up the case and return to London.

During the homeward journey, I roughed out a report which I would present to the Chief, describing

in detail the failure of my mission. Necessarily, it contained my theory\* of Volkov's disappearance. The essence of the theory was that Volkov's own insistence on bag communications had brought about his downfall. Nearly three weeks had elapsed since his first approach to Page before we first tried to contact him. During that time, the Russians had ample chances of getting on to him. Doubtless both his office and his living quarters were bugged. Both he and his wife were reported to be nervous. Perhaps his manner had given him away; perhaps he had got drunk and talked too much; perhaps even he had changed his mind and confessed to his colleagues. Of course, I admitted, this was all speculation; the truth might never be known. Another 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.