

The Spy who talked too much

In his autobiography published some years ago, William Facey wrote ...

"Before the last war a Russian couple moved into Gills Farm. They seemed a very strange pair, about 50 years in age. She was not seen very much but he used to go into the village shop each day and buy a newspaper and cigarettes; he would then go to the local pub opposite, buy a drink and hide behind the newspaper pretending to be reading but listening to anything that was being said.

He wore a heavy coat winter and summer, covering a belt that held a couple of revolvers and at times he would give a regular at the pub a drink or two to go into the field at the back and hold out the frying pan for firing practice. If anyone went to watch him he would threaten to shoot them.

He stayed until around 1939 and then did almost a moonlight flit overnight; some said he was a spy, – who knows? I never heard of anyone seeing or hearing from him again."

As I was compiling the History page on the West Down website, this certainly piqued my interest, particularly when an enquiry by Irina Dean was posted on the village History website in 2021 requesting some local information on Kaledin. With the help of John Pearce, Irina and I were able to eventually meet up and discover more about this enigmatic gentleman.

Irina is Russian by birth but has lived in England for more than twenty years. Her investigations into this mysterious character have been very successful in researching his life and exploits, with particular interest in the time he lived in West Down and created world wide interest in a sleepy little North Devon village.

His name was Victor Konstantine Cecil Luke de Mordowtzeff Kaledin.

Victor Kaledin was born in 1887 to an English mother and a Russian father. He was the nephew of Aleksei Kaledin, a famous Cossack General, who led the White Russian army prior to the 1917 Russian Revolution.

In his youth, Victor wrote that he was a Page to Tzar Nicholas II, before becoming a Captain in the Imperial Russian Army. During the early stages of the First World War, he claims to have been recruited as a spy for the Imperial Intelligence Service and then employed as a counter intelligence agent within the German Secret service.

At some point after the turmoil of the Communist upheaval, he surfaced in Istanbul, which was then an epicentre of European espionage and intrigue. Here he apparently advised Mussolini on intelligence matters. In the early 1920's , together with many other Czarist refugees, he settled in New York with his second wife Maria. At this point they were living hand to mouth and whilst he worked as a stevedore and took other casual jobs; she, a former opera prima donna, was singing in theatres and clubs. Times were very hard, but Victor, being a very resourceful chap, decided he could earn better money by writing about his life and times as a spy. His first book was published there in 1930.

At this point he and Maria seem to have parted company, and in the early 1930's, Victor travelled alone to England; restyled himself as a Colonel; shortened his name; 'acquired' a British D.S.O. medal and eventually became a naturalised British subject in 1936!

He and his third wife, Evelyn (who he must have met and married soon after he arrived) rented Rosemary Cottage in West Down. Altogether, he published five books on his activities as a double agent, and apparently these were very popular reading at that time.

In October 1933, newspaper headlines around the world covered this story ... *'A man in a tiny village in Devon is being trailed wherever he goes and has been shot at. His wife, who is sharing her husbands life of terror, has never set foot outside their cottage for over a year. He sleeps with loaded revolvers by his bedside. His wife has a small automatic and there are also two shotguns in a corner of the bedroom. "I am living all the time on the brink of death" he declared dramatically'.*

We're now fairly certain that the "shootings" in the village were all to do with publicity for his books, and throughout his life he was always 'available for comment' to a wide and varied newspaper audience! Kaledin seems to have had some connection with a retired General, Sir Ian Hamilton, who wrote a preface to his book 'High Treason' published in 1936. Hamilton presumably had an 'old boys' contact with Sir John Greer,

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the Director of Military Intelligence at that time and passed information regarding Kaledin's activities in North Devon. It appears that nothing came of this exchange of letters.

In many ways he was the 'Ian Fleming' of the 1930's! Contemporary researchers, however, such as William Fuller, the author of "The Foe Within", a definitive work on the history of espionage published in 2006, takes the view that Kaledin wrote 'racy trash for the hopelessly naive'. Undoubtedly Victor had a vivid imagination and was almost certainly writing glamourised semi fiction at this time.

During the Second World War, with his book income sadly depleted, Victor undertook occasional casual jobs around the West Country. His third wife, Evelyn, still lived in West Down, and because of her own family money (her father had been a well known artist), appears to have been their only source of income. In late 1945, Victor was in the Ilfracombe court for falsely acquiring unemployment benefit. It seems that Victor's problems continued, however, for the following summer, Evelyn died; and in early 1948, the Western Morning News reported he was living in a cave at Baggy Point and living on boiled seaweed!

But 'Colonel' Kaledin was made of sterner stuff. Within three months, he had married Louise Drube in Edinburgh! They were living in a rather nice town house and he had discovered a new talent as a clairaudient or spiritualist. They continue to live there probably until the late 1950's. At that point, we think they might have moved briefly to Oslo in 1956 and then possibly to Denmark. However, in early 1961, Victor and Louise had arrived in Majorca.

Here, he decides to return to writing - but with a different twist - love stories for a magazine audience! However, apparently the romantic memories of a sixty-nine year old Russian 'James Bond' didn't pay much, as he reported in a Daily Mirror article, and he planned to return to writing spy stories.

Meanwhile, the following year, Victor had remembered an ancient title allegedly conferred by James III on his mother's family in the seventeenth century. He had bestowed this grand title, "Princess Razibor", on his wife, Louise, at the time of their marriage. They now decided to offer it to a local 14 year old Mallorcan girl who they had befriended. We assume that money might have been involved in this transaction as the Spanish newspapers carried many comments about the glamour, potential fraud and harm this act may have caused. The Daily Mirror reported that Sir Thomas Innes, Scotland's Lord Lyon of Arms, thought it all very strange and that the title sounded more East European than Scottish!

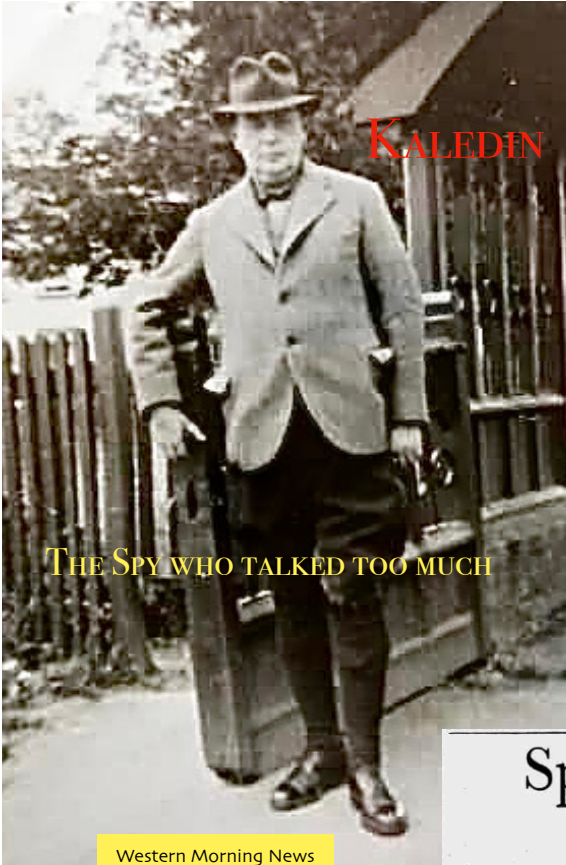
Victor was now 75 years old and suffering from a serious illness. They were now very badly off and his luminary skills as a master spy had become exhausted. As a last desperate attempt to raise some money, he wrote a letter to Robert Graves, the well known English war poet, who lived close by. Kaledin had somewhere along the myriad ways of his life collected a valuable Russian icon. He asked if Graves could help sell it on the American market, but nothing seems to have come of that rather desperate plea.

There our journey with Victor Kaledin comes to an end ... for now. We believe he died in Majorca at some point in the late sixties.

He lived at times a fascinating life through those early turbulent years. His dramatic tales of espionage and the undercover attempts to 'bump' him off; his availability with the newspaper gossip columns; his marriages almost certainly for financial advantage; the 'noble title' allegedly bestowed on his wives and his time spent as a clairvoyant in Edinburgh all paint a picture of a charming rogue and of **the Spy who talked too much.**

Tony Stafford with Irina Dean

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March 2023



KALEDIN

THE SPY WHO TALKED TOO MUCH

Western Morning News 3/2/1948



with his second wife at Rosemary Cottage in West Down

Birmingham Weekly Mercury

Spy Truths Beat Fiction

UNDERGROUND DIPLOMACY. By Victor K. Kaledin (Hurst and Blackett, 15s.).

MYSTERIES OF THE FRENCH SECRET POLICE. By Jean Galtier-Boissiere (Stanley Paul, 12s. 6d.).

"WHAT a tale! What a tale! Is it by any chance true?" asked the Letter-Writer of Rudyard Kipling's boy-spy Kim; and one feels inclined to pose the same compliment and question to Colonel Victor Kaledin.

Always, of course, in expectation of an affirmative answer—Colonel Kaledin was formerly one of Imperial Russia's most dexterous hidden hands and has published heretofore three volumes dealing with secret service. It is therefore as an established authority that he writes of his adventures as a "private spy" in post-war Europe.

One cannot, however, repress a certain surprise that spy fact should so easily surpass the wildest imaginings of spy fiction. Revolvers loaded with a mixture of pepper and chopped hair, for instance; "compressed air knives"; sets of fish-hooks "fitting snugly into the pockets of the jacket and guaranteed to stop any thief"; sebackscopes, concealed in toothache bandages, and sword-canes in addition to the traditional 45 Colt. Colonel Kaledin avails himself of all of these; and besides has dealings with a beautiful female spy, four other adventurers, respectively Irish, English, French and Czech-Slovakian; several bombs, a land-mine, a grey racing Isotta Fraschini (thus spelt) and pick-locks, codes, chemicals and so following in unquotable profusion.

His "contacts," starting after he had been rescued from the gutters of Constantinople by the beautiful female spy aforesaid, seem to have been with desperadoes concerned in the spreading of seditious literature among Allied troops; with liaison-men between the Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation and the Third International; with the Bolshevik agent provocateur in the Kapp putsch, and with divers cut-throats inhabiting the political background of Benito Mussolini.

One had heard of the amiable Fascist custom of administering vast doses of castor-oil; Colonel Kaledin brings news

of the "turpentine bath" which caused unspeakable and unprintable agony to male anti-Fascists. He gives an assortment of signs by which "the Milan nuns" are alleged to have ordered these baths and other outrages. A sort of dissected gridiron and a rectangle meant "Violent communists. Raid and destroy furniture bought on credit." A dot, a diagonal stroke and three dashes meant "Beat women."

Of the body of the work—in which the author and his allies are, for one thing, trapped in a steel-doored boat-cabin into which invisible enemies are about to release poison-gas—this reviewer can only say that its 300-odd pages are packed with material up to the sample just quoted. In its combination of fantastic action with recondite scholarship, "Underground Diplomacy" is unique in this experience.

"Mysteries of the French Secret Service," considering its much closer referability to records, runs Colonel Kaledin's book a remarkably close second. True to tradition, many of the intrigues of the French police are shown to have had their humorous side; Fouche, for instance, was asked by Louis XVIII. who had been set to spy on that monarch during the Empire. The Minister of Police replied that the Duc de Blacas had been paid 200,000 francs a year for that service.

"Good!" said Louis XVIII. "He didn't cheat me. We went shares in it!" More grimly, and a propos the volunteer executioners of the Terror, it is recalled that during 1914-1918 "volunteers constantly presented themselves to undertake the execution of traitors, and that at the front military authorities thought it perfectly natural to allow high pay and bonuses to volunteers whose role of 'trench cleaners' consisted essentially of finishing off the enemy wounded."

Napoleon seems to have dealt with "those unwise enough to express an opinion contrary to that of the Master by supervision, followed, if necessary, by exile or imprisonment without trial..." In the returns presented to the Emperor there figured a class of "prisoners untried and not brought up for judgment lest they may be acquitted for lack of legal proof."

Bonaparte, dictating such procedure 130 years ago, seems almost to have stolen a march on somebody.

'THE DOUBLE SPY'

Remarkable Record of Russian Now in Devon

SPECIAL INTERVIEW

Sequel to Warning Notice in the "Times"

A notice that appeared in the personal column of the "Times" on Tuesday aroused the journalistic curiosity of a member of the Western Times' staff.

It stated that it had come to the knowledge of Colonel Victor Konstantine Cecil Luke de Mordovtzeff Kaledin, of Rosemary Cottage, West Down, North Devon, that some person or persons had been making defamatory statements about him, and the notice issued a warning that active steps were being taken to trace the person or persons responsible, and stated that legal proceedings would be taken forthwith against anyone found responsible for the spread of the scandalous statements which had been made.

Wanting to know what it was all about, our representative motored over to West Down, a quaint old village just a mile or so off the main road between Barnstaple and Ilfracombe, to see Colonel Kaledin.

"Rosemary" Cottage is very aptly named, for it is one of those charming little country cottages such as are immediately pictured in one's mind when rosemary is mentioned. A lady was attending in the front garden, and there was cordiality about her invitation to the Pressman to "come inside to see Colonel Kaledin."

"We sat and talked," says our representative, "in the tastefully furnished little drawing room—the lady, whom I ascertained to be the Colonel's wife (a very charming English lady), Colonel Kaledin and myself. They told me what lies behind the notice appearing in the London newspaper."

"NOTHING AT ALL LOCAL"

"It is nothing at all local, but something with far-reaching effect," said Colonel Kaledin, who went on to explain that the matter had reference to the dreaded Russian Secret Police organisation—the O.G.P.U.—which, he said, was trying to discredit him.

It was brought to his notice about three weeks ago that certain reports, absolutely without foundation, absolutely appalling, were being circulated concerning himself. These rumours had percolated very far, and now the O.G.P.U., and particularly the new chief of the O.G.P.U., had stated that he (the Colonel) did not exist any more, and in fact never had existed.

"As a matter of fact," said Colonel Kaledin, "I am a nephew of the famous General, Anna Kaledin, of the White Army, and another nephew is Alexander Michels, Viceroy of the Caucasus. I can be a very dangerous opponent of the O.G.P.U. in certain cases. The O.G.P.U. are trying to discredit me. They are taking advantage of certain rumours being spread about by certain people, whom my notice in the newspaper annoys. I have evidence of the rumours having reached the O.G.P.U., but that information is of quite a private nature."

Further, Col. Kaledin observed, "I am not prepared to discuss the matter." Col. Kaledin said he asked nothing better than to be left alone because he had the privilege of living in his country now, and hoped to be satisfied.

Observing that he was hoping to write another book, Col. Kaledin produced a copy of his former book "The Adventures of a Double Spook Spy Who Spied Upon Spies." On the front piece of the book is the explanation "During the Great War as intelligence agent K.14 (Russian) and O.M.68 (German) Col. Kaledin played a dangerous role serving his native country Russia."

FIRST PAGE TO CAZAR

Col. Kaledin, in allusion to his connection with the former Russian Czar, said he was in the reign of Czar Nicholas II. He was a Don Cossack. In 1914 he was drafted to the 7th Section of the Russian General Staff at St. Petersburg—the intelligence service. Subsequently General Batoussin wanted what is known as a double spy, that is to say a highly trained agent, who is introduced deliberately into the intelligence service of another power.

"I managed to stage a 'success' appearing to cheat at cards and to be officially disgraced and kicked out of the Russian Army. That information was made fully public. Then I got into the German intelligence service. My German Chief, Major Von Lauenstein, told me to take my revenge against the Russians and I agreed. From 1915 to the Russian debacle of 1917 I made good use of my dual position. After the Russian Revolution I had to get away quickly and landed at Odesa from the Crimea."

Col. Kaledin said he subsequently offered his services as intelligence agent to the White Army under General Denikin, who was his uncle. He had also done work for Mussolini in Italy and learned for him. Eventually he found his way to the United States, where he was in turn stevedore, dish-washer, baker, in fact he did anything—he had to keep body and soul together. Then he came to England, where he wrote his book.

Col. Kaledin, who has been living at West Down for about two years, is a finely built man, who constantly smoked cigarettes as he imparted the information that the Pressman wanted from him. He mentioned that he spoke fourteen languages.

miles per hour on
EX-SECRET AGENT
"Living On Seaweed" In North Devon Story
Reports that a former international secret service agent has been living in a cave at Basset Point and eating boiled seaweed caused North Devon housewives some amusement, for to them seaweed cooked and prepared in the form of "laver" is a great delicacy.
The man, Col. Victor Konstantine Kaledin, formerly of the Russian Imperial Guard, who claims to have done secret service work with the Russians and British Intelligence during World War I, for some time lived at West Down, of 163, Strand, London, W.C.2. He wrote to Barnstaple Rural Council asking them to do something to save Col. Kaledin as he was "really starving and near death." The Sanitary Inspector (Mr. J. Dennis) investigated and informed Mr. Sparks that Col. Kaledin was living at Great Close, Croyde. He was in receipt of Public Assistance and had several other small sums coming in.
Today's Nature Story