

# An Impeccable Spy

## Richard Sorge, Stalin's Master Agent

Owen Matthews, Bloomsbury, London,  
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This book, *An Impeccable Spy: Richard Sorge, Stalin's Master Agent*, was one I came across by accident. I had never heard of Richard Sorge. But when reading the dust jacket commentary, with splashy quotes from the likes of Ian Fleming and John Le Carre, I became intrigued with the subject. Fleming called Sorge “the most formidable spy in history.” Le Carre said he was the “spy to end spies.” How then, had I missed this story?

Sorge was born in 1895 in the rich, corrupt, and violent boom town that was Baku, part of the sprawling Russian Empire, at the dawn of the oil boom. His father was German, his mother Russian, having met in Baku. Later, the family would relocate to Germany.

Not long after, World War I broke out, and Sorge enlisted. No doubt, “the shadow of his late father’s stern patriotism” played a part in his decision to join the fight.<sup>1</sup> But any illusions he may have held about the glory of war were quickly, decisively, and brutally shredded, along with many of his friends, on his first day of action. For him, the experience was like going from the schoolhouse to the slaughter block. It was both profoundly formative and shocking for so many of his generation. As such, this “bright young contrarian, found his reason beginning to rebel against the pointlessness of the conflict.”<sup>2</sup> But that shock would manifest itself in different ways for different people.

To Sorge’s surprise—and likely distress—his soldier buddies, despite the horrors they witnessed, seemed to have little interest in examining the root causes of the conflict in which they had become meat for the grinder. He would eventually be wounded three times and receive a medical discharge. At roughly the same time, he learned two of his brothers had been killed in combat. His last, near-fatal wounding, coupled with the loss of family and friends, crushed any lingering illusions he had. “I was plunged into an intense confusion of the soul.”<sup>3</sup> He experienced a revulsion of the worn idealism touted by nations at war and became convinced “that a violent political change was the only way of extricating ourselves from this quagmire.”<sup>4</sup> Like so many who endure combat, he would undergo a sort of rebirth that called into question so many foundations of the world he had previously known.

His last wounding resulted in two thoroughly shattered legs. Laid up in a bed and unable to walk, he began to read, in search of “the” truth. He became enamored with communism, which he described as “this most difficult, daring, and

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noble ideology [which strives] to eliminate the causes, economic and political, of this war and any future ones by means of internal revolution.”<sup>5</sup> The 1917 Russian Revolution cemented those burgeoning socialist convictions. When he had learned to walk again and received his discharge from the Army, he dove headlong into the socialist enterprise within Germany.

In the years that followed, Sorge was recognized for his innate talents and skills and recruited for clandestine work in support of his motherland (Russia), rather than his fatherland (Germany). Part of what made him a tantalizing candidate for recruitment was that he had, in the intervening years since his military service, achieved “academic and journalistic credentials that would serve as a perfect ready-made cover for foreign assignments.”<sup>6</sup> His illustrious overseas spying career began with a colorful and highly effective stint in Shanghai in 1930. It was there that Sorge honed many of the talents and techniques that would make him such a formidable spy in Tokyo from 1933 to 1941, the focus of the book.

In Tokyo, Sorge’s chief tasks were to ascertain Japanese military readiness and Japan’s designs with regard to the Soviet Union. This task was a difficult one. Japan was not an easy target for spies. The country’s profound suspicion of outsiders had its roots in centuries of isolation. And despite any outward appearance of tranquility, the Japan of 1933 was, in truth, a cauldron of infighting and intrigue. Just like in Germany, a brief experiment with democracy had come up short. In the previous year, the prime minister, finance minister, and several leading industrialists had been assassinated by young Army officers. The economic downturn following the crash on Wall Street, plus a dramatic crop failure, contributed to the intensity of the situation and the scrutiny applied to foreigners. Like many Germans that had suffered through massive inflation and food shortages, the Japanese, collectively speaking, were turning to nationalists versus socialists to rescue them from hardship, but these nationalists varied in their extremism and outlook. As Sorge’s chief task was to determine whether Japan would attack the Soviet Union, it was crucial to know who was really in charge in Tokyo. Sorge was incredibly adept at ingratiating himself with the German community in Tokyo, and particularly its embassy staff, to include the ambassador. His inroads were a direct result of his charm, charisma, flair, refreshingly cavalier attitude toward

authority, and studied insights on Japanese culture. Amazingly, he was able to deliver as much insight on the Japanese as he was the Germans via his harvested network of spies, who proved, somewhat surprisingly, to be very well-connected and highly productive, with stunning access to high-level Japanese government documents and deliberations.

Sorge’s audacity was hard to fathom, as was his luck. He took enormous risks but seemed blessed by some almost spiritual veil of invulnerability for so long. Berlin sent counterintelligence operatives to vet him, but all failed, even if doubts lingered. The Japanese were relentless in their pursuit of spy rings, but he was able to sidestep these efforts for so long, sometimes by design, sometimes by convenient accident. His sordid personal life was likely an outgrowth of all the secrets he had been forced to stow within himself for so long, unable to share with anyone save the always cynical and mercurial Moscow directorate. The twice-married Sorge probably had upwards of thirty affairs while in Tokyo, often with the wives and mistresses of his prime targets, viewing monogamy as a bourgeois practice to be shunned. Remarkably, even when a target, most notably German Ambassador Eugen Ott, learned of Sorge’s affair with a wife or mistress, nothing came of it. Sorge’s reckless behavior was fueled—at least in part—by Moscow’s repeated denials of his requests to come home to be with Katya, his long-suffering, *de facto* widow.

One cannot read the story of Sorge’s espionage for long without wondering why he remained so committed to a government that clearly proved itself duplicitous and deceitful, in general, and to Sorge, in particular. In the years leading up to World War II, Stalin had engaged in a deep and ruthless purge of his intelligence agencies, convinced they were all infiltrated by foreign operatives. In so doing, he ravaged their collective effectiveness and encouraged the creation of a stable of “yes men” that would only provide Stalin with tailored intelligence that conformed to his preexisting perceptions, lest they fall afoul of him and subsequently find themselves before a firing squad.<sup>7</sup> Sorge was clearly convinced at one point in the 1930s that his orders to return home were, in fact, an attempt to kill him—by his own sponsor! He avoided the fate of many other Soviet spies by simply ignoring the order and making himself indispensable. He clearly loathed Hitler, but his distaste for Stalin was also pronounced and only grew with time. Presumably, he figured the

Communist system was just (or at least superior to other forms of government), but its operation routinely maligned by a series of despicable, savage actors. It is truly astounding that Sorge sacrificed so much of his life to the welfare of a vicious entity like Stalin's USSR; that he could place such confidence in a system so warped by violence and wracked by corruption. In the end, the country he served so long and faithfully, saving it untold hardship, did nothing to rescue him after his espionage ring was rounded up. This may have been to cover up Stalin's ineptitude in the years and months preceding Hitler's unleashing of Operation Barbarossa on the Soviet Union. But it could also be the cold, mechanical, grinding of a beast beholden only to its own survival, whatever the cost in lives, where loyalty counts for much, until it doesn't.

A key question for Stalin, in the wake of Operation Barbarossa, was "Can I afford to weaken the Far Eastern areas and use those forces for defense against the Nazi onslaught?" It would be the central question driving Sorge's spy network in its last few months of existence. The answer from Tokyo was "Yes, Tokyo will not attack the Soviet Union." By this time, it seems Moscow was more apt to believe its previously castigated interloper. Stalin transferred forces from the Far East to the front lines opposing the Wehrmacht's push further into Russia. Was this what made the difference in the end? One will never really know, but there is a strong argument to be made that it was pivotal to the ultimate outcome in that Herculean struggle.

Sorge's amazing tale of espionage came to a shuddering close in October 1941. His willingness to tell all, once apprehended by Japanese police, seems strange. Then again, maybe it was a form of release and a way to etch his legacy. He would be executed in 1944 for his crimes, after the Japanese tried to trade him with the Soviets. For their part, the Soviets never came through for Richard Sorge. They never acknowledged he worked for them, throwing under the bus, arguably, the most effectual spy in the history of espionage. Ironically, though abandoned by the Soviets back then, his story was later celebrated by those same Soviets when he was rehabilitated by Khrushchev and made a posthumous Hero of the Soviet Union. His legacy received another boost later when Yuri Andropov was attempting to glamorize the KGB's image.

Owen Matthews' book certainly makes for an interesting read. But one is left wanting to know so much more about Sorge than these pages can deliver! Matthews' scholarship provides valuable insights, for sure, and he definitely deserves a tip of the hat, but Sorge remains a nagging paradox. Why—or better yet how—could Sorge remain a staunch supporter of communism? Why make such sacrifices for an entity that tried to terminate him? That often disbelieved his intelligence reports? That denied him a return home to be with his wife? That betrayed him and other devout communists in a profound and inexplicable way by dealing with the devil and signing the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact? One wonders. ■

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## Notes

1. Owen Matthews, *An Impeccable Spy: Richard Sorge, Stalin's Master Agent* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 12.

2. *Ibid.*, 13.

3. *Ibid.*, 15.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, 17.

6. *Ibid.*, 51.

7. Which happened all too often; at the height of Sorge's Tokyo operation, the Fourth Department's leader, Golikov, was undoubtedly aware that the six former heads of the Fourth Department of Soviet Military Intelligence had been executed by Stalin's henchmen. There are some fascinating excerpts within the texts from Molotov, Stalin's foreign minister, in which he makes some rather honest statements concerning the state of affairs inside the Kremlin under Stalin's tyrannical grip and conspiracy-obsessed mentality.