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AN IMPECCABLE SPY
Richard Sorge, Stalin's master agent
448pp. Bloomsbury. £25.
978 1 4088 5778 6

Although the basic facts have been known since the 1960s, the extraordinary exploits of Richard Sorge lose none of their fascination with time. Born in Baku into a middle-class German family in 1895, Sorge fought his way through the First World War, ending up with a permanent limp, an Iron Cross and the conviction that only socialism could save mankind from the horrors he had witnessed. This belief turned him first into a professional agitator, then into a member of the German Communist Party and finally into a spy. His career in espionage began in the Comintern, for which he spent the mid-1920s organizing networks across Europe before he was purged as a "Bukharinite". He returned to Moscow to defend himself but, in October 1929, the Comintern's executive committee voted to dismiss him. Or so it seemed. As Owen Matthews writes, Sorge's vetting had in fact proceeded successfully, winning him entry into the fastest-growing branch of the Soviet spy system: the military intelligence section of the Red Army, better known as the Fourth Directorate. Sorge remained a member of this service until he was executed by the Japanese in 1943, by which time he had become – in the words of Ian Fleming – "the most formidable spy in history".

Endowed with the quotient of good fortune necessary for any successful espionage career, Sorge had prepared well for his work. Before his first assignment, as covert head of the Soviet *rezidentura* in Shanghai, he had obtained several accreditations from the German press that provided his cover: over the following decade he was to write dozens of articles that established his reputation as one of Germany's experts on the economic, military and political problems of the Far East. When Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931 brought home how limited Moscow's intelligence from Tokyo really was, Sorge – by now known as Agent Ramsay – was posted there. This was a far harder assignment than Shanghai because the Japanese police discouraged relations with foreigners. So Sorge established a new set of credentials, and he could hardly have done better: membership in the National Socialist Workers' Party provided him with letters of introduction from figures at the heart of the German foreign policy establishment.

Among these letters was one addressed to a certain Colonel Eugen Ott, who was then serving as liaison to a Japanese regiment. Sorge visited Ott in the backwater of Nagoya, and the two men hit it off. It turned out they had served in the same unit in the First World War, and Ott – himself no slouch at the double game – was far from a confirmed Nazi: he had in fact been the right-hand man of General Kurt von Schleicher, German chancellor before Hitler. The Nazis regarded Ott with suspicion, and so his friends had got him posted to Japan to keep him out of their clutches. Who would have suspected that, less than a year later, Ott would join the German embassy in Tokyo as military attaché, and in 1938 actually become ambassador, just in time to share with his good friend Sorge some of Berlin's most tightly held secrets?

Sorge passed on to the Kremlin two vital pieces of information. The first, which went unheeded, was word of the coming invasion of the Soviet Union. Stalin ignored Sorge's warnings, as he did the others that were flooding into Moscow in the spring of 1941. But a few months later, as the Wehrmacht approached the outskirts of the capital, Stalin listened as Sorge sent a stream of messages analysing discussions of war strategy among the Japanese top brass. The Soviets needed to know whether to risk pulling troops out of the Far East to use in the defence of Moscow. Sorge's information helped reassure them that the Japanese were not an immediate threat, and the result was the transfer of fifteen divisions to the German front and, in all probability, the capital's salvation.

Owen Matthews tells this story well, with an eye for anecdote and character, and with the help of a vast range of sources. Like those before him, he is fascinated by Sorge the man – his charisma, his drinking, his womanizing, his sheer ruthlessness. But there was also Sorge's relative sophistication. In 1941, a notorious Gestapo officer named Josef Meisinger was posted in disgrace to the German embassy: his brutality in occupied Poland had been too much even for his SS bosses. Meisinger's manners were boorish and he had absolutely no interest in Japan: his chief assignment was pursuing homosexuals in the German community there. Sorge, on the other hand, loved the country and its people, had a long-time Japanese mistress and spoke rudimentary Japanese. This intelligent embrace of his cultural circumstances allowed him to operate in plain sight, feeding to the Germans the material he obtained from his Japanese informants and thereby gaining their trust so that they in turn would entrust him with their deepest secrets. All of which material – Japanese and German – he could then synthesize and supply to Moscow. For those who wonder whether individuals can make a difference to history, the case of Richard Sorge will always supply a kind of answer.