

Who is that Chap in the Middle?

Major Arthur Birse

Watching the *World at War* the other evening, the 'war' was finally drawing to an end and the leaders of the three great powers were meeting. My wife was somewhat surprised when I pointed at a soldier sitting at the table next to Stalin and said 'I knew him, we worked together.' Coincidentally, it was only a couple of days earlier that I had been looking at some papers, and had come across an article which showed a picture of Churchill hosting a dinner to mark his 69th birthday. It was attended by Stalin and the article posed the question 'who was the chap in the middle of these two great men'? I knew the answer to this question, since it was the same man even though he wasn't in the middle!



IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

In 1958 I was interviewed for a job in a newly established company. I got the job but found out at the end of the interview that this was a result of my dubious claim in my CV that 'I had some Russian'. I escaped this claim being tested since at that time there was no one in the company able to do so. It was certainly not the time to confess; I needed the job. The Company was called Rustyfa¹, a consortium of six companies that, together with Dunlop, had come together to engineer, supply, install and commission a complete vehicle tyre factory in Dniepropetrovsk in the then USSR. At £14.2 million, it was the biggest contract ever awarded between the two countries, and this at a time when trade between the two was, to put it mildly, difficult, with many products embargoed.

Within what seemed to be a few days of starting, my frailty was about to be exposed. I was to meet my first Russians, who until then had merely been the source of a collection of 'dots and dashes' or instructions being issued to tank drivers heard through earphones in a wagon at the Langeleben intercept station on the edge of the British zone in Germany, transmitted by the USSR's 3rd Shock Army and 12 Guards. After all, Magdeburg, at the heart of East Germany's military might was metaphorically just down the road.

This meeting was to finalise the letters of intent that would form the basis of the contract, and I was warned that I would be needed at the meeting not to be involved, but there as a glorified messenger boy. It would be attended by senior members of Technopromimport and Techmashimport, the head of the USSR Trade Delegation to the UK, a representative of the UK Board of Trade and senior members of the consortium companies. I was stationed at the door to greet them as they arrived, relieving them of their trilbies. The first person to arrive was a stocky, almost dapper, gentleman who soon busied himself with the members of the consortium, and then the Russians arrived to much fuss and bother. I watched this gentleman as he moved amongst the crowd, moving effortlessly from English to Russian (of which I understood very little).

After the ritual giving of presents (mine, being way down the pecking order, was a small model of the Sputnik which I treasured for many years) the meeting got under way. The Soviets had brought no interpreter, relying on our interpreter Arthur Birse and the linguistic abilities of their own members of the delegation. In retrospect, this was a measure of the respect that they had of the man. If ever there was a master class in the art and skill of interpreting he was it. It was to be the first of many meetings that I attended where he interpreted and I was always fascinated by the utmost respect that every Russian paid him. I came to marvel at his incredible skill finding the Russian for the most abstruse engineering terms, many of them peculiar to the tyre and rubber industries. I later discovered that during his early years in business in St Petersburg, he had been with a firm of English engineers who imported mechanical equipment for Russian factories, and this was now showing dividends nearly 50 years later. His extraordinary patience and calmness were quite remarkable: the meetings would start early in the morning and continue all day frequently into the evenings, often followed by dinner. The Russians loved being entertained, the more expensive the restaurant the happier they seemed to be. I acquired a knowledge of the hotels, restaurants and nightclubs of London, sadly never to be repeated. Thankfully, throughout that time there was no real need for me to flourish my little Russian; the members of the Trade Delegation, in particular, were all very happy to show their own expertise and desperately wanted to improve. Over the next five years I became good friends with all of them as we travelled around the country inspecting

¹ Rustyfa Ltd. dissolved 28 February 1980

equipment often followed at a discreet distance by the local police who would be advised by the Foreign Office of our itinerary. The police in the more rural areas took this task exceedingly seriously. If, as was frequently claimed, they were the 'centre of Soviet intelligence' at 32 Highgate West Hill, I saw no evidence of it. Over the five years I spent in their company I made some good friends, even ending up playing handball (badly) with them.

Arthur Birse had led a life that would not be out of place in the *Boys Own* magazine, the full story of which I was not to learn for some time. When I remarked to my new colleagues on his skills, I was told that he had interpreted at several wartime meetings between Stalin and Churchill and Eden. He had been awarded in 1945 one of the highest decorations that could be awarded to a foreigner (the Order of the Red Banner of Labour) which was presented to him in Moscow in 1944 by the then President Kalinin, who addressed him as '*tovarisch*' (comrade).

Born in St Petersburg in 1889, he was the youngest son of a Scots merchant in Russia. The part played by English and Scots residents in the Russia of his day was important in commercial and industrial life. The firm with which his family was connected had been established in Russia in 1770, and his grandfather had gone to Russia before the Crimean War, first to Archangel and then St Petersburg. Britain was not the only foreign trading partner, being outnumbered by German settlers who had originally been invited there by Catherine the Great.

In many ways, the expatriate life they led was almost idyllic – tennis courts even. Many English boys born in Russia were sent to English boarding schools but Birse's father had decided that his sons' futures (his brother, some three years older was to make a career in the opera world) lay in Russia, learning to speak, write and understand Russian like a Russian. Although he envied them, Birse later confessed that 'it gave him an asset – the ability to speak, write and understand Russian like a Russian – a talent possessed by very few Britons'. This ability was to prove to be of immense value to Britain in two world wars. After a number of jobs in the engineering industry he finally joined the firm with which his father had been connected all his life.

His autobiography tells of life during the war from 1914 and the lead-up to the revolution.² He married in May 1915 an English girl, who was engaged, like most of them, in teaching English. With business almost at a standstill in the war, he joined the British Military Mission as one of their Russian translators. He tried several times to volunteer for active service in the army but the medical officer at the Moscow Embassy turned him down on health grounds. By this time he was married with a young family and on the advice of the embassy he sent them to England, which had never been their home. Their extraordinary journey took them by train through Finland to Tornea, by sledge across a frozen river into Sweden, thence again by train to Bergen in Norway where a ship was waiting to take the party of refugees to Newcastle – which, incredibly they reached without mishap.

He was not altogether satisfied with his work with the Military Mission in Russia and wanted to enlist in the army in Britain and to rejoin his family and was finally given permission to leave Russia to do so. He would never see his father again. At Dukes Hotel, St James's he enlisted in the Artists Rifles where he was posted to the second battalion, then an Officers' Training Corps, stationed at Gidea Park. By the spring of 1918 he was considered fit to go to France but on the eve of his draft leave he

² *Memoirs of an Interpreter*. A.H. Birse. Michael Joseph 1967

was told to report to the War Office. Somehow, at the last minute, they had found out about his 'Russian'. After a four-month course at Cambridge he was finally commissioned as a second lieutenant. At another interview at the War Office he was given the choice of green tabs (Intelligence) or blue (railway administration). He claimed that he chose blue since it was his favourite colour. After a week's course learning how to be a railway transport officer, he embarked on a transport for Murmansk.

Britain had sent a small expeditionary Force to North Russia before the end of the war with Germany to prevent Murmansk being used as a base for submarines, but with Russia now out of the war their presence was resented. His experiences over the next year, with the advance of the Red Army, the cruelty of the Cossacks, were appalling and in the spring of 1920 he returned to London. Although his autobiography tells of his brother-in-law being awarded a CBE for his work in Russia, he fails to mention that, by then a captain in the Labour Corps he was awarded an MBE for his work during the Russian Civil War, in particular the Murmansk campaign of 1919–20. This period is glossed over in his autobiography.

Upon demobilisation, after a great deal of difficulty, with the help of his brother in 1920 he secured a post with the British Overseas Bank despite his total lack of banking experience. This was compensated for, however, by his considerable language skills and military experience. The following year he went to Poland as sub-manager of their Warsaw subsidiary where he learned Polish, an attribute he usually kept hidden. In 1925 he left them to take up the post of assistant manager of the Milan and Genoa branches of the Banca Italo Britannica. In 1928 he joined the Chemical Bank & Trust Co., London, as assistant European representative. Two years later he went to Antwerp to join a company in which his old firm, Baring Bros. & Co. were interested. In 1932 he joined the Amstelbank in Amsterdam having been appointed by a group of British Bank creditors to attend its liquidation. The economic crisis was taking its toll. In 1936 he joined Martins Bank as assistant manager in the London foreign branch but with the onset of war the most spectacular part of his career was still to come. During the summer of 1939 when war seemed imminent, he registered at the War Office in the Officers' Reserve. He heard nothing until February 1940 when an officer from the War Office called on the bank to recruit volunteers 'with a knowledge of languages interested in joining the security services'. The officer was taken somewhat aback when it was pointed out to him that Birse's name had been with them for several months. Within a few days there was an interview at the War Office and he emerged a second lieutenant in the Intelligence Dept., the Intelligence Corps still to be formed. His first posting was to the press-reading section where he would plough through three- or four-dozen newspapers in German, Dutch and Russian.

With the invasion of Norway, the phony war was over and he joined the Assistant Director of Military Intelligence to the Middle East and GHQ in Cairo. After hospitalisation following an unrecorded illness, he was posted to Jerusalem. Hardly had he settled in, than on 21 June 1941 Hitler invaded the USSR and he was immediately recalled to Cairo where he received orders to join the Military Mission in Moscow. By then promoted to major his official status was as second secretary to the British Embassy in Moscow and personal interpreter to the Ambassador Lord Inverchapel.

In May 1944 in Moscow, President Kalinin presented Major Birse with the Order of the Red Banner of Labour. The Order of the Red Banner of Labour can be awarded to citizens of the USSR, to businesses, associations, institutions, organizations, and allied autonomous republics, territories, autonomous regions, districts, cities and other localities; it may also be awarded to persons who are not citizens of the USSR, as well as to enterprises, institutions and organizations located in foreign countries.





From this success he acted as interpreter to Churchill and Anthony Eden at the Moscow Conference in October 1943; at the Tehran Conference in November 1943. As agreed, Eden had made a personal request to the Bank for his services at the Moscow Conference of 1944 and at the Yalta Conference in January 1945. He also acted as interpreter at the prolonged Armistice negotiations with the satellite countries in Moscow during September and October 1944.

Hugh Lunghi told an anecdote which does much to illustrate the relationship that had been built up between Stalin and Birse.³⁴ A dinner was held at the British Legation to celebrate Churchill's sixty-ninth birthday. There were many courses with a complex layout of cutlery, something that seemed momentarily to baffle the Soviet leader. Hugh Lunghi who attended as part of Roosevelt's US delegation wrote: 'all seemed to be going well when I saw Churchill's chief interpreter Arthur Birse pointing out something to Stalin to do with the cutlery. I learned afterwards from Birse that Stalin had been puzzled by having all this vast amount of cutlery on either side of his plate and he actually asked Birse who was sitting next to him "what do I do with them", and Birse replied, "proceed as you want. It doesn't matter at all which one you pick up; whatever you are comfortable with.'" so putting the great man at his ease.

When Churchill was visiting Stalin for a private meeting at the Kremlin, at a certain moment he needed to go to the gents, obviously on his own. His interpreter, Birse, whilst waiting in the meeting room was answering Stalin's and Molotov's questions on how he had learned Russian, etc. When Churchill returned and saw them busily talking he looked perturbed, but Birse immediately reassured him with an explanation of the contents of his conversation with Stalin.

When Birse sought to be released from the army, Eden agreed on the understanding that if there was another Three-Power conference he would be recalled if required. He applied to the War Office where he hoped to sort this out but he met a dead end. 'Intelligence' no longer knew him. He served no better with the Adjutant-General department; they knew nothing of him. He then tried the Military Missions Abroad Dept. and one or two others. The army seemingly knew nothing of him! Finally someone suggested that he apply to a department housed in a building near Victoria Station where, after a long search, they found his file. The file showed that he had been demobilised in June 1943 when he joined the British Embassy in Moscow. No one had told him! Subject to Eden's proviso, he was free to resume life in the City.

In 1954 there was an event which hit the world's headlines: the defection of Vladimir Petrov, an official of the Soviet Embassy in Canberra. As third secretary, Petrov had diplomatic immunity. The reason for his defection it seemed, was fear. The Soviet ambassador had sent several critical reports to Moscow about Petrov and his wife. Exacerbated by a small but significant procedural error, this

³ **Hugh Lunghi**, was a wartime interpreter for Churchill and Roosevelt who saw Stalin up close on a number of occasions, and was among the first into Hitler's bunker. **Lunghi** worked at the Tehran conference between Harry S. Truman & Stalin, and Yalta conferences between Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin. In July 1945 he was in Berlin for the Potsdam conference between Harry S. Truman and Stalin.

⁴ *World War II: Behind Closed Doors*, Laurence Rees.

led in early April 1954 to his deciding to defect from the Soviet diplomatic and voluntarily ask for protection. A fortnight later, his wife did the same. Petrov did not tell his wife Evdokia of his intentions; apparently, he planned to defect without her. Petrov, despite his relatively junior diplomatic status, was in fact a colonel in what became in 1954 the KGB, the Soviet secret police, and his wife was an MVD officer. The Petrovs had been sent to the Canberra embassy in 1951 by the Soviet security chief Beria. After Stalin's death in March 1953, Beria had been arrested and shot by Stalin's successors, and Vladimir Petrov evidently feared that, if he returned to the Soviet Union, he would be purged as a Beria man.

After falsely claiming that Australian authorities had kidnapped Mrs Petrov, the MVD sent two couriers to Australia to fetch her. Word of this leaked out and on 19 April there were violent anti-Communist demonstrations at the airport as Evdokia Petrova was escorted by the KGB/MVD men to the aircraft. On the plane, on radioed instructions from the prime minister, a flight attendant asked her if she was happy being escorted back to the USSR, but she did not give a clear answer, as she was wracked with indecision - defection could have severe consequences for her family in the USSR. Menzies decided that he could not allow her to be removed in this way, and when the aircraft stopped for refuelling at Darwin she was seized from the MVD men by Australian Security Organisation (ASIO) officials. (In order to separate Petrova from the MVD, the ASIO officials confronted them on the grounds that they were carrying arms, which was illegal on an aircraft.) The ASIO officials offered Petrova asylum, which she accepted, after speaking to her husband by phone. The photos of Evdokia Petrova being rough-handled by KGB agents at Sydney Airport and her agonised last-moment decision to defect with her husband, made while being bundled onto the plane at Darwin Airport that was due to take her back to the Soviet Union were flashed around the world became iconic Australian images of the 1950s. The affair grew more dramatic when Menzies told the House of Representatives that Petrov had brought with him documents concerning Soviet espionage in Australia. He announced that a royal commission would investigate the matter. Petrov's documents were shown to the commission members, though they were never made public. The documents were alleged to provide evidence of an extensive Soviet spy ring in Australia. As a result of the defections, the Australian embassy in Moscow was expelled and the USSR embassy in Canberra was recalled. Diplomatic relations were not re-established until 13 March 1959.⁵

Birse was invited to interpret at the commission inquiry both for the court and the Petrovs. The hearings in Melbourne lasted a month and then continued in Sydney for several months. The Australian Club in Macquarie St would become his home for nearly a year. Birse spent more than 104 hours on his feet beside the Petrovs in the witness box, and was frequently called to give evidence with other witnesses whose knowledge of English was doubtful. On numerous occasions he was asked to arbitrate on the translation of words found in the documents handed over by Petrov. An extraordinary intellectual feat!

From documents and the Petrovs' evidence it was established beyond a doubt that from 1943, when we were supposedly allies of the Soviet Union, they had operated a military espionage operation in Australia. Documents later released showed that although there had been some Soviet espionage in Australia, there was no major Soviet spy ring, and that most of the documents given by Petrov to

⁵ Wikipedia, 'The Petrov Affair'.

ASIO contained little more than political gossip which could have been compiled by any competent journalist.



There is (at least for me) a sad footnote to these memories.

I was recently searching through a Bonham's auction catalogue and came across an entry for the sale of some decorations:

A 1st World War MBE and 'Mentioned in Despatches, Two World War 2 service medals, a CBE and an Order of the Red Banner, once the property of Capt. [not 'Major' even], Arthur Birse⁶

They fetched the miserable sum of £1,600 including premium. What an addition to our museum's collection of honours and awards they would have made! To me, a sad end to a uniquely brilliant career!

GREAT POWER CONFERENCES⁷

Molotov-Ribbentrop Treaty	23 August, 1939	Germany, Soviet Union	Hitler and Stalin sign non-aggression pact which meant the Soviets would not intervene if Poland were invaded. Hitler later invaded Russia on 22 Jun 1941.
Atlantic Charter	August 1941	Great Britain, US	FDR and Churchill approve the Atlantic Charter which supported self-determination, a new permanent system of general security (a new League of Nations), and the right of people to regain governments abolished by

⁶ CBE London Gazette 01/01/1944 Civil Division
 MBE London Gazette 11/11/1919 Military Division
 MID London Gazette 15/03/1920

⁷ Wikipedia

dictators.

Casablanca Conference	January 1943	Great Britain, US	FDR and Churchill agree to step up Pacific War, invade Sicily, increase pressure on Italy and insist on an unconditional surrender of Germany.
Tehran Conference	November 1943	Great Britain, US, Soviet Union	Allies agree to launch attacks from Russia on the east, at the same time as US and Great Britain attack from west.
Yalta Conference	February 1945	Great Britain, US, Soviet Union	Stalin agreed that Poland would have free elections after the war and that the Soviets would attack Japan within three months of the collapse of Germany. Soviets receive territory in Manchuria and several islands
San Francisco Conference	22 April 1945	50 nations	United Nations Charter approved establishing a Security Council with veto power for the Big Five powers (US, Great Britain, France, China, and Soviet Union) and a General Assembly.
Potsdam Conference	July 1945	U.S, Great Britain, Soviet Union	President Truman met Stalin and Churchill and agreed that Japan must surrender or risk destruction. Atomic bomb successfully tested on July 16 and dropped on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945.