

Ian Mitchell's Russia-related BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

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SIX – The Real James Bonds 1909-1939

Author: Michael Smith

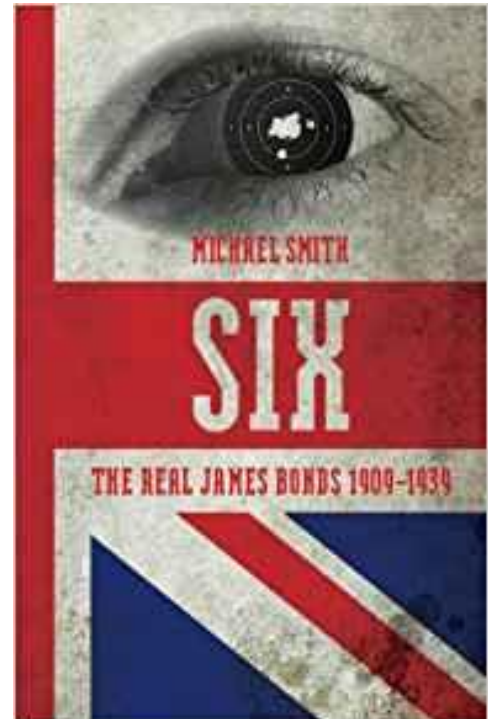
Publisher: [Biteback Publishing](#), 2010
(available on Amazon, [click on cover image for link](#))

Descriptor: History of the people in the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS or MI6) to the start of World War II

RusRoL relevance: *Slight – but interesting about many Russian and Soviet initiatives as seen from a British point of view. Soviet efforts were often less designed to help the Soviet Union than to “dishelp” other states. Their record of “negative campaigning” was depressingly impressive.*

Reason to read: Not a great deal, as this is basically a journalistic account, with neither argument nor much new material. Much of the story will be known to people who are familiar with Russian and Soviet history. There is additional detail on some of the incidents, for example about the murder of Rasputin, and how Arthur Ransome got his wife, Evgeniya Shelepina, out of Russia. Except where the author gets bogged down in office politics, it is interesting to re-read many of these tales. But that would not justify a recommendation. However, there is one completely fantastic story, of which I knew nothing, that is told here at some length and which deserves to be much better known. That is the tale of “Johnny X” and his adventures in South America. He was a German working for the British inside the Soviet Comintern. Why this has not already been the subject of a spy-thriller film, I do not know!

Main talking points: Johnny X's real name was Johann Heinrich de Graaf. He had been one of the leaders of the mutiny on board the German battleship, *Westfalen*, in 1917. Partly as a result of that, he was recruited as a Soviet agent in Germany, and was sent the Frunze Military Academy in Moscow. One of his earlier postings was to Britain where, in the early 1930s he worked with the Communist party to foment revolt in the armed forces—this was the time of the Invergordon mutiny. He soon got disillusioned both with the British CP and with its Soviet parent. He offered his services to the Americans, who turned him down, and to the British, who accepted. He suggested coming over to work in Britain, but was persuaded to stay and work within the Comintern. Soon afterwards, he was sent by



his Moscow masters to China, which they wanted to turn Communist. But the Chinese, assisted by the British, managed to foil the Soviet plots, at least locally. They seized the whole Comintern archive in Shanghai which, once SIS had deciphered it, laid bare Soviet operations in the Far East as a whole. Johnny X's Soviet mission was to repair the damage. His simultaneous British one was to make it more complete. That was what he did. He managed to get all the Comintern agents arrested by the Chinese, bringing to a temporary end its activities in the city. (pp. 341-347)

That was the warm-up. The main event took place in South America where, I was astonished to learn, the Soviet Union planned a China-style revolution in the early 1930s! The detonator was to be Brazil. "Moscow believed it could stage a military uprising there which would create a Soviet satellite state inside Latin America. The establishment of a Soviet-style regime in Brazil would disrupt Anglo-American influence in South America and act as a catalyst for further revolutions that could see communism sweep from South and Central America into the US and Canada. Johnny's role in aborting the coup on Brazil was probably his greatest success." (p. 347)

The country was divided between staggeringly rich landowners and semi-landless peasants. The army was the instrument for maintaining control—and also where the hope of revolution lay. The US offered the presidency of Brazil to a young officer who had led a desperate "long march" of rebels round the vast country. But the so-called "Knight of Hope" preferred to deal with Moscow. He went there, was given intensive training and sent back with a band of co-conspirators in 1934. One of those was Johnny X. Once there, Johnny made contact with London, and his case was turned over to Valentine Vivian, the SIS officer whom Philby ridicules in his book, *My Silent War*, but who was clearly far from being so ridiculous a figure. Between the two of them, they managed to get the revolution started prematurely, with the authorities aware of what was happening. Due to Johnny X it ended in humiliating defeat. (see pp. 349-50)

Persuasively, Johnny was one of those arrested. That looked good in Moscow. But discrete influence was brought to bear and he was soon set free. After a full debriefing, Vivian suggested that he hang up his mask and return to a well-earned retirement in Britain. The dangers of going back to Moscow after a failed mission were stressed to him, as was his value to British intelligence. But de Graaf was made of stern stuff. He decided to return to Moscow to explain the failure, and to try to be sent out again to repair the damage he himself had done. Incredibly, this was just what happened. Johnny was able to assuage all doubts about his role in the failed coup—partly, once senses, through luck, as the people he dealt with had not yet been displaced by Stalin's robotic "new men".

De Graaf went on to be an important Nazi-hunter in World War II and later worked for SIS in Canada, where he died at a ripe old age. Smith concludes that Johnny X "is regarded as one of the best agents ever recruited by SIS." (p. 355) Yet I had never heard of him. Why?

Incidental interest: There is naturally a lot about Russia/Soviet Union. Apart from Rasputin and Ransome, there is also interesting material on the Lockhart plot, Paul Dukes, Sidney Reilly and the Metropolitan-Vickers trial in Moscow in 1933 (see [The Justice Factory](#) chapter 2).

Thought(s) provoked: If there is one general point that I took away from this book it is that most of the best agents were those known as "walk-ins". They were people who simply walked in off the street and said they had something to contribute to the British intelligence effort. Doubtless there were many

duds and weirdos who walked in, but the others, including Johnny X, were so valuable that the weeding process simply has to be considered an operational cost. This was true of another German, Karl Krüger, who walked into the British legation in The Hague in November 1914, armed with almost completely free access to German naval yards as he was in the marine engineering business. He was, Smiths says, “possibly the most valuable agent Cumming [“C”: head of SIS] had throughout the First World War.” (p. 113) Krüger knew all about German naval construction and managed to obtain important information about deployment. For example, he was able to travel to Kiel to get full details of the damage suffered by the High Seas Fleet at the battle of Jutland, which was extremely useful.

Related to this point, is the depressing fact of how often the British authorities refused to accept information the intelligence services provided. (Like Stalin before Barbarossa.) One of the main reasons the British fleet suffered at Jutland—which would otherwise have been an unarguable victory—was that the Admiralty had failed to act on warnings Cumming had given them, from other intelligence sources within Germany before the war, that the High Seas Fleet was equipped with a better type of delayed-action shell which was designed to penetrate the magazines of ships before detonating. When Beatty said (allegedly) at the battle that “There seems to be something wrong with our damned ships today,” he might more accurately have said, “There seems to be something wrong with our damned Admiralty planning system these days.” Thicker deck armour was all that was needed to solve the problem—as the fate of *HMS Hood* later illustrated.

Negative issue(s): Too much office politics, especially in the early part. Also, the subtitle is misleading – the book has almost nothing to do with James Bond. Clearly the name was used for sales effect. Bear point.

Style: Competent, but dull. No poetry or humour. Looks more like a job of work than a labour of love.

Publishing quality: Acceptable; useful pictures of people like Valentine Vivian.

Author: Michael Smith claims on his website to have worked in British military intelligence for many years—should we believe a soi-disant spy? At any rate, he has written many books on British espionage history, and he certainly seems to know the field. This is that website:

<https://www.michaelsmithauthor.com/index.html>

Link(s): None that I can find

Overall recommendation level: NOT HIGH

About the reviewer: Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including *Isles of the West* and *The Justice Factory*. He is writing a comparative study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called *Russia and the Rule of Law*—hence the “RusRoL Relevance” section at the top. He can be contacted at: ianbookrec@gmail.com. For other reviews in this series, see [Ian Mitchell’s Book Recommendations](#).