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Was [Sir] Nick Clegg's aunt a Soviet Spy? She was an enigmatic Russian baroness who cut a swathe through London's best connected men. Now secret MI5 files pose the question

By [Guy Walters for the Daily Mail](#)

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The agents from the Cheka came in the middle of the night, as they always did. As members of the Soviet Union's first State Security organisation, by September 1918 the men already had a notorious reputation for making people disappear.

The agents were led by Pavel Malkov, who was also the commandant of the Kremlin. His involvement suggested that the person they had come to arrest in this Moscow apartment block was someone of note.

But far from being some Bolshevik who had fallen foul of the new regime, their target was a jug-eared Scotsman. His name was Robert Bruce Lockhart, a British diplomat and suspected spy, who the Cheka maintained was behind a failed assassination attempt on Lenin just two days before.



Moura Budberg, pictured, was suspected of being a Soviet spy according to secret MI5 files

Malkov and his men reached the fifth floor of the block and knocked on the door of his flat. After a few minutes, the door was opened but left on the chain. A woman's face appeared.

'I need to speak to Mr Lockhart,' said Malkov. 'It is imperative that I do so.'

The 26-year-old woman's strong features did not register any emotion. Brazenly, she asked the man from the Cheka what he wanted, and who he was. Malkov stuck his foot in the gap, and insisted he spoke to Lockhart.

'No,' the woman replied. 'I have no intention of letting you do so.'

The Cheka agent was about to lose his temper, when an Englishman appeared — Hicks, Lockhart's assistant. Much to the woman's consternation, he undid the chain. Malkov marched into Lockhart's bedroom, woke the slumbering Scot, and pointed a pistol at his face.

'Mr Lockhart, by order of the Cheka, you are under arrest,' said Malkov.

Within minutes, Lockhart, Hicks and the woman were driven away. The two men would be taken to the Cheka's dreaded headquarters — the Lubyanka — while the woman would be taken to another Cheka prison. Lockhart was more worried about the fate of the woman than his own. For although she was ostensibly his secretary, she had also become his lover.

She had, in his own words, 'a lofty disregard for all the pettiness of life and a courage which was proof against all cowardice'. She had certainly displayed those qualities that night, but would they hold out now she was in the clutches of the Cheka?

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Ms Budberg was great, great grand aunt of Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, right

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2908987/Was-Nick-Clegg-s-aunt-Soviet-Spy-enigmatic-Russian-baroness-cut-swathe-London-s-best-connected-men-secret-MI5-files-pose-question.html>



Moura Budberg was an “intimidating presence” for the young Nick Clegg with her strong Russian accent

So who was this woman, a lady who was brave enough to stand up to Lenin’s equivalent of the Gestapo?

The name Moura Budberg will mean nothing to many in this country. However, the name of her great-great-nephew will resonate a lot more, as it belongs to the deputy prime minister, Nick Clegg.

When he has growing up, Clegg remembers Moura as being ‘a pretty imposing figure, utterly terrifying for a small boy’, who spoke in a thick Russian accent and would reprimand him for not speaking clearly enough.

Such is the stuff of which people are made who can stand up to secret policemen. But then maybe not all was what it seemed that day.

For now, thanks to the release of formerly top secret files to the National Archives, it emerges that Moura's stand in that Moscow flat in 1918 may have been a sham — and that she might have been a Soviet agent all along, until the end of her life in 1974.

The notion that the great-great-aunt of the second most senior politician in the land worked for the Russians for over half a century is undoubtedly an intriguing one, and certainly merits closer inspection.

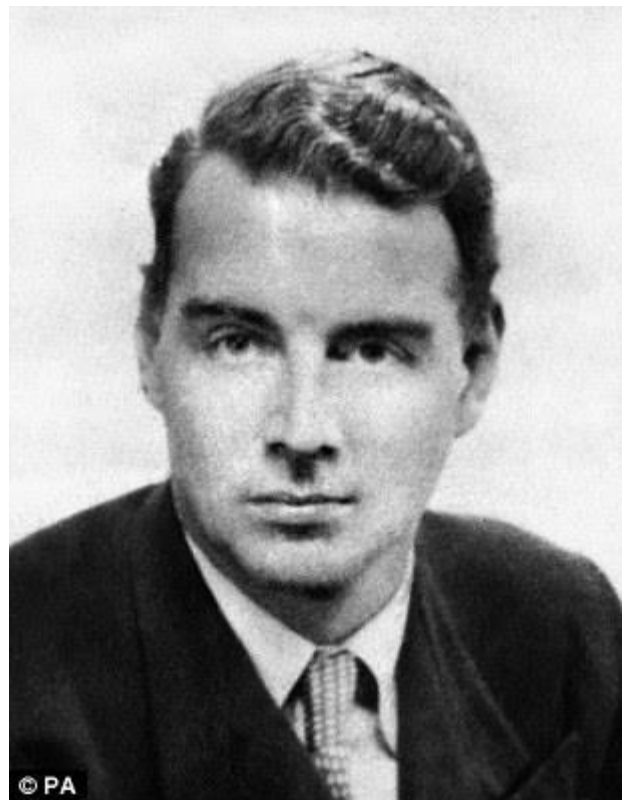
To do that, one must turn to Moura's three thick MI5 files. The documents reveal that she was a great survivor, who lived on her wits and told many lies about herself.

As her biographer, the late novelist and academic Nina Berberova, observed: 'If she needed anything, it was her own legend, the myth she had created about her life, which she cultivated, embellished and reinforced as the years passed.'

So what is the truth — and was she really a Soviet spy?

There are some things about which we can be certain. Moura was born in March 1892 in St Petersburg. Her father, Ignaty Zakrevsky, was a member of the State Council, and the family was wealthy enough to send Moura and her three siblings to smart boarding schools.

In 1911, Moura, who had grown to be a single-minded young woman, was sent to England. It was in London where she first displayed her lifelong talent for mixing with the cream of society — and attracting men.



Soviet spy Guy Burgess, pictured, was a regular at Moura Budberg's gin-fueled parties in London.

[Guy Francis de Moncy Burgess (1911-1963) was a British diplomat and Soviet agent belonging to the "Cambridge Five" spy ring (Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean, Kim Philby, Anthony Blunt, John Cairncross) that operated ca. 1930's – 1950. IGB called them "The Magnificent Five." He defected to the USSR in 1951 with fellow spy Donald Maclean.]

'Moral considerations, false modesty, mundane taboos did not affect liaisons,' wrote Berberova, who knew Moura for many years. 'Sex came naturally to her and in sex she had no need to be taught, to imitate, or to pretend.'

It was in London that Moura would meet not only Lockhart, but also her first husband, Count Ivan Benckendorff, with whom she went to live in Estonia. In 1913, she gave birth to a son, and then in 1915, to a girl.

For the next two years, she would raise her children.

But then came the Russian Revolution.

In November 1917, the headstrong young mother left Estonia in order to prevent her family flat in St Petersburg being stolen by the revolutionaries. Her attempt failed, but while she was in the city, she received the most terrible news.

Her husband had been clubbed to death by local peasants, and their house had been burned down. Thankfully, the children had escaped with their governess, and were in hiding.

Moura was naturally keen to return, but she was marooned. Her guardian angel came in the form of Lockhart, who had been sent by the British Government to ensure that the Bolsheviks did not pull out of the war against Germany.

The two started a passionate affair, which would culminate in their arrest in September 1918 for their supposed involvement in a plot against Lenin's life.

Although the charges against him were trumped up, Lockhart knew that would not necessarily halt the merciless dispensation of Bolshevik justice. For three weeks, he awaited his fate, and then Moura stepped into his cell accompanied by a senior Cheka officer. Moura left Lockhart a secret note stating that he would soon be released, and within a fortnight, she was proved right.

It was clear that Moura had engineered Lockhart's release. One suggestion was that she had seduced the Cheka officer, but another is that she was, in fact, a Cheka agent herself.

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Supporting the spy theory is an original Russian document that appears in the MI5 file, in which it is claimed that Moura offered her services to the so-called Hetman government in the Ukraine — an anti-Bolshevik regime set up after a Right-wing coup.

According to the document, Moura said that she would carry out 'reconnaissance' — in other words, spy — on the territories held by the Bolsheviks. However, the Ukrainians soon felt that Moura was actually spying on them.

'The impression was that the baroness was working on two fronts,' the report states.

The report also claims that Moura went on to spy on the Ukrainians in Berlin in the late Twenties, when she is said to have had an affair with a leading light of the Hetman movement called Kochubey.

Apparently, at the same time, the Soviets started to gain more knowledge of the Hetman movement's activities — information that was possibly supplied by Moura.



Ms Budberg had a passionate affair with author H.G. Wells, pictured, who left her a large inheritance

Can this report be trusted? It is impossible to say, but it was certainly taken seriously by MI5 and the Home Office when Moura applied for a visa to visit Britain in July 1928. Her application was turned down, because of the suspicion of double-dealing.

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It didn't help that Moura, who had acquired the Estonian title of Baroness Budberg through a marriage of convenience, had become the mistress of Maxim Gorky, the Russian pro-Bolshevik writer.

Moura's desire to come to Britain was partly to be close to her niece Kira Engelhardt, who was studying at the Pitman's secretarial college. In 1932, Kira would marry an English doctor named Hugh Clegg, later editor of the British Medical Journal. Years later, their son Nick would marry a Dutch woman called Eulalie, who had survived the horrors of a Japanese internment camp during WWII.

In 1967, Eulalie gave birth to a son, also called Nick — the man who is now Deputy Prime Minister.

Back in the Thirties, Moura made repeated applications to come to Britain and, finally, after good words from the likes of Lockhart, she was granted a week's visa.



Moura Budberg had earlier been the mistress of Russian writer Maxim Gorky, pictured, who died in 1936

Over the next few years, she was able to visit more frequently, until, by 1933, she was allowed to remain here, along with her children. There were many misgivings in MI5, but as with so much of Moura's story, there was never any proof of wrongdoing — just an inkling. But almost as soon as she had seemed to settle down, the spooks found something to go on.

A trawl through the files revealed a letter to Moura written in December 1931 by one Vladimir Gaidarov, a Russian engineer who had attended a trade delegation in Berlin, and was known to supply intelligence back to Moscow.

Although the contents of the letter were anodyne, it was enough for MI5 to ask for a Home Office Warrant to intercept Moura's post. As it turned out, there was nothing in Moura's mail that suggested she was anything but the 'Author's Representative' that she claimed to be.

But it became clear to MI5 that — partly through trading on her status as Gorky's mistress — Moura had made herself incredibly well connected. Not only was she the lover of the author H.G. Wells, her high-society friends included Duff Cooper, who was Financial Secretary to the Treasury, and would become Minister of War in 1935.

Of course, this only made MI5 more suspicious, as did Moura's regular visits to Berlin, Moscow, Italy and Amsterdam. According to one account, she was even present at Gorky's death in Russia in 1936, alongside the head of the Soviet Secret Police — and none other than Joseph Stalin.



Some reports claim that Moura Budberg had even met with Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, pictured

This story may be one of Moura's many fabrications, but the notion that she was linked with the Soviet dictator was advanced by a French diplomat, who insisted to a British contact that Moura was a secret emissary between Duff Cooper and 'Uncle Joe'.

Once again, this was enough for MI5 to subject Moura to another Home Office Warrant — and again, all that showed up from intercepted mail was a sophisticated social life.

What did excite attention were Moura's meetings with an unidentified man in the Suffolk port of Felixstowe, but such an assignation was likely to be more romantic than treacherous.

The war was a difficult time for Moura, who was banned from working for any sensitive organisations, including the BBC. Her phone was also tapped by the Home Office, and she was trailed.

The watchers were only too ready to believe any allegations. If she wasn't working for the Russians, then, according to a scrap of intelligence from across the Atlantic, she was 'working as a spy in the service of the German Secret Service'.

Moura did have her defenders in MI5. An officer who knew her well summed her up as a woman who had 'a flair for getting herself into all sorts of compromising situations' but was a 'staunch upholder of all the British Empire stands for'.

After the war, Moura inherited a small fortune from H.G. Wells after he died in 1946. Some put the figure at £4,000, others at £100,000 (the equivalent now of nearly £4 million).

She continued to attract compromising company, hosting many gin-infused parties at her home in Knightsbridge. According to Klop Ustinov, an MI5 informant and father of the actor Peter Ustinov, Moura could 'drink an amazing quantity'.

Two regular visitors were James MacGibbon — who worked in publishing and who, during the war, had leaked intelligence from Bletchley Park to the Soviets — and Guy Burgess, later revealed as one of the Cambridge Spies.

Before the diplomat fled to Moscow with his fellow traitor Donald Maclean in late 1951, MI5 was concerned, ironically enough, that Moura was unsuitable company for Burgess. True to form, he would get howlingly drunk on her gin.

But MI5 was never to find any proof that Moura spied for the Russians, the Nazis or anyone else.

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Ultimately, the British would have done better to treat her as a source rather than as a target. After Maclean and Burgess fled, Moura told Ustinov that Sir Anthony Blunt, the art historian and Keeper of the King's Pictures, was himself a Communist.

Ustinov reported back, inquiring as to whether this startling piece of information about a member of the Royal Household should be held on file. In the right margin, of Ustinov's report, written in firm black ink, is the single word, 'no'.

With her penchant for gin, the years were not kind to Moura. She suffered from cancer, and in November 1974 she died near Florence. Her body was brought back to London, where she was buried.

In the end, we shall never know the truth about the Deputy Prime Minister's mysterious relative. Ultimately, her greatest achievement was deceiving everyone — even the deceivers.

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