

# WORLD WAR II

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**AMERICAN SUBS IN THE PACIFIC KILLED FAR MORE ENEMY THAN PREVIOUSLY KNOWN**

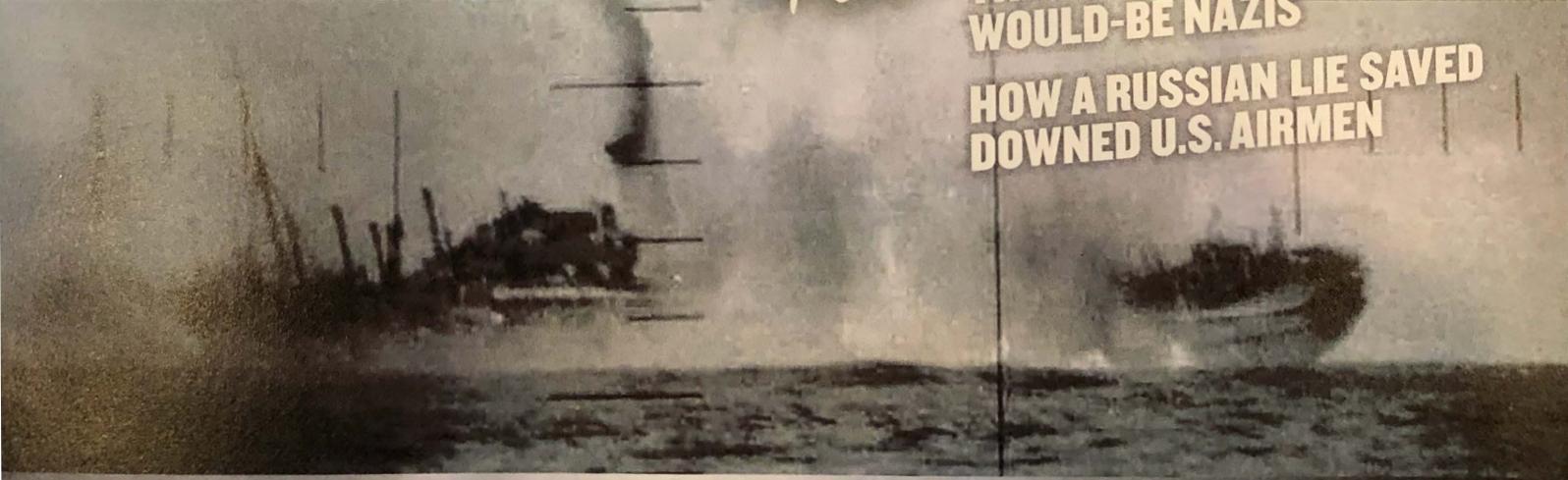
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*Plus*

**THE CLEVER RUSE THAT SNARED BRITAIN'S WOULD-BE NAZIS**

**HOW A RUSSIAN LIE SAVED DOWNED U.S. AIRMEN**



*Japanese transport Teiko Maru succumbs to a torpedo from the USS Puffer on February 22, 1944.*

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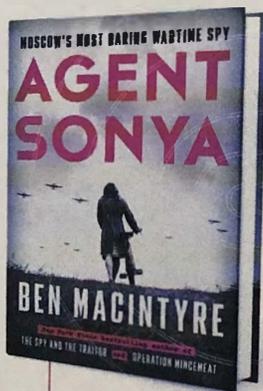




Soviet spy Ursula Kuczynski—dubbed “Agent Sonya”—dressed for travel in 1936 to meet her handler in London.

REVIEWS BOOKS

# UNDERCOVER MOTHER



**AGENT SONYA**  
**Moscow's Most Daring Wartime Spy**  
 By Ben Macintyre.  
 400 pp. Crown,  
 2020. \$28.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION led many to become disillusioned with capitalism. For wealthy, left-leaning academics—the prominent Kuczynski family of Berlin among them—communism was appealing, as the movement championed workers’ rights and challenged rising fascism in Europe and Asia.

It was an early awareness of class disparities—and a blow from a policeman’s truncheon during a workers’ May Day parade—that radicalized the Kuczynski’s daughter, Ursula, and paved the way for an extraordinary career. While living in mid-1930s Shanghai with her architect husband, Ursula gained the confidence of American journalist and communist sympathizer Agnes Smedley, who believed that Ursula could be useful to the Soviet cause. Smedley passed her name to Russian spymaster Richard Sorge, who gave Ursula a small task: He asked to use her home as a safe house to hide communists from the Nationalist government. She agreed. Sorge gave Ursula the codename “Sonya.”

As Sorge’s trust in Ursula grew, so did her responsibilities in carrying out espionage for

the GRU, the Soviet military intelligence agency. From concealing communists in prewar China to running agents in Nazi Germany and collecting nuclear secrets in Britain, Sonya lived in a world of illusion in which codenames and forged documents passed for true identities. Typically, a wartime agent’s life hinges on his or her ability to keep real and fabricated personas separate. But Sonya skillfully blended her public and clandestine lives, using her domestic roles—sister, wife, mother—to recruit top agents from unlikely places, all the while flying under the radar.

It’s tempting to consider *Agent Sonya* to be a story of a modern woman torn between home and career. But for Sonya, the stakes were much higher than those of her peers with conventional lives and occupations. If discovered, Sonya’s children might grow up motherless; little balance existed between the spheres in her life. And as a committed Communist, she overlooked Stalin’s purges and willingly sacrificed much—including multiple marriages and, frequently, what was best for her children—to serve Mother Russia.

Epics featuring female spies are finally coming to the fore—dozens debuted in 2020 alone—and Macintyre shows us that Sonya was one of the best. One important recruitment can make a spy’s career; Sonya staked her claim as one of the Soviet Union’s greatest agents by stacking up extraordinary recruits like cordwood. Her biggest prize was nuclear scientist Klaus Fuchs, a German Communist Party member and arguably the most important spy of World War II. Fuchs provided Sonya with hundreds of documents that sped the development of the Soviet Union’s atomic bomb. It was chiefly due to him and other scientist recruits that Stalin knew about the West’s nuclear advances years before Truman revealed the Manhattan Project’s success to him at the Potsdam Conference in July 1945.

Macintyre is a master storyteller, but it’s his meticulous research that truly stands out: Ursula Kuczynski’s family granted him access to hundreds of photographs and letters, and Ursula’s girlhood diary. Together, these remarkable documents reveal the agent’s innermost tensions, bringing the remarkable “Agent Sonya” fully to life. —Craig Gralley, a former senior officer with the Central Intelligence Agency, is the author of *Hall of Mirrors: Virginia Hall—America’s Greatest Spy of World War II* (2019).

COURTESY OF PETER BEURTON