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Alan Nunn May

Nuclear scientist who served six years for passing atomic secrets to the Russians in the Second World War

The trial of Alan Nunn May in 1946 on charges of having passed "information calculated to be directly or indirectly useful to an enemy" was the first of a series of cases in this country and the US that demonstrated the degree to which American and British nuclear secrets had been leaked to the Soviet Union during the Second World War.

The damage inflicted by Nunn May's activities was not on the scale of the betrayals by the German-born British scientist Klaus Fuchs, later sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment, nor of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, executed by the Americans in 1953. Nunn May had not their degree of access to details of the Manhattan Project to develop an atomic bomb, and his betrayal took place over a shorter period. But his case was the first indication that the British end of the Anglo-American nuclear weapons programme had been a weak link. With the subsequent Fuchs revelations it led to America's refusal to share atom secrets with Britain.

Nunn May, who had been a Communist Party member and ardent sympathiser with the Soviet Union from the 1930s, pleaded in his defence that at the time he was giving information to the Soviet Embassy in Ottawa the Russians were our allies. But though the Attorney-General of the day, Sir Hartley Shawcross, told the court (with presumably intentional irony in the light of Churchill's recently delivered "iron curtain" speech) that there was "no kind of suggestion that the Russians are enemies or potential enemies", they nevertheless fell into the category of "unauthorised persons" to whom such sensitive material was not to be imparted. Admitting to activities "prejudicial to the safety and interest of the State", Nunn May was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment.

Nunn May was a retiring and lonely man, with none of the dash of the smart left-wing set at Cambridge, where he had gone to read physics in 1930. But he had imbibed their communism and anti-Fascism and believed in the rectitude of his actions. When he was convicted there were many in the British scientific community who protested at the harshness of his sentence.

Alan Nunn May was born in 1911 in Kings Norton, Birmingham, the son of a brass founder. He was a clever child and scholarships took him first to King Edward's School, Birmingham, and then to Trinity Hall, Cambridge, where he was tutored in physics by the inspirational P. M. S. Blackett.

He graduated with a first in physics and then went on to research for

a doctorate for which Rutherford, then Cavendish Professor of Experimental Physics, was one of the examiners. Having gained his PhD, he was appointed to a lectureship at King's College London where he continued with his research.

Though he had already been radicalised by his Cambridge experience and had joined the Communist Party, he did not, as did some of his contemporaries, take up cudgels on the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War, but contented himself with the odd pilgrimage to Moscow.

When war came in 1939 he worked for a short time on the new and secret radar project. But in October 1939 the King's College physics department was evacuated to Bristol, where he continued research on elementary particles. Later he was taken from his academic post to join what was cryptically known as the Tube Alloys Project, the British effort to explore the possibility of making an atomic bomb, work for which was being done at the Cavendish Laboratory at Cambridge.

In due course British nuclear research was moved to Canada, both for security reasons and to make co-operation with the American work on the bomb easier. Nunn May went with the British team in 1943 and at some point after that was contacted by Colonel Nikolai Zabotin who, under the guise of being the Soviet military attaché in Ottawa, was running one of the most important Soviet teams attempting to penetrate the Allied atomic bomb programme for the GRU — the military intelligence directorate.

Over the next two years Nunn May's work frequently took him to the heavy water pile at Chalk River and he also made a number of visits to the Argonne Laboratory in Chicago.

Noting that these visits were more frequent than those of any other British physicist, the Americans became somewhat suspicious, and put a limit on them.

When first asked by a GRU lieutenant, Pavel Angelov, to supply information about atomic energy, Nunn May had no scruples in agreeing. He had been assigned to analyse an American report that the Germans were working on a heavy-water reactor and that they might well be able to drop a "dirty" nuclear bomb on the Soviet Union.

Nunn May passed on information but was reluctant to accept the modest $200 and two bottles of whisky that the GRU proposed as payment. His refusal was over-ruled, providing his Soviet masters with the receipts that were later to be his undoing, even though he swore under interrogation that he had destroyed the money.

In the latter part of 1945 Nunn May told his Soviet contacts that his time in Canada was coming to an end. They asked for a final favour, a detailed account of the detonation of the first atomic bomb at Alamagordo, New Mexico, on June 16, which he provided. In September Nunn May returned to London to his King's College post, where the Russians intended to re-establish contact with him.

But these calculations were upset by the defection of a GRU lieutenant, Igor Gouzenko, who gave himself up to the Canadian

authorities in Ottawa, with a substantial bundle of documents that revealed the extent of Soviet spying on its Western allies throughout the war. Among these documents was indisputable proof of Nunn May's activities in this period.

When the Gouzenko revelations were communicated to the British authorities there was no immediate move made to arrest Nunn May. He was put under observation in the hope that his further contact with Soviet agents might lead to the arrest of the bigger fish whose presence was suggested by the Gouzenko material.

At this period Nunn May himself appears to have had serious second thoughts about his role. In an atmosphere in which the wartime Allies were already beginning to fall out he felt he wanted to go no further in the business, and failed to make an appointment with his new Russian control in London. At his trial he was to say that he wanted "to wash my hands of the whole business".

When it became evident that no further insight into Russian spying was to be gained through Nunn May's continuing at liberty, he was arrested in March 1946 and charged under the Official Secrets Act.

He admitted the facts, though pleading in mitigation: "The whole affair was extremely painful to me and I only embarked on it because I felt this was a contribution I Gardiner, further argued in extenuation that the information Nunn May had passed on had merely saved time for foreign powers engaged on atomic research.

The idea that Nunn May's activities had amounted merely to a dissemination of scientific knowledge throughout the world did not, however, impress the trial judge, Mr Justice Oliver. On May 1, 1946, he sentenced Nunn May to ten years, of which he served six. Having gained remission for good behaviour, he was released from Wakefield Prison at the end of December 1952 and returned to Cambridge where he met and married his Viennese-born wife, Dr Hildegarde (Hilde) Broda, who was deputy medical officer of health for the city. In 1954 Cambridge County Council rejected a motion to dismiss her.

For the next nine years Nunn May was effectively blacklisted for employment, but received a small stipend for work in a private laboratory making scientific instruments. At the same time he relearnt his theoretical physics.

In 1961 he went out to Ghana to take up a post as a research professor in physics at the University of Ghana, where he later served as Dean. His wife Hilde and their family went with him and she developed a reputation as a tireless medical worker in the country.

Nunn May retired in 1976 but remained in Ghana for a further two years as a government adviser on science education. In 1978 he returned to Cambridge.

Nunn May is survived by his wife Hilde and by a son and stepson.

Alan Nunn May, physicist, was born in Birmingham on May 2, 1911. He died in Cambridge on January 12, 2003, aged 91.