

# Sir Reginald Hibbert

*Albanologist and former ambassador in Paris*

REGINALD HIBBERT was one of the most prominent diplomats of his generation, but he will also be remembered for his work as a distinguished historian and Albanologist and leading protagonist in the controversies about British policy towards the Balkans in the post-Communist period.

After a conventional upbringing in a strong Anglo-Catholic north London suburban household, Hibbert was of the generation to find his education interrupted and career pattern fundamentally changed by the Second World War. After gaining a place from Queen Elizabeth's School, Barnet, to read History at Worcester College, Oxford, he studied there until volunteering for the forces and going to Royal Military Academy Sandhurst for officer training.

In 1943 he volunteered for the Special Operations Executive and after instruction in Egypt was parachuted into Albania. He remained there attached to the Communist Partisans until November 1944, when he returned to his regiment, the 4th Queen's Own Hussars, and ended the war as a tank commander in Italy.

Having spent a further year reading Russian at Oxford, he joined the Foreign Service. He was present at the Paris Peace Conference and a string of overseas postings followed, in Bucharest, Vienna, Guatemala, Ankara and Brussels. He was abroad almost continually for 14 years, his well-known practical and organisational skills being used in several difficult missions - he was the first ever British diplomat posted in Mongolia, as Charge d'Affaires in Ulan Bator from 1964 to 1966.

Rapid promotion followed and, under David Owen as Foreign Secretary, he became Political Director of the FCO and then, in 1979, ambassador to France, a post where he supervised the renovation of the magnificent historic building of the British Embassy in Paris, a job he said needed the skills as much of the museum keeper as the diplomat. He was a strong pro-European, and made a very good impression on his French hosts. Within the Foreign Office, he was regarded as somebody often difficult to work for, and who made great demands on his staff.

Although at one level Hibbert had an outstandingly good war record, and reached the commanding heights of the Diplomatic Service, his deep wartime involvement with Albania through his post as a British Liaison Officer to Enver Hoxha's Partisans was to determine much of the rest of his life.

As he set out in his book *Albania's National Liberation Struggle: the bitter victory* (1991), his professional career was always dogged by the allegation that he was a Communist or fellow traveller. The victory of Hoxha and the Communists was seen by some British officers who had been attached to the right-wing "nationalists" in northern Albania as caused by an internal betrayal within SOE and British intelligence. Hibbert and others

who were attached to the Partisan side became victims of the so-called "conspiracy theory", where a Communist mole at SOE Bari HQ in Italy was blamed for the victory of Hoxha and Stalin. Hibbert was sometimes said to have been this "mole", or to have acted in association with him. A possible candidate for the mole was the prominent Cambridge Communist James Klugman, who had been a contemporary of Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean. Klugman was involved in SOE Yugoslav operations at Bari HQ.

This view gained some powerful adherents then in the British establishment, such as Julian Amery and David Smiley, both of whom later published books on the subject of Albania in the Second World War. Amery's *Sons of the Eagle* (1948) was particularly influential.

Smeared by guilt by association, and because of his clear and principled criticism of British involvement with the Titoist Communist dictatorship, Hibbert was regarded as a security risk by many in MI5 and MI6. The "conspiracy theory" gained further adherents in these organisations and the CIA after the exposure of the Soviet spy Kim Philby's role in undermining the agencies' attempts to overthrow Hoxha's regime in the late 1940s and early 1950s - although Hibbert never met or knew Philby, or had any kind of contact with him.

Much of Hibbert's own volume is taken up with refuting these allegations, with a minutely detailed record and analysis of seminal events in Albania in 1943-44, particularly the Battle of Dibra.

In fact, as this and other recent



Hibbert: refuted allegations he was a Communist

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historical studies have shown, the victory of the Partisans took place as a result of their superior organisation and commitment to the anti-Fascist cause, and the nature of the social revolution in Albania under Axis occupation at the time. But the struggle between the advocates of these two historical perspectives was very intense for many years, and often personal too; and it was renewed with undiminished venom in the aftermath of the downfall of the Communist regime in Albania in 1991.

The Amery-Smiley group, and their British lobby, the Anglo-Albanian Society, were opposed by the Albania Society of Britain, of which Hibbert was President for a time. The Amery-Smileys often tended to put forward the same positions as the "Oxford Helsinki Human Rights Group", including Professor Norman Stone. Both were involved in bitter controversy which culminated in 1997 with the violent events leading to the downfall of the Berisha regime in Albania.

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His final literary work, awaiting publication, was a memoir of his time as first British representative in Mongolia, a nation in which he also maintained a close interest, and he was also active in the affairs of French-British societies.

In his personal life, he was a warm and loyal friend and an attentive son to his father, Alfred Hibbert who died recently aged 107, one of the oldest men alive in Europe. Reginald Hibbert had suffered from cancer for some years, but it did not diminish his activity until a few months ago. He bore his last illnesses with great fortitude and dignity.

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He was a particular critic of MI6, which he felt had often taken up scarce funding resources for secret work to the detriment of open work by Foreign Office missions, and he believed MI6 had consistently

attempted to manipulate the British press in a pro-Serb direction. In that context, he exposed the covert backing of the Berisha government in Albania by the Major government, and the attempts made in the 1997 crisis to smear critics of Berisha with the "Enthese two historical perspectives" or "Communist" tag that led to the victory of members of the Albania Society of Britain in a libel case against *The Sunday Telegraph* in that year.

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