
Robertson and Malinin: Two Men and Their Missions – A Cold War Footnote

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In contrast with some other wars, the aftermath of the Second World War in Europe was the subject of long debate and detailed preparation by the Allies, in this case by the Big Three (UK, USA & USSR).

One requirement that was foreseen by the European Advisory Commission was the need for effective liaison between the Allied high commands: *'Each commander-in-chief in his zone of occupation will have attached to him military, naval and air representatives of the other two commanders-in-chief for liaison duties'*¹.

For reasons that remain unclear the first of the agreements to set up reciprocal military liaison missions (MLMs) was not finalised until 16th September 1946, when the *'Agreement regarding the Exchange of Military Liaison Missions between the Soviet and British Commanders-in-Chief of Zones of Occupation in Germany'* was signed in Berlin².

This brief and rather unremarkable document was long on administrative details, but short on specific taskings for these MLMs³. Whether this was intentional is uncertain, but the text was to remain unamended until the Missions ceased to be operational on 2nd October 1990, the eve of German unification.

By tradition the document was known by the name of the senior officers who signed it and so it was always described as the Robertson-Malinin Agreement (RMA). In consequence this Cold War footnote seeks to answer the question: *'So, who were Robertson and Malinin?'*

¹ Article 2 of the Agreement of 'The Control Machinery in Germany', signed on 14 Nov 45. France was only included as the fourth Allied Control Council member at the Yalta conference in Feb 45 and the boundaries of the French zone, carved from the British and US zones, were only agreed on 26 Jul 45

² It may have been signed in the margins of a meeting of the Four Power Allied Control Council or of its Coordinating Committee.

³ The missions, based respectively in Buende and Potsdam, were known colloquially as SOXMIS and BRIXMIS.

Lieutenant General Sir Brian Robertson

General Robertson, who signed as the Deputy Military Governor, Control Commission Germany, was a very remarkable man in his own right, as well as having been the son of Field Marshal Sir William 'Wully' Robertson⁴.

After serving as a staff officer for the greater part of the First World War⁵, he went on to his first command of troops, spending five years in India with the Bengal Miners and Sappers, before attending the Staff College in 1926. In 1934, however, having inherited his father's baronetcy, he resigned and went to work for Dunlop in South Africa.

Despite having been a star at Camberley, he explained this decision: *'It's like this. I suppose if I stay on in the Army and there's no war, I may become a Major General, whereas if I go to South Africa with Dunlop, I can stay on until I'm 60, and if here's a war, I shall come back and become a general anyway'*⁶.

When the Second World War began the War Office rejected Robertson as too old (at 43) and so he joined the South African Army, embarking on a highly successful wartime career as *'an ironmonger of genius'*⁷. He spent the last two years of the war in Italy as the Chief Administrator Allied Armies in Field Marshal Alexander's HQ and was noted for his knack of getting on well with the Americans.

So it was a considerable surprise to be posted in July 1945 to become Montgomery's chief of staff in Germany. He later remarked: *'I didn't speak a word of German; I'd never been in the country before ... I knew nothing about the situation at all, nothing, nor had I taken part in any of the great preparatory work .. in London'*⁸.

⁴ He is the subject of an excellent biography *'A Most Diplomatic General: The Life of General Lord Robertson of Oakridge'* by David Williamson, Brassey's 1996, ISBN 1 85753 180 9.

⁵ Despite a shortage of time on the frontline, he was awarded an MC and a DSO.

⁶ Williamson, p27. Robertson was not being conceited, simply analyzing his prospects rationally. And time was to prove him all too right.

⁷ He did not formally rejoin the British Army until Oct 45 by which stage he was a Lt Gen and Deputy to Montgomery, the British Military Governor in Germany. On being awarded a CBE in Sep 42, he noted: *'It's like the measles, you've got to get it sometime!'*

⁸ Williamson, p85.

At first Robertson found that he could get on well with Marshal Vasily Sokolovsky, the Soviet Military Governor. In December 1945 he remarked: *'General conception of the Russians is that they are insincere and incapable of decisions without reference to Moscow. This is not our experience, but they are very realistic; they hate the Germans and they still distrust us considerably'*⁹.

However, by March 1946 Robertson's enthusiasm for the Russians began to cool. He described them as brutal, whereas the other Allies had to act as if wearing kid gloves, and he accepted that he had been taken in by Sokolovsky's apparent ability and wisdom. Unfortunately, his views on his Soviet direct counterpart, Malinin, are unknown.

In July 1946 Robertson gave a sober assessment of his Soviet allies: *'The Russians have a sense of responsibility about Germany. .. It is easy to become impatient about Russian obstruction and their rather Asiatic methods of negotiation. If, however, I am right in thinking that fundamentally they want to reach agreement on Germany, then our patience with them should be great and our perseverance unrelenting'*¹⁰.

Several weeks later the British and Soviet Deputy Military Governors signed the RMA, a deal which was achieved over six months ahead of the equivalent French and US agreements¹¹. It has long been assumed that the British were first in the queue because their relationship with the Soviets at a man-to-man level was better than those of the other Allies. It is thought to have reflected the good rapport that Air Chief Marshal Sir Sholto Douglas had established with Marshal Sokolovsky¹².

Having signed the RMA there is little evidence that General Robertson, who stepped up to be Military Governor in November 1947¹³, had much cause to focus on the MLM issue again, except in April 1948 after the fatal collision of a Soviet fighter with a British Viking aircraft near Berlin. On that occasion he had insisted on delivering a letter of protest in person to Sokolovsky, whom he described as *'ill at ease and on the defensive'*.

⁹ Williamson, p.89.

¹⁰ Williamson, p102.

¹¹ The analogous, but far from identical, Noiret-Malinin and Huebner-Malinin Agreements setting up the French-Soviet and US-Soviet MLMs, were signed on 3 Apr and 5 Apr 47.

¹² Conversation in Apr 06 with Maj Gen Ian Freer, last Chief BRIXMIS, who had discussed the question with experts back in 1990. There appears, however, to be little or no hard evidence to support this assumption.

¹³ As Military Governor he was also CINC of the British troops in Germany. This was a unique father-and-son achievement because his father had also been CINC BAOR in Germany from 1919-20.

Robertson was to remain in Germany until 1950, latterly as the civilian British High Commissioner, before moving on to the Middle East as commander-in-chief. On retiring from the Army he headed up the British Transport Commission and was made Baron Robertson of Oakridge in 1961. He died in 1974, aged 77.

As a man, General Lord Robertson did not seek out fame or glory and he accepted his success with great modesty. Lord Longford, who worked with him in Germany, summed him up: *'Robertson was an unforgettable man. With his military bearing he was every inch a soldier among professors. With his precise scholarly way of speech, a professor among soldiers. The servant of political masters, he was able to hold his own with any of them. Robertson was a man of brilliant mind and incorruptible character'*¹⁴.

Colonel General Mikhail Malinin

If Robertson was *'essentially a late British Imperial figure'*¹⁵, what kind of a man was his counterpart, General Malinin?

Coming from humble rural origins, Mikhail Malinin worked as a carpenter before joining the Red Army in 1919 and fighting in the Civil War. He stayed in the army and served as a battalion commander before being admitted to the Communist Party and entering the Frunze staff academy in 1931. He then progressed through the ranks as an armoured commander, filled a staff appointment in the Finno-Soviet war and was the chief of staff (COS) of a mechanised corps when the Germans invaded Russia.

Like Robertson, his wartime service was spent as a senior staff officer at the front. Working for Marshal Rokossovsky, he was COS of the Bryansk, Don, Belorussian and then 1st Belorussian Fronts, and then, when Rokossovsky moved to the 2nd Belorussian Front, Malinin stayed on to serve Marshal Zhukov as his COS for the Battle of Berlin. In the immediate aftermath of the war Malinin was made a hero of the Soviet Union and Deputy Commander and COS of the Soviet forces in Germany.

¹⁴ Williamson, Foreword.

¹⁵ Williamson, p221.

Rokossovsky later looked back on his wartime relationship with Malinin, describing him as: *'a calm, pedantic man with full confidence in himself and his subordinates. One never doubted his ability to see that an order was carried out. A firm army friendship developed between us'*¹⁶.

Malinin was, however, a man who knew his own limits or who feared becoming the 'fall guy' for some unsuccessful operation. In July 1942, when Rokossovsky was being transferred to command the Bryansk Front, he offered to recommend Malinin for command of the 16th Army. *'Malinin declared frankly that he could not shoulder the responsibility an Army Commander had to bear, and asked to be left as COS'*¹⁷ In the event sticking to his staffing skills and staying close to Rokossovsky and then to Zhukov was to do Malinin no harm.

Two other anecdotes give us some insights into Malinin's character. The first dates from April 1943, when a high level Belorussian political delegation was visiting Rokossovsky's HQ. The Commander rang Stalin to give his situation report, which included mention of the delegation. Stalin asked whether Nadezhda Grekova was in the group and Rokossovsky confirmed that she was. Stalin then noted that Malinin was a widower and Grekova a spinster. *'They'd make a splendid couple!'* And so it was to be. Both generals knew that Stalin's whims were not to be disregarded¹⁸.

The second story concerns Malinin's investiture as an honorary KBE by Field Marshal Montgomery at the Brandenburg Gate in July 1945. *'The English king honoured my father with the rank of Knight-Commander. This is Britain's highest award for foreigners. The privileges that go with this equate with those of English lords. For example, Malinin's children and grandchildren (so me and my children) have the right to be married in the church where the royal family are married'*¹⁹. This suggests that Malinin's children, if not the general himself, were prone to non-Communist pride.

Malinin's post-war career saw him continue in high level COS posts, finally serving as the 1st Deputy Chief of the General Staff. It was in this last post that he played his last important role: flying in

¹⁶ Rokossovsky *'A Soldier's Duty'*, pp 44 & 34

¹⁷ Rokossovsky, p118.

¹⁸ Malinin's son, also Mikhail, recalled his story in an article in 1999. Nadezhda Grekova (1910-2001) was a member of the Belorussian Supreme Soviet at that time; she was married at the front and went on to have four children with Malinin. Rokossovsky, who had been purged, tortured and sent to the 'gulag', was released in 1941, but had a death sentence always hanging over him; Stalin's joke cannot have seemed faintly funny to him.

¹⁹ Malinin's son, same 1999 article.

great secrecy with the head of the KGB, Ivan Serov, to Budapest in October 1956 to report back to the Politburo on the Hungarian revolution. When Marshal Konev led the Warsaw Pact forces into Hungary to suppress the uprising with great violence, Malinin was acting as his MOD adviser.

Finally, whereas Robertson insisted upon a low-key family funeral and a small memorial plaque in Oakridge Linch Church, when Malinin died in January 1960 he was buried with great pomp in Moscow's exclusive Novodevichy cemetery and his memorial relief shows him wearing his KBE.

Concluding Remarks

While the achievements and characters of the great WW2 commanders have been examined in detail, it is perhaps useful to look at the next level of military leaders to see how they also reacted to the war's pressures and demands.

On the one hand, Robertson was clearly a very remarkable man. The official historian called him '*a prince among administrative officers*²⁰', during the Berlin blockade he was described as '*a rock in a swirling sea*²¹', and one German politician even likened him to Bismarck for being '*firm and far seeing*²²'.

For his part, Malinin was operating in a very different environment, where commanders were constantly under political control and exercising initiative was a distinctly dangerous trait. After the war Zhukov and Rokossovsky were side-lined by Stalin for having risen to too much prominence; Malinin understood the perils of '*bonapartism*' and served out his days as a politically correct 4-star general. They may not have had much in common in a social sense, but both men were justifiably successful in their own military and political cultures.

²⁰ Williamson, p58.

²¹ Williamson, p85.

²² Williamson, p236.