

The Selling of the KGB

The post-Cold War world is awash in tantalizing tales from the KGB archives. But the new literature on Soviet espionage may be much less revealing than it appears.

by Amy Knight

The fascination in the West with spy stories seems limitless. Tales proliferate about the Cambridge Five spy group (Kim Philby et al.), the various New Deal subversives whose treachery in giving away secrets to the Soviet Union went unnoticed for years, and the efforts of the KGB to subvert Western democracies through propaganda and terrorism. But apparently readers do not tire of the accounts, judging from the recent sensational response to *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive*, by Christopher Andrew, a history professor at Cambridge University, and Vasili Mitrokhin, a former KGB officer.

The Sword and the Shield is the latest example of an emerging genre of spy histories based on materials from the KGB archives. For almost a decade now, Western writers and current or former Russian foreign intelligence officers have been collaborating on books about the KGB's foreign operations during the Soviet period. All of these volumes have a similar style and format, with chapter headings such as "The Great Illegals," "Love and Loyalties," and "A Dangerous Game," along with lengthy appendixes listing code names of secret agents and

KGB operatives or presenting organizational charts of the KGB. They also tend to cover much of the same ground. Time and again the reader is told about Lenin's Cheka, the assassination of Trotsky, and Soviet atomic espionage.

Despite the redundancy inherent in the genre, these books have found an eager audience in the West. To be sure, there have been critical reviews and complaints about inaccuracies. But for the most part, the new KGB histories have received much favorable attention, and some of them have reached the best-seller list. They also have reopened debates among historians and the general public about key aspects of the Cold War. Indeed, Andrew and Mitrokhin's recent book, replete with new names (or code names) of Western traitors, set off a media frenzy in Britain and fueled impassioned political debates in several European countries about what to do with former spies.

Few would argue that the release of new information on the KGB's operations abroad is anything but a positive development. We should welcome the possibility of finding out what was happening on the other side of the Cold War

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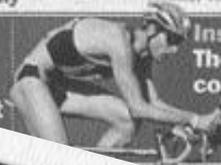
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Alice Thomson:
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Inside Sport
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Why MI5 ignored small fish in a big plot

Russia bugged British agents and Kissinger



Defector
fears for
his life

Big catch? Information from the KGB archives recently showed that Melita Norwood, a former secretary in Britain who is now in her eighties, spied for Moscow in the 1940s.

trenches and perhaps resolving some of the questions that have puzzled researchers for decades. What really happened to American prisoners of war believed to have ended up in the Soviet Union after World War II, Korea, and Vietnam? Do we know all there is to know about the KGB and Lee Harvey Oswald? Even in cases that are closed (such as that of convicted American spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg), there is a thirst in the West for more details from the Soviet side.

But in the excitement produced by the new revelations, many of the standards by which scholars traditionally judge historical writings

have been lowered, or discarded altogether. Historians and general readers alike seem to have forgotten the importance of understanding where the information in a book has come from and who is interpreting and presenting it. "Even the most tendentious historical views can gain credibility in part because the sources of history can be interpreted in different ways—or sensationalized or falsified or used dishonestly or ignored," *New York Times* journalist Richard Bernstein observed in criticizing a historian's claims that Hitler did not know about the extermination of the Jews.

Bernstein's observation is particularly apt in the case of the new KGB page-turners, given that the source of the rev-

elations is an organization with a long history of falsification and forgery directed against the West. Have these books deepened our historical understanding or have they simply distorted the real picture and caused confusion? Have people been reading facts or *disinformazia*? A look at how these spy books came about suggests that we should, at the very least, be reading them with more caution.

Andrew's earlier book, *KGB: The Inside Story of Its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev* (1990), began the new wave of collaborative spy history. Andrew teamed up with a high-level defector from the KGB named Oleg Gordievsky to write an extensive new history of the Soviet intelligence agency. Yet, while the book used information Gordievsky reportedly gleaned from the KGB archives, the bulk of the sources cited were secondary (Western histories and memoirs), not KGB documents. It was not until a year later, in 1991, that the KGB actually sanctioned a book project based on its files. In the changed political climate created by Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of openness, KGB officials decided that it was time to have their story told to the West. Facing unprecedented criticism from the newly emboldened Soviet press, the KGB set out to improve its image at home by publicizing its past successes. It also saw the possibility of earning some extra cash.

Enter John Costello, a successful British nonfiction writer, who first attracted the attention of the KGB when he requested documents for a book he was working on and was encouraged to come to Moscow. There he met Oleg Tsarev, a seasoned intelligence officer who spoke perfect English and was at the time deputy chief of the KGB press department. Tsarev had been commissioned by his superiors to write a book about Alexander Orlov, the Soviet spy who defected to the United States in

the late 1930s. Because the book would be aimed at Western markets, it was essential to have a Western co-author with connections in the publishing world. Costello was an ideal candidate. In mid-1991, a collaboration sanctioned at the highest levels of the KGB was formally initiated between Tsarev and Costello, with Crown, a division of Random House, as publisher.

The end product was *Deadly Illusions*, published in 1993 with a great deal of fanfare because of the book's provocative thesis—that Orlov had never been a genuine defector but had stayed loyal to the Soviet Union. He had, the authors asserted, pulled the wool over the eyes of the Americans, who thought all along that Orlov was giving them valuable information when, in fact, he was passing on “half-truths and trivialities.” The main source for this extraordinary thesis was the so-called Orlov file, a top-secret KGB dossier. But Costello, who did not read a word of Russian, never actually saw the Orlov file. Instead, he relied on Tsarev, assisted by a coterie of his colleagues at the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (or FIS, as it was renamed after the dissolution of the KGB in late 1991) to make “summaries” of the relevant documents in English.

In an afterword to the book, Costello admitted that this arrangement was not ideal, given that the KGB had a long track record of conspiracies against the West. But, he argued, “We had agreed from the outset that this would not be an ‘as told’ account because at least one of the co-authors of this book has seen all the material.” Overlooking the fact that his co-author had spent years abroad as a KGB officer, engaging in the deception and disinformation for which the KGB was notorious, Costello was full of praise for the Russians’ “new level of openness,” which marked a sharp contrast to the secretive-ness of the CIA and the FBI. But this

> AMY KNIGHT, a former Wilson Center Fellow, recently published her fourth book on Soviet and Russian affairs, *Who Killed Kirov? The Kremlin's Greatest Mystery*. Copyright © 2000 by Amy Knight.

openness, it turns out, had distinct limits. Although Costello assured the reader that “all substantive documentation relating to the text will be declassified to coincide with the publication of *Deadly Illusions*,” the Orlov documents, after seven years, are still inaccessible.

Deadly Illusions was followed in 1994 by a real blockbuster spy book, *Special Tasks: The Memoirs of an Unwanted Witness—a Soviet Spymaster*, by Pavel Sudoplatov and Anatoli Sudoplatov with Jerrold and Leona Schecter. As American historian Thomas Powers observed, “The book has more authors than a Hollywood movie with script trouble.” When excerpts of *Special Tasks* were published in *Time*, and the MacNeil/Lehrer News-Hour devoted a large segment to its revelations, it was clear that the book would take American readers by storm. Among its sensational charges was the claim that several leading Western scientists of the 1940s, including Niels Bohr, Enrico Fermi, and Robert Oppenheimer, gave atomic secrets to the Soviet Union.

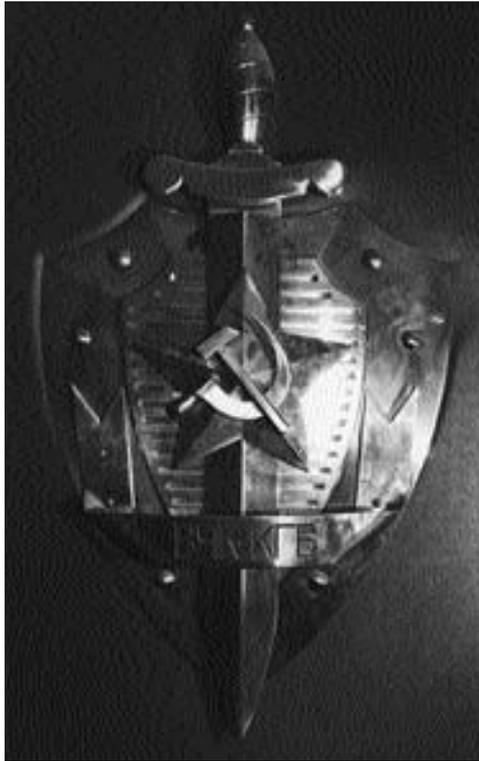
Again, the co-authoring arrangement and the methods of gathering source material were highly unusual. The 87-year-old Pavel Sudoplatov had been a leading official in the NKVD (a Stalinist predecessor to the KGB) during the 1940s and early 1950s, specializing in so-called wet affairs (assassinations and the like). In 1992 his son Anatoli, himself a former KGB employee, apparently decided

that it was time to reap some profits from his father’s memory bank before it was too late. He approached the Schecters (Jerrold was an American journalist and his wife a literary agent) with a plan for a book, but it did not fly. As the Schecters put it in their introduction, “Sudoplatov’s first outline for the book was directed to a Russian audience; we explained that most of the names in the outline were unfamiliar to Western readers.” After the younger Sudoplatov

went back to the drawing board and came up with some familiar names such as Oppenheimer and Fermi, the Schecters became excited, and a deal was made. The Schecters began tapping interviews with the elder and infirm Sudoplatov, prodded on during the sessions by son Anatoli, who must have had dollar signs in his eyes.

There were some hitches, however. Although Pavel Sudoplatov had indeed been an important NKVD official with access to many secrets, his connection with

atomic espionage (which was to be the high point of the book) was very limited. In fact, despite the book’s claims that Sudoplatov had led the Soviet atomic espionage effort since 1942, he was involved in this area only for a brief period during 1945–46. This was well after several of the spying episodes—presented in Sudoplatov’s memoir as authoritative accounts—occurred. As if anticipating that the discrepancy would raise eyebrows, the Schecters said in their introduction that Sudoplatov had received helpful documents from the



The sword and shield emblem of the former KGB

FIS and that “in relaxed meetings with former KGB officers who had obtained atomic secrets, he filled in missing pieces of memory.” All well and good, except for the fact that many of the book’s allegations about the traitorous activity of Western scientists did not stand up to the scrutiny of those who knew about the subject. Indeed, the book was riddled with contradictions and errors. (To cite one of many examples, the authors say that Oppenheimer recruited Klaus Fuchs, a spy for the Soviets, to Los Alamos to work on the bomb, when Oppenheimer had nothing whatsoever to do with the decision.)

The Schecters remained undaunted in the face of a barrage of criticism from historians and members of the scientific community, doggedly defending the veracity of *Special Tasks* by telling people to look at the documentation at the back of the book. This documentation, impressive at first glance, turned out to have been published in the Russian press long before, and it did nothing to confirm Sudoplatov’s allegations about Western scientists. As a last resort, the Schecters, like John Costello, offered the feeble promise that we would see archival documents to back up the book’s claims: “Documents proving Sudoplatov’s oral history are in Moscow archives and eventually will emerge.” We are still waiting.

While the archives of the former KGB have remained tightly closed, Western scholars have unearthed a mine of materials in the Communist Party archives, opened to researchers after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Many documents (particularly those less than 30 years old and files relating to top party leaders) are still classified, but historians have found enough new information to justify reassessment of several key episodes in Soviet history. Thanks to the release of transcripts of Communist Party Central Committee plenums, for example, we have a new understanding of struggles

within the party leadership over issues such as the crisis in East Germany in June 1953 and Khrushchev’s efforts at rapprochement with Yugoslavia. The research process is entirely different from that involving KGB materials. With few exceptions, no one is hand-fed pre-selected documents. In the party archives (where knowledge of Russian is essential), one has to fend for oneself, spending hours going through lists of what is available, filling out forms, and waiting for requested materials to be delivered, which sometimes never happens. Making copies of documents is expensive and tedious, while the physical challenges—lack of heat and a bare minimum of lighting—can be daunting. Such inconveniences might make ordinary scholars envy the privileged few who get KGB materials with no hassle, but at least research in the party archives offers some freedom of choice, an essential prerequisite for historical objectivity. And the playing field, for the most part, is level. Everybody comes up against the same obstacles in hunting down sources.

That the FIS has preferred to do things a different way is understandable. Like all intelligence services, including the CIA, the FIS has many secrets and could hardly be expected to permit researchers to rummage in its archives. At the same time, however, the FIS wants to influence historical writing, earn some money, and give the impression of openness. The solution has been to handpick the documents and the authors. It is presumably more convenient if the Western co-author does not read Russian and or know a great deal about Soviet history. Otherwise, there might be awkward questions about missing files and documents or requests for materials that could not be released.

A case in point is *The Haunted Wood: Soviet Espionage in America—the Stalin Era*, by Allen Weinstein and Alexander Vassiliev, published in early 1999 by Random House to rave reviews. In the *New York Times Book Review*, historian Joseph Persico compared the book’s sig-

nificance to that of Ultra (the British project that broke German codes during World War II), and said that the authors provided “proof of the guilt of certain Americans whose spying for the Soviet Union has been the subject of debate for over half a century.” In addition to documenting the allegedly traitorous activity of Americans such as Martha Dodd, daughter of a former U.S. ambassador to Germany, Michael Straight, an official in the Roosevelt administration, and former New York congressman Samuel Dickstein, the authors claim to verify the guilt of Alger Hiss and former State Department official Laurence Duggan. Contrary to the general impression of reviewers, however, the authors did not cull their documentation from the FIS archives. Neither Weinstein, the author of a book about the Alger Hiss case, nor Vassiliev, a former KGB officer, ever gained access to the FIS’s treasure-trove at its Iasenevo headquarters. Vassiliev simply made summaries of documents that were handed over to him at an office in Moscow by FIS officials and then translated them for Weinstein.

The arrangement was part of a lucrative book deal (involving advances to the Russians of several hundred thousand dollars) made between Random House and the Association of Retired Intelligence Officers, a Russian organization that serves as a middleman for the FIS. Iurii Kobaladze, head of FIS public relations, was the moving force behind the deal, just as he had been with *Deadly Illusions*. Kobaladze said, “We are not opening up the archives, and we are not selling any documents. What we are doing and we are guaranteeing to the authors of these books is that we shall supply them with materials which will allow them to write these books on the basis of documents.” All very well for the FIS, which can determine what information the authors write about, and in the process reap substantial profits (none of which reach the Russian taxpayer), but

what about the curious reader of these spy tomes, who would like to check the sources?

Although the authors of *The Haunted Wood* substantiate some of the references to KGB files with information from the so-called Venona cables (Soviet transmissions intercepted and decoded by the Americans during World War II), the majority of source notes refer only to KGB file numbers that no one can check. As with the earlier books, if we accept that the grave claims made against Americans are true, in the end we are relying on the word of the former KGB.

The *Crown Jewels: The British Secrets at the Heart of the KGB Archives*, another work co-authored by Oleg Tsarev, this time with British historian Nigel West (Costello died in 1996), is more of the same. Published in 1999 by Yale University Press, the book purports to offer much new information about well-known British spies (the Cambridge Five, in particular), as well as names of hitherto unknown traitors. As usual, the reader comes away dazzled by the Soviets’ phenomenal success at recruiting spies and wondering how the government of the victim country, in this case Britain, could be so stupid. Yet while it is more smoothly written than some of the other spy books, *The Crown Jewels* (titled after the KGB’s name for its top-secret files on Britain) does not offer any precious gems. The dust jacket promises, for example, that the book “explores a previously unknown spy ring in Oxford.” In fact, all that the authors do is make vague references to a so-called Oxford Group without giving any names (except the code name, SCOTT, of the alleged leader), or specifics about what the group did. For the most part, *The Crown Jewels* merely adds details to already known spy episodes, covering only the period through the 1950s—safe ground from the FIS’s standpoint. Since the Russians themselves have already published a number of documents about



Sweden declassified these documents on diplomat Raoul Wallenberg in 1997. He saved tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews from the Nazis during World War II; the KGB archives still hold clues to his fate.

Cold War espionage for this earlier period, the information cannot be viewed as earthshaking.

At least, however, the authors do not make a pretense of having conducted research in the KGB archives. They received the documents through the FIS press bureau, where Tsarev still worked under the tutelage of Kobaladze, by this time a familiar (and probably wealthy) figure in the world of spy history publishing.

Last year's *Sword and the Shield*, by contrast, is billed as something different. Co-author Christopher Andrew tells us that the sources were gathered by a defector, Vasili Mitrokhin, not a representative of the FIS, which means that they are more trustworthy. This in itself

is a questionable premise, but even more problematic is the story of Mitrokhin's defection, which strains credulity. Mitrokhin, Andrew tells us, was a secret dissident who strongly disapproved of the KGB even though he worked for its foreign intelligence branch for 35 years. In 1972, for some inexplicable reason, Mitrokhin, who never achieved a rank above major in his entire KGB career, was given the sensitive job of overseeing the transfer of the KGB's entire foreign intelligence archive to its new headquarters outside Moscow. According to Andrew, Mitrokhin had two private offices and unlimited access to the KGB's darkest secrets. With the goal of getting

back at his employers by telling the West about the KGB's foreign operations, Mitrokhin spent the next 12 years scribbling thousands upon thousands of notes from the files he saw. Incredibly, given the rigorous security rules in all Soviet archives, no one noticed what Mitrokhin was doing all day or checked him when he was going home at night.

The story gets even more mysterious. Despite all his hard work, Mitrokhin made no attempt to do anything with the notes he took (except to retype them) after his retirement in 1984. His private "archive" would apparently never have seen the light of day if it had not been for the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Emboldened to take action, Mitrokhin traveled to an unnamed

Baltic country in 1992 and knocked on the door of a British embassy. After a few more trips back and forth to Russia, he eventually was “exfiltrated” by the British with all his documents (six suitcases’ worth) and his family. All this happened under the very noses of the members of the Russian security services, who apparently did not notice that one of their former colleagues who had had access to top-secret files was going back and forth to one of the now-independent Baltic states (where the Russians were spying up a storm).

Despite the strange circumstances surrounding the Mitrokhin story, which suggest that he had some help from his former employers in assembling his notes, Andrew considers his book to be more reliable than the other collaborative spy histories: “Their main weakness, for which the authors cannot be blamed, is that the choice of KGB documents on which they are based has been made not by them but by the SVR [the Russian acronym for the FIS].” Yet even if we accept that Mitrokhin was a genuine defector who did copy all the notes by himself, Andrew’s effort to distinguish his book from the others falls a bit flat. In this case, too, someone other than the author selected the materials, and that someone used to work for the KGB.

While *The Sword and the Shield* contains new information, including the revelation that a British woman named Melita Norwood, now in her eighties, spied for the Soviets several decades ago, none of it has much significance for broader interpretations of the Cold War. The main message the reader comes away with after plowing through almost a thousand pages is the same one gleaned from the earlier books: the Soviets were incredibly successful, albeit evil, spymasters, and none of the Western services could come close to matching their expertise. Bravo the KGB.

What is disappointing, but not surprising, about all these books is their failure to shed light on some of the really pivotal

cases of Cold War history. After all the rehashing of the Alger Hiss case, none of these books offer new evidence of his guilt, except for a single cable from the Venona transcripts that makes reference to an American agent codenamed ALES and speculates that it is probably Hiss. And the fate of Raoul Wallenberg, the celebrated Swedish diplomat who was kidnapped by the Soviets in Budapest in 1945, remains unknown. *Special Tasks* is the only book to touch on that case, and all it adds are Pavel Sudoplatov’s foggy speculations about what happened to Wallenberg. It is clear, however, from an obscure reference made by Sudoplatov in a footnote to the “Wallenberg family file in the KGB archives” that FIS officials have been lying when they say they have no information about the Wallenberg case. For a variety of political reasons, not the least of which is the embarrassment to Russia if a cover-up were acknowledged, the FIS has chosen to keep Wallenberg’s story a secret.

However disappointing these spy histories might be for those who are looking for documented facts and objective analyses, they should not be rejected out of hand, because they are all we have (unless one wants to wade through the self-serving and arid Russian-language memoirs of former KGB officials such as Vladimir Kriuchkov). There is no point in waiting for the Russians to open up their foreign intelligence archives to public access so that scholars can actually do their own research. Unless there is a drastic change in the way Russia’s security and intelligence services operate, the FIS will continue to dole out its archival secrets for profit, selling only those documents that uphold its version of history. But this should not stop us from reading what they have to say now. Probably the best approach is to treat these books with the same kind of skepticism we applied to Soviet publications—from which the discerning reader could glean a great deal. In other words, read between the lines, and always consider the source. □