

***The Liar: How a Double Agent in the CIA Became the Cold War's Last Honest Man***

Benjamin Cunningham (Public Affairs, 2022), 268 pages, endnotes, photos, index.

**Reviewed by Graham Alexander**

Karel Koecher holds the dubious distinction of being the only known Eastern bloc operative to successfully infiltrate CIA through a seeding operation. Former correspondent Benjamin Cunningham recounts this incredible story in *The Liar*, detailing many of the case's most significant milestones and showing how the amoral, louche, and often cantankerous Koecher succeeded where so many others failed.

Cunningham is an obviously skilled writer and, despite his lack of intelligence experience, he reveals a surprisingly sophisticated comprehension of intelligence tradecraft.<sup>a</sup> His brisk, highly readable account burns most brightly in the early chapters, where Cunningham weaves details of Koecher's life together with the main plot-points of Central Europe's turbulent mid-twentieth-century experience. Frustratingly, Cunningham is unable to maintain this high standard throughout the work when his narrative compass spins in multiple, competing directions. Political opinions, historical analysis, personal animosity, and an ironic personal affinity for Koecher all elbow for copy in highly limited space. They prevent Cunningham from coaxing the full payout for what might have been a more balanced review of a complex, often fascinating espionage story.

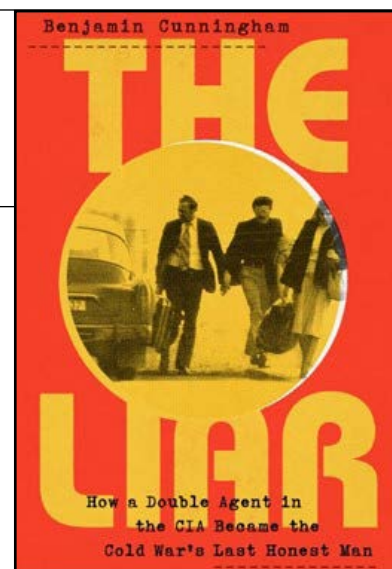
Cunningham breaks cleanly from the blocks with a cliffhanger opener detailing a portentous 1976 meeting between Koecher and KGB Colonel Oleg Kalugin at a safehouse just inside the Czech border with Austria. Events then skip back into Koecher's early life where Cunningham persuasively details how the collapse of the Hapsburg monarchy, Germany's 1939 annexation of most of Czechoslovakia, and Czechoslovakia's transformation into a Soviet satellite shaped Koecher's personality.

Closer to home, Koecher's cynicism and libertinism feel like logical, even inevitable, responses to the shifting loyalties that marked Czechoslovak society and the often spit-tle-laced remonstrations of Koecher's devoutly Catholic father.

Cunningham avoids the trap of armchair psychology while still painting the picture of a man whom the reader believes is ready to sell his services to the intelligence war, albeit less on behalf of the workers of the world than his own unbridled ambitions.

Scene-setting complete, Koecher's move to the United States in December 1965 with instructions to penetrate the US national security apparatus constitutes the drama's main act. Incredibly, this often dilettantish, incorrigibly venal agent succeeds in obtaining US citizenship, passing a polygraph examination, and by 1973, beginning translation work as a CIA contractor. Cunningham recounts various parts of this story using interviews from Koecher and a smattering of other sources, including often unsourced details from Czechoslovak intelligence archives.

Frustratingly, Cunningham does not dwell at sufficient length on the case itself. Details on the wider world of politics were useful in understanding Koecher's formative years but, too often in later chapters, Cunningham meditates unnecessarily on various world events and US presidents whose policies he variously critiques or praises. The trend culminates with the final disintegration of the fourth wall as Cunningham recounts his impressions of



a. See also Hayden Peake's brief review in the Intelligence Officer's Bookshelf, *Studies in Intelligence* 66, no. 4 (December 2022). For a broader historical perspective, see Cleveland C. Cram, *Of Moles and Molehunters: A Review of Counterintelligence Literature, 1977–92* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1993), available at <https://cia.gov/resources/csi/books-monographs/of-moles-and-molehunters-a-review-of-counterintelligence-literature-1977-92/>.

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Koecher's home during their interviews, and their discussions on social issues and US elections. His unconcealed disdain for Kalugin, whom he sheepishly admits avoided him by providing a false phone number, also suggests Cunningham wants to cast heroes and villains.

The ultimate verdict on *The Liar* is that it is a solid, usually entertaining, account of a case that could have been so much better. The epic sprawl of Koecher's story begs for an even more detailed examination weighted more evenly among its main protagonists, several of whose stories are equally dramatic. The reader understands well how Koecher came to work in the world of espionage but much less so the drivers behind the

sometimes unpredictable turns in the case. Cunningham desperately needs, for example, better sourcing from FBI, KGB, and Czechoslovak intelligence to widen the aperture and to verify Koecher's sensational, self-serving claims.

In the final act, Cunningham cannot resist the temptation for a verbal flourish by recalling how, on the night before his 1984 arrest, both Koecher and his wife "went down swinging" with a local couple. How much more worthwhile would *The Liar* have proven, however, had it eschewed word games and, perhaps, even weighed this lifestyle among the variables that explained Koecher's often astonishing espionage career?



*The reviewer:* Graham Alexander is the pen name of a CIA officer.