

## ***Intelligence in Public Media***

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### ***Spycraft***

Netflix documentary series, eight episodes.

***Reviewed by Brent M. Geary and David Welker***

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The new documentary series *Spycraft*, which debuted on Netflix in January 2021, mostly succeeds as an entertaining overview for general audiences of the world of intelligence during roughly the last century. Reflecting mostly strong research, high production values, and good storytelling, the series most likely will teach viewers fascinating things about famous spies, devices, and events in intelligence history over eight episodes ranging from 29 to 36 minutes in length. Consumers of strategic history, however, especially intelligence practitioners or subscribers to *Studies in Intelligence*, will likely find little here that is new and much that is annoying, sensationalized, or—in a few cases—just plain wrong.

On the plus side, *Spycraft* is at least partly the work of seasoned intelligence experts. Two of its producers are International Spy Museum founding board members, intelligence artifact collector, and writer Keith Melton and his frequent co-author of intelligence-related books, former CIA Office of Technical Service Director Bob Wallace, both of whom appear frequently as talking heads in the series. In addition, several other noteworthy former intelligence professionals appear throughout *Spycraft*, including Directorate of Operations legend Waldimir “Scotty” Skotzko, former CIA Chief Historian Ben Fischer, and Sandy Grimes, one of the counterintelligence officers who uncovered the KGB mole Aldrich Ames. Their reflections on pivotal cases are the highlights of some episodes and lend greater credibility to the overall product.

With such intellectual firepower, many of the stories the series touches upon are well-told, even riveting, with frequently entertaining reenactments and high quality cinematography and digitized graphics. The episode on surveillance, for example, features retired CIA and FBI experts describing events and technologies such as the passive cavity resonator installed by the Soviets in a wooden replica of the Great Seal of the United States presented as a gift to the US ambassador to Moscow in 1945. (The CIA museum has a copy of the seal on display.)

Other strengths of the series include the range of topics covered, at least somewhat. Entire episodes, for example, are dedicated to clandestine collection techniques, covert communications, counterintelligence, codebreaking, and the intelligence nexus with special operations. Less justifiably, however, but likely driven more by the perceived need to titillate audiences, are episodes focused entirely on assassination operations—primarily deadly poisons—and the use of sex as a means to compromise potential agents. The latter episode, unoriginally named “Sexpionage,” features a claim by the narrator that this term is used to describe such operations, which is utter nonsense and yet indicative of a larger weakness in the series overall.

First, *Spycraft*’s narrator routinely mispronounces words throughout, to the point that it becomes a distraction. From the World War I spy “Meta” Hari, to “new-cue-ler” weapons, to the Office of “Personal” Management, to creative takes on several Slavic names, the garbled words come fast and furious and would make for a lively drinking game. Such frequent mistakes in something so easy to spot, however, highlight an overall shoddy effort from the series’ editors and post-production staff. Only once or twice do the authoritative professionals misstate details about the cases they discuss—such as Melton saying that the operation to take down Usama bin Laden originated in Pakistan rather than Afghanistan—but the narrator does so repeatedly, suggesting that the project was overly rushed. One such example was the claim that the so-called Russian “illegals” arrested in the United States for spying in 2010 were a “new type of Russian officer.” The Soviet Union had used such deep cover officers for generations; nothing was “new” about them except that they were rounded up at the same time and in such large numbers.

Likewise, the series claims that aerial photographs were taken from a balloon during the American Civil War to collect intelligence on Confederate troops when, in reality, Union forces considered the idea but never attempted it because of the poor quality of cameras then

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available. Instead, messages were sent from the balloons by telegraph or delivered upon landing.

Probably because of the involvement of experts such as Melton and Wallace, many finer details of intelligence history are accurately depicted, and the series deserves credit for that. However, perhaps owing to the number of directors (three) and producers (eight), the episodes are of uneven quality. Much of the material is needlessly sensationalized, with the use of “sexpionage” only the most egregious example. In discussing the effects of polonium poisoning on Russian investigator Alexander Litvinenko, the narrator declares that the drug caused Litvinenko’s organs to “literally explode,” followed by a three dimensional animation depicting the same. It was unnecessarily graphic and undercut an otherwise accurate telling of Litvinenko’s 2006 assassination. Also, the episode about special forces and future technology veered away from

intelligence altogether at times, seemingly in an effort to get as many clever gadgets on the screen as possible but detracting from the overall purpose of the series.

Despite these faults, *Spycraft* makes for an entertaining diversion with brief, dense episodes that competently depict some of the most important chapters of intelligence history and technology since World War I. The authorities who appear on the screen provide real heft to the proceedings, though they could have been filmed better and should have been given more air time. The slick, jumpy cinematography, reenactments, and digital effects are reminiscent of the Jason Bourne movies and work reasonably well. As it is, relative to other television depictions of the intelligence business, *Spycraft* is an above-average series. With better narration and editing—and less sensationalism—it could have been even better.



The reviewers: Brent M. Geary and David Welker are members of CIA’s History Staff.