

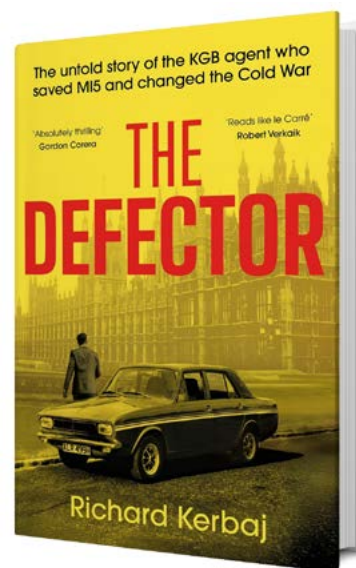
intelligence in public media

The Defector

The Untold Story of the KGB Agent Who Saved MI5 and Changed the Cold War

Reviewed by Mel Miller

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Reviewer: The reviewer is a Russian linguist and regular contributor to *Studies in Intelligence*.



In *The Defector*, journalist Richard Kerbaj weaves together several stories of Soviet defectors from the 1950s to the early 1970s. It is advertised as the story of Oleg Lyalin, a KGB Department V officer sent to the UK at the height of the Cold War to conduct sabotage and assassination operations. Broadly speaking, *The Defector* is about the disorder and confusion that several Soviet defectors caused US and UK intelligence agencies during this time frame. Citing new sources from FBI Freedom of Information Act requests, the Lithuanian Special Archives (LYA), and personal interviews, Kerbaj attempts to breathe new life into one of the most important Cold War espionage cases. Oleg Lyalin was one part of this chaos.

Born at the height of Stalin's purges, Oleg Adolfovich Lyalin was first co-opted to work for the KGB while a

student at the Higher Marine School in Odessa in 1957. In 1958–59, he was sent on a training exercise to Chisinau with a fraudulent identity document in the name Oleg Aleksandrovich Liabin.¹ Based on his performance, he was invited to attend the KGB's 101 Intelligence Institute, where he trained to become an illegal support officer. After roughly two years of training, it was decided that Lyalin would not become an illegal support officer after all. Instead, he was sent to Klaipeda, Lithuania, in April or May 1962, where he was assigned to Sub-Division I dealing with foreign sailors. In March 1967, he returned to Moscow and began training to become a Department V officer specializing in sabotage and assassination operations. In May 1968, Lyalin was instructed to prepare for a mission as an illegal to Czechoslovakia. His mission was to pose as an American tourist of German origin, likely using the identity Aaron Adolfovich Stromvasser.

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The mission never took place because the unrest in Czechoslovakia, known as the Prague Spring, was brought under control. On April 11, 1969, he was posted to London under Soviet Trade Representative cover.² Aged 34 years, Lyalin defected on September 3, 1971, which set the UK and US counterintelligence communities on a path of bewilderment and madness.

At first, *The Defector* barely seems to be about Lyalin at all. The first third focuses heavily on Anatoliy Golitsyn, Yuriy Nosenko, and Pyotr Popov, whose cases brewed in the decade leading up to Lyalin's defection. James Angleton and leadership within MI5 and MI6 are also key characters. This is probably to set the stage for Lyalin's entrance, but too much of the book is dedicated to their well-known history. Kerbaj sprinkles random details of information about Lyalin in the early pages of the book and waits to mention how Golitsyn and Lyalin are connected until the second half. (177–78) While the other espionage cases discussed in the book are important in their own right, their prominence throughout the book serves as more of a distraction than helpful context. By Chapters 6 and 7, Lyalin begins to make more frequent appearances.

There's a reason no historian dared attempt a book-length work dedicated solely to Lyalin's story in the 55 years since his defection: critical archival materials are still largely unavailable. The UK National Archives (TNA) holds three indexed files relating to Oleg Lyalin.³ As of September 2025, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) was still unwilling to release these files, citing national security concerns. While valuable, the FBI files are largely redacted, with many pages withheld in their entirety.⁴ It is clear that reports resulting from interrogations of Lyalin are not included, which raises more questions about what else is missing. Until governmental records are made available in full, Lyalin's story and the impact of his disclosures will always be incomplete.

To Kerbaj's credit, he uncovers several new records pertaining to British agents whom Lyalin ran while he was operationally active, which, combined with insights from the FBI files, add a new dimension to his intelligence activities in Britain. The FBI files on their own give a sense of how the US government

dealt with the aftermath. While improperly cited and underutilized, the Lithuanian "file" that Kerbaj discovered accounts for Lyalin's KGB assignments and confirms his bona fides. Interviews with British officers who knew Lyalin in London offer previously unknown tidbits of Lyalin's character and capture the human element of his experience. These were worth publishing.

However, these discoveries do not excuse some serious errors and sourcing issues. Kerbaj's unorthodox footnote style and lack of bibliography make it difficult for the lay reader to decipher the true scope of sourcing. There is no citation for the so-called Lyalin File from the Lithuanian Special Archives, which complicates researchers' ability to verify these records on their own. Actually, this file is Lyalin's service card, not a file.⁵ Lyalin's FBI file number is confused for the FOIA processing number. Multiple citations are mistyped, which would lead a researcher down a search for incorrectly sourced or nonexistent files.⁶ Some citations are kept suspiciously vague, only being described as an MI5 file, an intelligence briefing, or a recently declassified intelligence file.⁷

While somehow citing MI5 files, Kerbaj notes that Lyalin's MI5 file remains sealed.⁸ (266) Some important facts and analysis are without citation at all. For example, a list of Lyalin's operational names has no citation.⁹ (163) Kerbaj mislabels GRU defector Anatoliy Chebotarev, who defected in Brussels in 1971, as Anatole Thoibeve, but this name was incorrectly spelled in the source from which Kerbaj likely obtained this information.¹⁰ There are also baseless claims about KGB priorities and tradecraft, as well as details about information sharing between MI5 and the US government, that historians should question before repeating elsewhere. (149) These choices may be acceptable in journalistic reporting, but more is expected of the book claiming to reveal groundbreaking insights from newly declassified sources.

If Kerbaj had access to still-classified UK government records on Lyalin and was permitted to include this information in his book, he wouldn't be the first one. Much of Kerbaj's telling of the UK perspective on the case is already found in published works. Christopher Andrew's *The Defence of the Realm* (which

Kerbaj cites) tells what is known about Lyalin's case from official UK sources and in a much more concise format. Andrew's sourcing for much of the Lyalin material is simply "Security Service Archives," which fuels curiosity that Andrew was given special access to files that remain classified and inaccessible to the rest of us.¹¹

Even though there were probably not enough records available pertaining to Lyalin to write this book, Kerbaj still under utilizes FBI, LYA, and TNA records. The FBI's files were not released until around six years after Andrew published his authorized history, yet Kerbaj misses the opportunity to add several themes contained in the FBI file.¹² For example, Lyalin's disclosures inspired investigations in Boston, New York, San Francisco, the District of Columbia, and elsewhere. Kerbaj also misses the opportunity to expand upon several of Lyalin's unnamed sources, including one who worked for the Shell International Oil Company in London before moving to Boston.¹³ He also could have included more information about the former head of Department V in the United States, Nikolay Alekseyevich Kuznetsov, but only mentions him once. Furthermore, the FBI files report an unidentified illegal pair who arrived in London in mid-1969 and provide details about the FBI's questioning of Lyalin's knowledge of illegal operations.¹⁴ These would have all been within the scope of Lyalin's story.

Lyalin's Lithuanian KGB service card is also a significant discovery, packed with details that Kerbaj inexplicably withholds from the reader: he only cites the record three times.¹⁵ For example, Lyalin's service card shows he was assigned to military unit no. 22995 in Sevastopol for three weeks in October 1959, just before he went to the 101 school for illegal support training.¹⁶ Could unit 22995 be the unit to which Lyalin was assigned on his illegal training mission to Moldova? This question and so many others are left unaddressed.

A simple search in LYA revealed additional information about the impact Lyalin's defection had on the Lithuanian KGB that Kerbaj's book also omits. In the aftermath of Lyalin's defection, the KGB noted an increase in incidents and a worsening operational

situation at the port of Klaipeda, where Lyalin previously worked: they believed that the special services of some Western European capitalist states, especially Germany, sought to use ships departing from Klaipeda for sabotage and other subversive activities against the Soviet Union. The KGB also suffered setbacks recruiting foreign sailors as agents, and further noted that relationships with at least three agents that were recruited in 1970–71 were destroyed as a direct result of Lyalin's defection.¹⁷ For a book that purports to cover the impact of Lyalin's defection, these details seem too important to exclude.

There are still several other TNA files regarding Lyalin's source, Siraj Abdoolcader, that have yet to be explored. Abdoolcader was a clerical employee of the Greater London Council who specialized in vehicle registrations. According to Kerbaj, Abdoolcader provided proprietary information about British surveillance vehicles to the KGB. (103) Kerbaj cites one file dedicated to this source, but there are seven others housed at TNA yet to be studied. It would have been most appropriate to dedicate more attention to Abdoolcader based on these records, and less on Golitsyn and Angleton.

The Defector is also largely without Russian sources, which lends to some potentially misleading analysis on the KGB's perspective of Lyalin's defection. If the KGB were keeping score, Kerbaj states, "the Soviets were way, way ahead" and the KGB considered MI5 to be "America's junior partner." (191) He adds that the KGB and Andropov underestimated MI5. (230) This isn't to say that the KGB didn't have a lot going on: it might be fair to say that the Soviets allocated more resources to espionage as evidenced by the sheer number of personnel they deployed for their efforts, but they had their own share of setbacks in the UK. Even though Gordon Lonsdale wasn't a volunteer like Lyalin, the loss of his entire network several years prior was a massive blow to Soviet espionage in the United Kingdom, to cite one example.¹⁸ The status of MI5 as "America's junior partner" is also debatable: the British have much more history and experience in intelligence than the US services. Even if it were true, there is no apparent citation that speaks to Andropov's underestimation of MI5, either.

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Even worse, Kerbaj neglects the largest collection of Russian source material in his own backyard. Housed at the Churchill Archives Centre in Cambridge, the Vasiliy Mitrokhin Papers are a staple of primary source material from the Soviet perspective.¹⁹ There are several references to Oleg Lyalin in the Mitrokhin Papers that would have benefited Kerbaj's text, especially records that capture the Soviet perspective of the aftermath of Lyalin's defection. For example, the Soviets did not stop all recruitments of Brits after Lyalin's defection, but rather they temporarily shifted priority to former British colonies.²⁰ Readers would also be interested to know that a London Metropolitan Police Officer named John Alexander Symonds (codenamed Skat), offered his services to the Soviet embassy in Rabat in 1972. Symonds gave valuable information to the Soviets about Scotland Yard's efforts to protect Lyalin after his defection.²¹ The KGB recruited Israeli-Palestinian Haddad Wadia, codenamed Nationalist, and tasked him with finding Lyalin.²² This is just a small sample of valuable insight in the Mitrokhin Papers that Kerbaj's book omits.²³

Despite these shortcomings, *The Defector* may be appreciated by readers who seek entertainment and conspiracy more than historical accuracy. Readers may

enjoy Kerbaj's interpretation of the available records over the original government reports, even if the book contains frequent errors, embellishments, and analytic leaps. His account of the press battle in the aftermath of Lyalin's defection is engaging, although he discusses Russian media and fails to cite any. Readers who have never heard of Anatoliy Golitsyn or James Angleton may like learning about their relationship, even though their story is beyond the scope of the book. Key primary sources, such as archival records, are worthy of further inspection and may be of subsequent value for historians.

Given the incompleteness and underutilization of available records, *The Defector* probably contains a fraction of Lyalin's story. US and UK governments' refusal to release information about Oleg Lyalin even 55 years after his defection indicates the long-lasting impact of his disclosures. Withholding the Lyalin files suggests continued national security sensitivities to this day. Given his impact and the timeliness of stories about Russian assassinations and sabotage against the West, it is understandable why Kerbaj wanted to tell Lyalin's story. Unfortunately, not enough time has passed. The full story will need to be retold after more records come to light. ■

Endnotes

1. In archival records in Lyalin's case, Chisinau is spelled Kishnev or Kishinev.'
2. Exact dates and units of Lyalin's assignments vary in the available documents. For example, one FBI source in New York reported that he believed Lyalin joined the KGB in 1960 and served as an illegal support officer from 1960 to 1969, but this contradicts what Lyalin reported during his interrogations. This summary of Lyalin's career is based on a five-page biographic sketch in the FBI FOIA files, titled "Oleg Adolfovich Lyalin" and dated September 16, 1971, in FBI Bufile No. 105-216642 (accessed on archive.org) and Lyalin's Lithuanian KGB service card: Lietuvos Ypatingasis Archyvas (LYA), PAGRINDAS. F. K-1, ap. 61, kartoteka Nr. 41, tarnybos kortele Nr. 8033 (Oleg Lialin, Adolfovici).
3. These are FCO 168/4587, FCO 168/4588, and FCO 168/4589. I requested these files under the UK's Freedom of Information law and was denied access in September 2025.
4. Judging from a review of the FBI FOIA files shared on archive.org, 3,988 pages in the FBI's Lyalin file were withheld in their entirety. This does not include the pages that were shared but redacted in-full, of which there were hundreds more. Some of the deleted pages are listed as being "duplicates" or "referrals/consults" to other US government agencies. It is not known if the referred pages were ever released.
5. Service cards are summaries of an individual's career and contain information akin to a resume. His service card was only two pages long. Full KGB files in the Lithuanian Special Archive can be hundreds of pages long. The correct citation for Lyalin's service card in the Lithuanian Special Archive is: Lietuvos Ypatingasis Archyvas (LYA), PAGRINDAS. F. K-1, ap. 61, kartoteka Nr. 41, tarnybos kortele Nr. 8033 (Oleg Lialin, Adolfovici).
6. Multiple TNA records are mistyped. One citation in Chapter 5 points to CRIM 2/5681/1, which does not exist. He likely meant CRIM 1/5681/2, which is also cited in Chapter 6. Also in Chapters 5, 8, and 10, he cites DEFE 141/68, which does not exist. He likely meant DEFE 68/141, which is a file about one of Lyalin's British sources, Siraj Abdoolcader.
7. Kerbaj, *The Defector*, 130, 144, 182. Kerbaj cites an "MI5 File" in relation to information he includes about former Soviet Consul in Istanbul Konstantin Volkov. In the corresponding footnote, he cites his previous book, *The Secret History of the Five Eyes*, but the text about Volkov in *Five Eyes* does not provide a citation for the same information. While this has little to do with Lyalin, it calls to question the other unverifiable sources throughout.
8. The FBI files include one British memo (dated June 15, 1972) containing a heavily redacted four-page memo.
9. Lyalin's operational names are from a five-page biographic sketch in the FBI FOIA files, titled "Oleg Adolfovich Lyalin" and dated September 16, 1971, in FBI Bufile No. 105-216642. Accessed on archive.org.
10. It is widely known that this GRU defector's name was Anatoliy Chebotarev, not Anatole Thoibev. Kerbaj only cites "a press report" in relation to the "Thoibev" defection, but a search for this name in newspapers.com reveals *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mirror* reports on October 6, 1971, that use this incorrect spelling. The *Daily Telegraph* identifies the author as Serge Nabokoff, who reported from Brussels. The error likely came from transliterating the name from Russian to French and then French to English, but it also could have been caused by a simple reporting error early in the case. *Le Monde* spelled his name as "Anatole Tchebotarev" in an article on October 7, 1971, and some US newspapers repeated this spelling. Subsequent reporting on this case clarified his name as Chebotarev. For reference to the name Thoibev, see Kerbaj, *The Defector*, 237.
11. Christopher Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5* (Allen Lane, 2009), 567–84, and corresponding footnotes.
12. Andrew's *The Defence of the Realm* was published in 2009, and the FBI FOIA records were released in 2015, judging from a watermark on FBI FOIA records.
13. One possible reason Kerbaj chose to omit this part of the story is because the source's name was redacted, see FBI Memorandum from Boston Field Office, Title Redacted, dated October, 18, 1971, in FBI Bufile No. 105-216642. Accessed on archive.org.
14. FBI Memorandum from W.A. Branigan to Mr. E.S. Miller, "Subject: Oleg A. Lyalin, Internal Security - Russia," dated September 27, 1971, in FBI Bufile No. 105-216642. Accessed on archive.org. These illegals are also mentioned in the Mitrokhin Papers. Their names are not mentioned in the FBI file, but they are mentioned in Mitrokhin as Grinenko and Tonya, see MITN 1/7, 179, accessed in The Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge.
15. The LYA service card can be difficult to interpret because it is almost entirely handwritten in Russian.
16. LYA, PAGRINDAS. F. K-1, ap. 61, kartoteka Nr. 41, tarnybos kortele Nr. 8033 (Oleg Lialin, Adolfovici).
17. These agents are described as "Egon-Mayer," "Berg," and "Verner." From LYA, PAGRINDAS. F. K-41, ap. 1, b. 715, l. 185–218.
18. Gordon Lonsdale, a pseudonym, was an illegal in the United Kingdom until his arrest in January 1961. Several others in his network were also arrested. Lonsdale's true name was Konon Molody, but the files in the National Archives at Kew are listed under Gordon Lonsdale.
19. Vasilii Mitrokhin was an archivist in the KGB from 1972 to 1984. In 1992, he defected to the UK, bringing with him priceless records from the KGB archive. Several books on Soviet espionage history were written based on the contents of the Mitrokhin Papers.
20. MITN 1/6/3, 119.
21. MITN 1/5, 195.
22. MITN 2/24, Item 365.
23. Special thanks to Dr. Kevin Riehle for visiting the Churchill Archives Centre and digging up relevant records. For more on the Vasilii Mitrokhin Papers, visit <https://archives.chu.cam.ac.uk/collections/mitrokhin/>. ■