

Intelligence in Public Media

Near and Distant Neighbors: A New History of Soviet Intelligence

Jonathan Haslam (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 400 pps.

Reviewed by John Ehrman

Where does one go to start reading the history of the modern (that is, post-1917) Russian intelligence services? Certainly, there is no shortage of books on the topic. Some, like George Leggett's *The Cheka* (1981), focus on narrow slices; others, such as John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr, and Alexander Vassiliev's *Spies* (2009), look at operations in a particular country or era; scores of other books, of varying quality, look at individual Soviet espionage cases or the lives of spies. The British academic, Christopher Andrew, has collaborated with former Soviet officers on the two most thorough treatments—the first, *KGB* (1991) with Oleg Gordievskiy, and the second, *The Sword and Shield* (1999), with Vasiliy Mitrokhin. While encyclopedic, Andrews's books are aging and check in at around 600 pages each, and the Mitrokhin volume, especially, is hard going (a third, and lesser-read, Andrews-Mitrokhin volume adds almost another 700 pages to their work). No doubt, we can use a short history of Soviet intelligence, one that is both thorough and readable. This is what a US-based British scholar of Soviet history and foreign policy, Jonathan Haslam, seeks to provide in *Near and Distant Neighbors*.

The results, however, are mixed. Haslam's strengths are that he provides a good overall summary of the course of Soviet intelligence and goes into some areas that other writers overlook. Beginning with the establishment of the Cheka soon after the Bolshevik coup, he walks through Soviet intelligence's early focus on preventing counter-revolution, its gradual shift to collecting foreign intelligence, the era of the Illegals in the 1930s and 1940s, and the gradual decline of human intelligence capabilities as the pool of Soviet sympathizers in the West dried up. Almost all of this—the stories of the Trust, the Cambridge Five, the impact of the purges, the strong counterintelligence tradition, and the later volunteers such as the Walkers, Ames, and Hanssen—will be familiar to anyone with a basic knowledge of Soviet intelligence. But unlike a lot of other intelligence histories, Haslam takes the time to explore the lesser-known aspects of the Soviet experience. He is particularly informative on the importance of military intelligence in the early days, the gradual profes-

sionalization of the services, and the underdevelopment of Soviet codebreaking.

Haslam is also insightful on Soviet intelligence's chronic weaknesses, most of which stemmed from the nature of the Soviet system itself. In the 1920s, Soviet intelligence wasted its time and resources countering British plots that existed only in the paranoid minds of the leadership. Then, in the 1930s and 1940s, intelligence had to toe the Stalinist line. Haslam notes that this was especially problematic for codebreaking because under Stalin, who prized human intelligence above all, the study of the requisite mathematics was under an ideological cloud. Once Stalin was dead, Soviet mathematicians began to catch up with the United States and Britain only to find, in the 1960s, that the West was starting to leap ahead in computers. Soviet cryptanalysis again fell far behind, according to Haslam, its practitioners condemned to work with paper and pencil in a digitizing world. Finally, Haslam also points out that advancement in the KGB and other Soviet services depended more on loyalty to communist ideology and personal ties than on talent. In general, Soviet intelligence was run by mediocrities who had risen by never asking hard questions or rocking the boat. Small wonder, as Haslam notes, that defections and betrayals from within were a far greater problem for the Soviets than for the British and American services.

Haslam presents all this in a concise, organized, and clearly-written package, based on archival research and a wide reading of Russian and Western secondary sources. Nonetheless, several aspects of his account give the reader pause. Some are the usual small mistakes that creep into broad histories; Aldrich Ames, for example, was the chief of CI for SE Division, never "heading counterintelligence at CIA." (226) Curiously, Haslam also consistently states the nomenclature of KGB and SVR directorates backwards—they are not S Directorate or T Directorate, as he calls them, but Directorate S, and so on. More troubling, however, is Haslam's insistence that the United States was able to "trick" the Soviets into invading Afghanistan in 1979. (245) This is a claim he made in a

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previous book, *Russia's Cold War* (2011), but one based on a remark made by Zbigniew Brzezinski in an interview 20 years after the fact and for which there appears to be no documentary or other substantiation. While anyone writing on Soviet intelligence needs to be aware of the reality of conspiracies and bizarre plots, this claim seems to go a little far.

These errors are unfortunate because they might lead some readers to question a good point that Haslam saves for the last few pages. The behavior of the Soviet intelligence services, he posits, is less a result of Soviet experiences and conditions than something deeply ingrained in Russian political culture. That is, he makes an excellent

point about the continuities from Tsarist times through the Soviet and post-Soviet periods—the emphasis on counterintelligence to the point of obsession, the routine use of assassinations, and the use of intelligence services as political police. This is a sobering thought, indeed, for anyone who hopes that the Russian services will alter their ways or can become partners for the West in areas of mutual concern.

Overall, *Near and Distant Neighbors* is a useful book that, if read with care, can be helpful in learning about Soviet and Russian intelligence history. As broad and readable as it is, however, it still cannot stand alone.

