

review essay

Razvedchik, Russia's Intelligence Journal

Reviewed by Mel Miller

Published By: SVR, the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service
Print Pages Approximately 115 pages per edition
Reviewer: The reviewer is a Russian linguist and author of *Discovering Hidden Gems in Foreign Languages* (Springer Nature, 2023).



In December 2022, Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (best known by its Russian initials SVR) published its first quarterly issue of the journal *Razvedchik*. Several months into Russia's "Special Military Operation" in Ukraine, the journal provided a platform for the SVR to tell happy stories of intelligence successes past and present. This was more important than ever, considering their war wasn't going as planned. Since then, in the 11 issues available, *Razvedchik* offers a Russia-centric version of *Studies in Intelligence* that will be as interesting as it is frustrating to those used to reading quality espionage literature.

Each issue is around 115 pages in length, with a high production quality that is pleasing to the eye. Even the name of the journal, which comes from the Russian word for intelligence officer, probably resonates among those

already in the game. The alternative, *shpion*, is considered a derogatory term because it is used primarily for those labeled as traitors. This journal is not for these types, but rather it is for professionals and stewards of the profession.

Just as *Studies* is openly affiliated with CIA and the US Intelligence Community, *Razvedchik* has direct ties to veterans of the KGB and SVR. In May 2025, *The Insider* (a Russian investigative journal) prepared its own expose of *Razvedchik*: it was not impressed. According to *Insider* sources, editor-in-chief Mikhail Pogudin is a retired KGB general with little experience in field work. Technically, the journal was founded by Soglasie, a charitable foundation for the promotion of social protection of the SVR officers and veterans. Pogudin is the head of this organi-

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zation, and as *The Insider* observed, Soglasieye shares an address with the SVR's press bureau.

Besides their shared address, a cursory review of the content is all it takes to see the SVR's active hand in the content and objectives. A warm picture of SVR Director Sergey Naryshkin accompanies the introductory remarks of the first issue. It is clear from these remarks that the journal was born out of a desire to combat supposed misinformation about Russia's activities, thereby honoring the legacy and sacrifices of those who served. This journal offers Russia's version of the truth.

What might that be? In the first issue, Pogudin clarified that the journal's purpose is to allow veteran intelligence officers to discuss the serious and existential threats posed to Russia by the political, financial, and economic world order (December 2022, 10). These themes are at the forefront of each issue, but with an intelligence twist. While the Russian view of the truth is obviously skewed in ways that present the Russian cause as righteous and just, there is something to be said about some of the unique content that *Studies* could never provide. For this reason, readers of *Studies* cannot afford to ignore *Razvedchik*.

Main Enemy

Readers who remember the Cold War will be relieved to know that the United States is still the "Main Enemy": even 35 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russians have not moved on. America is to blame: always has been, always will be (December 2022, 5).

Razvedchik takes continual stabs at America's global stature in a way that might be comical to the US readers. *Razvedchik* offers a unique lens into Russia's own insecurities by offering a platform for ideas that *Studies* could never capture. For example, Vyacheslav Molotov's grandson, Vyacheslav Nikonov,^a reveals Russian views of US global standing by complaining that the Washington underestimates Russia, just as Napoleon and Hitler underestimated Russia in their

eras (March 2025, 29). When Russians read about the history of the World War II, they see the status that the United States gained, but the Soviet Union did not. They feel as though they deserve an international status commensurate with the high losses they incurred. Their invasion of Ukraine appears to be a way of recreating the years immediately after World War II; this time, they hope to emerge as a global power and rebalance the world order in their favor. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov verifies this assessment by asserting that the United States is attempting to revive an outdated unipolar world centered around itself (March 2023, 3).

Ukraine

The first issue of *Razvedchik* was published just 10 months after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, suggesting that the journal's goals may include defense of the war effort, which is a common theme throughout. The journal takes a whole-of-propaganda approach to justifying Russia's actions in Ukraine by blending historical and current references, each one more ridiculous than the next.

The reader is left with the impression Russia has decades of reasons to invade Ukraine today. From interviews with former intelligence officers who fought there decades prior, to reviews of declassified documents, the journal paves a clear path to explain their most recent "special military operation." Across the issues, various authors paint Ukrainians as fascists and terrorists. One article detailed how Ukrainians formed terrorist groups in the 1930s to advocate for the creation of an independent Ukrainian state. To achieve their goals, the group partnered with German fascists; subsequently, the Germans redirected the Ukrainians to conduct anti-Soviet activities (December 2022, 82). Readers may not agree with this pretext for war nearly 100 years later, but Russia-watchers cannot afford to ignore that this is the reality Russia wants its intelligence officers to embrace.

The early days of Russia's invasion of Ukraine were rife with propaganda and other evidence of journal-

a. Nikonov is a career politician and academic. He currently serves as the dean of the Faculty of Public Management at Moscow State University, and he has served in various roles for the Russian State Duma since 1993. Molotov was a Soviet politician and diplomat and was second in command to Stalin during the 1930s. He died in 1986.

istic confusion. The first issue of *Razvedchik* weaves a story about Poland's alleged plans to occupy Western Ukraine in spring 2022 (December 2022, 22). Today's chairman of the State Council of the Republic of Crimea, Vladimir Konstantinov, writes in favor of the return of Crimea to Russia in 2014 (March 2024, 44). Ironically, just two years before, he strongly condemned it.^a Propaganda works on some people.

It all makes sense when one realizes that Russia still views Ukraine through its Soviet lens. For example, *Razvedchik* accused "Ukrainian authorities of deliberately pursuing a policy of denigrating the Soviet past ... by abandoning the memory of the heroic deeds of their ancestors, but also the Russian identity" (March 2023, 93). Readers of *Razvedchik* may be led to believe that this is what Ukrainians want, and the Russians are simply there to give it to them.

The outcome is already known: "The result must be our unconditional victory. Otherwise, we will not justify all the sacrifices that we have made and continue to make, and the sacrifices are great.... The enemy will be defeated" (March 2025, 33). We'll just have to wait and see.

Russian Economy

If themes in *Razvedchik* are indicative of Russia's priorities, then the Kremlin must really be concerned about Russia's finances. Nearly every issue makes some reference to the weakness of the US dollar and Russia's challenge to US world dominance via the economy. Not all of it is propaganda, though.

The power of Western financial markets and their ability to inflict economic pressure on Russia have interesting and creative conversations about measures Russia can take to counteract their leverage. Articles

on this topic seem to contradict each other at times. One article lauded the Russian government for implementing creative solutions to import substitutions and implementing a responsible fiscal policy that favors Russian economic development (December 2022, 29–30). Other articles indicate a more dire situation requiring more drastic measures: for example, the development of a new BRICS currency to counteract the dollar (March 2024, 46). In doing so, they may strive to offset what they view as discrepancies in the balance of world power.

Illegals

Another theme throughout the journal is the legacy of Russia's jewels of espionage: their illegals. Interestingly, the journal portrays even some of their worst failures as successes.^b Well-known illegals such as Dmitriy Bystroletov and Pavel Sudoplatov are painted as heroes, but little attention is paid to their untimely apprehensions.^{c,d} The Russians continue to find ways to honor them: in 2022, a documentary film about Bystroletov won an SVR Prize for Literature and Art. According to the description, the film contained newly declassified information. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, busts of Sudoplatov were unveiled in Melitopol and Donetsk (March 2023, 94). It is telling that the journal chose to highlight these illegals of Ukrainian descent.

While *Studies* offers book reviews of the newest intelligence-themed publications, *Razvedchik* takes it one step further by offering reviews of intelligence-themed art, sculpture, live performances, and television shows. The SVR established the Prize in Literature and Art in 2000, and it now uses *Razvedchik* to showcase the winners. Among these is a sculptor recognized for the creation of a monument to illegal intelligence officers that now sits on the SVR

a. "Pro-Russian Activist Falls On Hard Times In Annexed Crimea," Radio Free Europe (January 16, 2016). <http://www.rferl.org/content/pro-russian-activist-crimea-hard-times/27483975.html>.

b. Illegals are a type of intelligence officer who lives abroad for an extended period of time, usually under a false or fraudulent identity. They are sometimes referred to as deep cover officers or scouts.

c. Born in Melitopol, Pavel Sudoplatov joined the Ukrainian State Political Directorate (OGPU) in the 1920s as a young boy. In the 1930s, he trained and worked as an illegal in several European countries, including Germany and Finland. By 1939, he was the Deputy Chief of Foreign Intelligence. He was arrested in 1953 for his association with Lavrenty Beria and sentenced to 15 years imprisonment. He published an autobiography titled *Special Tasks* in 1994 and died two years later.

d. Born in Crimea, Dmitriy Bystroletov worked as an illegal all around the world and was never caught. Well known for his charisma and good looks, he is often referred to as the "Romeo Spy." It is said that he spoke over 20 languages. He was arrested in 1938 and spent 16 years in a prison camp.

campus (March 2023, 17). Readers of *Studies* may consider looking to *Razvedchik* for further sources of entertainment.

Razvedchik also interviews illegals whose identities were recently revealed in the media, offering insight into current issues. One of these included the Dultsev family, whose members were arrested in Slovenia in 2022 and traded back to Russia (December 2024, 35). Despite their arrest, they are still considered successful, raising questions about Russia's view of "success" in this sphere. Another interview, one with long-term illegal Tamara Netyksa^a focuses on the appeal of illegal intelligence work for women (March 2023, 54), which raises questions about recruitment issues. It is apparent the SVR still greatly values illegals, but not all that glitters is gold.

Weapons

Razvedchik includes enough references to weapons to call them their own theme. The journal accuses adversaries of developing weapons to justify the development of Russia's own weapons, while reconciling historical references to developmental successes.

If ever accused of developing a harmful weapon that may be considered a violation of an international treaty, the Russians can point to the activities of their adversaries to justify their own. According to the journal, the US government is still secretly developing biological weapons at Walter Reed Medical Center (March 2023, 36). The journal insinuates that suspicious outbreaks of diseases in Africa, Asia, and Latin America just so happened to be caused by the same pathogens the Russians accuse the US government of possessing. It paints the US government as a monster with an international death wish: "The Pentagon's obvious goal for the future is to develop such modified microorganisms against which there will be neither diagnostic facilities nor treatment." (39)

Those who read often about Russian history know how much they love to talk about the atomic bomb, and *Razvedchik* is no stranger to this topic. They tell their version of events by highlighting scientific developments from the Soviet side, as well as the history of the creation of the Kurchatov Institute. Illegals also played a role in atomic espionage, and the journal is sure to highlight these accomplishments, too (March 2023, 42–46). Fear was, and still is, a large part of Russia's calculus.

Circle of Friends

What authors for *Studies* would probably call "strategic partnerships," *Razvedchik* refers to as Moscow's "Circle of Friends." In this recurring theme, the journal highlights that Russia still has many allies in a world that is increasingly out to get it. Not all is doom-and-gloom for Russia's intelligence services. The journal features headlines about the ways Russia's intelligence partners with their closest allies. For example, the heads of intelligence organizations of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan were reported to have come together for a productive conference in December 2022 (March 2023, 96).

Much attention is paid to Africa throughout the issues. It is apparent that Russia's own interests in Africa are rooted in its desire to combat the neocolonialism imposed by Europe and the United States. Just as they see the war in Ukraine, the Russians view themselves as liberators of others from Western (and therefore, non-Russian) ideas (June 2025, 3). Not only is Africa the land of future opportunity, it is also "significantly ahead of Western countries in terms of security for Russian businesses" (June 2023, 16). Despite Russia's purported friendly view of Africa, *Razvedchik* could not resist the urge to highlight at least one illegal, who successfully deployed to Africa (December 2024, 59).^b

On occasion, *Razvedchik* also honors friendly foreign intelligence services: for example, the Belar-

a. Tamara Netyksa was recruited to serve as an illegal in 1972 and spent 22 years abroad. She learned Spanish and presumably served in Spanish-speaking countries. The SVR declassified her identity, along with the identities of six other unknown illegals, in February 2020. She was never caught.

b. Posing as a German businessman, Aleksey Mikhailovich Kozlov served as an illegal in South Africa in the late 1970's. His mission was to report on South Africa's nuclear weapons program. He was arrested in July 1980 and awarded the title 'Hero of Russia' in 2000.



Президент Уганды
Й. Мусевени и В. Путин
на саммите Россия –
Африка.
Санкт-Петербург.
27 июля 2023 года

Ugandan President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni shown shaking hands with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg, July 27–28, 2023 (*Razvedchik* 11, No. 2, 2025).

ussian KGB and SVR work together to combat the subversive activities of Western countries. The SVR even hosts Belarusian KGB officers at its Foreign Intelligence Academy (December 2022, 40). Another article honored the head of the Kazakh intelligence service (KNB) by telling the history of its formation. Pogudin wrote a poem honoring the Russia-Kazakh partnership.

Arts and Culture

In many ways, *Razvedchik* serves a similar intent to *Studies* in promulgating Russia's patriotic and historical views on a variety of topics relating to intelligence and national security. Yet *Razvedchik* contains certain content that *Studies* generally eschews: art, fictional stories, games, and patriotic poetry by former intelligence officers contrast with the serious and academic approach that readers of *Studies* have grown to appreciate.

One example is the “psychological workshop” in every issue that covers methods intelligence officers can use to cope with stress (December 2022, 48),

resolve conflict (March 2023, 50), and interpret nonverbal language (June 2023, 44). Essentially, these are the soft skills young and aspiring ‘razvedchiks’ are expected to embody.

Another noteworthy feature of the journal is its access to key figures in Russian espionage. To date, *Razvedchik* has interviewed the notorious spy George Blake (December 2022, 58), sculptor Andrey Kovalchuk (who created memorial plaques of notorious intelligence officers) (December 2022, 35), and even CEO of Rostec (a key supporter in the war in Ukraine) Sergey Chemezov (June 2025, 30). The journal also grants readers access to the Moscow flat previously occupied by the notorious illegals Morris and Lona Cohen: perfectly preserved, it serves as a window into the lives of intelligence officers the Russians still consider great, even so many decades later. There are also espionage-themed crossword puzzles, and most issues end with some sort of homage to the bravery of intelligence officers past through the telling of heartfelt espionage-themed poetry.

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US intelligence officers cannot afford to ignore *Razvedchik*. For every Western intelligence officer not reading *Razvedchik*, there are current or future Russian intelligence officers (or their allies) getting inspiration from it. Readers steeped in Russian and Soviet history will get more out of reading *Razvedchik* than those who are not, but regardless, the journal offers a frame of reference for Russian decisionmaking past, present, and future. *Razvedchik* is available in Russian and English on the SVR website. ■