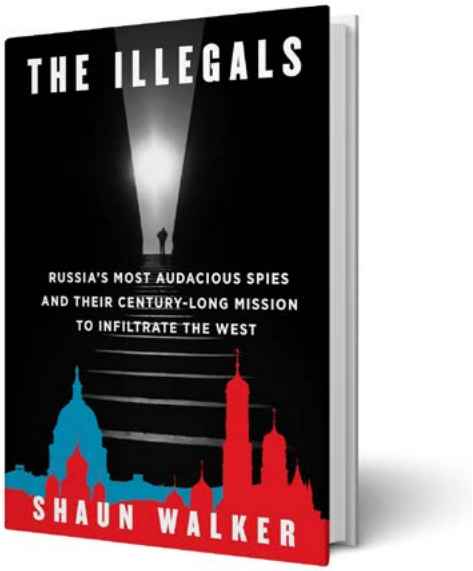
intelligence in public media

The Illegals
Russia's Most Audacious Spies and Their Century-Long Mission to Infiltrate the West



Reviewed by Kathy G.

Author:	*Shaun Walker*
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In 2018, US viewers of the TV show *The Americans* were treated to the final agonizing decisions of Elizabeth and Philip Jennings, KGB illegals operating with relative dramatic impunity in the United States at the end of the Cold War. The fraught series finale saw the Jennings' children left behind in the United States while their parents fled back to Russia to avoid arrest for espionage by the FBI. For daughter Paige, the communist cause so deeply felt by her mother, was seemingly passed down to the child who voluntarily remained in the enemy territory of the United States to carry on her parents' work. The emotional turmoil of these moments demonstrated, albeit fictionally, the quite real and immense psychological pressures faced by these highly trained Soviet illegals.

Illegals in this context are trained intelligence officers who give up their Russian identities, families, and culture to live undercover overseas, while fulfilling espionage taskings from their KGB handlers.[a] Illegals are venerated as the best-of-the-best of Russian spies, honored in movies, TV, postage stamps, and most importantly by Vladimir Putin himself who has routinely extolled the virtues and hardships of the illegals. The types of pressures associated with creating and living an entirely new life away from home and family with very human consequences, even in the cold game of intelligence brinkmanship between East and West. The same sense of humanity found in *The Americans* also wonderfully underpins Shaun Walker's *The Illegals*, which encompasses over 100 years of KGB and SVR illegals history by telling their dramatic

a. While other Soviet Bloc countries possessed illegals programs, they all contained a Soviet core. Programs in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland all appeared to dissolve with the fall of the Soviet Union. Today only Russia and Cuba appear to have such programs that are publicly known.

and sometimes humdrum stories, often through the lens of their memoirs or interviews with Illegals and their trainers themselves.[a]

"Only an intelligence service that works for a great cause can ask for such a sacrifice from its officers." KGB spy and former MI6 officer George Blake describing the psychological burden of being a Russian KGB illegal officer

"I know pretty much how everything is. No real achievements in work that I [am] supposed to do…." Text from Russian SVR Illegal Artem Shmyrev (alias Gerhard Daniel Campos Wittich) to his SVR Illegal ex-wife Irina, summer 2021 (from texts published by the New York Times, *May 21, 2025)*

Walker, a British journalist and long-time Russia watcher, has worked for *The Independent* and, more recently *The Guardian*. His deeply researched book, *The Long Hangover: Putin's New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past* (2018), discussed Russia's unresolved struggle to come to terms with its Stalinist legacy. Much like *The Long Hangover*, *The Illegals* focuses on the human factors of Russia's most elite spies, while describing the rich and fraught mythos surrounding this niche Russian intelligence program. Walker further takes on important questions surrounding the actual utility and cost effectiveness of such an intelligence platform that invests so much but provides minimal returns in the present day. The SVR illegals program has faced heavy losses twice in recent decades, both in 2010 with the now famous "Ghost Stories" arrests of 10 SVR illegals in the United States and the global arrests of SVR and GRU illegals during 2022–23 after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Walker begins his illegals history with the genesis of these operations during the nascent days of subversive intelligence activity in the early 1900s by jumping into the life of Vladimir Lenin. Early in the revolutionary period Lenin took on many aliases worldwide in attempts to avoid scrutiny from both foreign security services and domestic (the Okrana), as the communist cause grew. In fact, the name Lenin was an alias for Vladimir Ulyanov. Using gripping details from Soviet files and personal histories, Walker convincingly describes how these early intelligence operations shaped Lenin's thinking about the "legal" work to be conducted as revolutionaries against the tsar, such as propaganda and organization, and then the "illegal" work of espionage and assassination necessary to avoid detection.

For Lenin, legal and illegal work should be conducted separately, only coming together through operational management at the Center (Moscow). Nevertheless, it was the combination of these two activities that would make the Bolsheviks successful. This latter illegal work was foundational to what we know today as Russian intelligence. Long before the Soviet Union was diplomatically recognized, and could therefore post intelligence officers abroad posing as diplomats, Lenin was developing operatives with false documentation who could slip across countless borders. This runs counter to the development of Western intelligence services who institutionalized their efforts using diplomatically covered officers but only later developed non-official cover for intelligence collection. The role of illegals at the tip of the spear of Soviet intelligence therefore explains their dominance and continued place in Russian intelligence structure, according to Walker.

The second half of Walker's book gently shifts the narrative from the successes of the multilingual, passionate ideologue illegals of the early and mid-20th century to the promising but perhaps less successful young officers of the 1960s to present. Walker's focus on KGB Illegal Yuri Linov, who worked in Ireland, Israel, Britain, and Belgium takes the reader through the course of an illegal's career and the hard-to-fathom psychological aspects of living this type of life. Walker also covers multiple but perhaps less dynamic illegals operating through 2022, including information from more current SVR illegals cases exposed publicly in the last three years. This fascinating evolution, or perhaps devolution, of the illegals program during and after the Cold War is artfully put into perspective through

a. Walker also drew heavily on the famous Vasili Mitrokhin archive for this book. In addition to the two volumes Mitrokhin co-wrote himself, see Gordon Corera, *The Spy in the Archive: How One Man Tried to Kill the KGB*, reviewed in *Studies in Intelligence* by Ian B. Ericson (Vol. 69, No. 3 [September 2025]).

Walker's description of the changing motivations of the illegals and their Moscow-based officers. Illegals once motivated by ideology were now less compelled by duty but for survival and driven more by ego. This may likely explain the seeming lack of success in recent decades compared to the 1930s through the 1950s.

Throughout the book, Walker also plumbs the depths of selecting and training illegals, seemingly only altered over minutely decades. Walker explains that illegals, then (and allegedly now), were trained by the KGB and SVR by spending years studying in secret *konskvatira* (safehouses) in Moscow. Illegals—selected from universities and military then go through intense instruction consisting of one-on-one foreign language practice, Morse code, source-elicitation practice, and other forms of subterfuge and tradecraft (*konspiratsiva*). Only after years of training and potential arranged marriages to other trained officers, would the illegals themselves begin foreign deployments using fake documents of one country to infiltrate into a third country for intelligence operations. These operations were and are almost always focused eventually against the West, even if their deployment locations are far away from the likes of Washington, London, or Brussels.

Illustrative of the variety of the illegals' intelligence functions, Walker provides further details about Naum Eitingon, whose recruitment of Caridad and Ramon Mercader—a daring mother-and-son duo who allowed Soviet intelligence to penetrate Leon Trotsky's inner circle and assassinate Trotsky in Mexico. In this vein, Walker explains that illegals were trained not only to collect foreign intelligence against the West, but also to play a proactive role in monitoring refugee and infiltrate dissident groups. More traditionally, illegals also served to collect on the intentions of foreign governments and economies. Illegals achieved tremendous success in the 1930s and 1940s in recruiting foreign diplomats and collecting intelligence on world on the brink of war.

Unfortunately, many of these officers were recalled back to Russia, only to be met with imprisonment or death under Stalin's purges. Their crime? Delivering information that leadership did not want to hear. Perhaps the best example of an illegal who met this fate is Richard Sorge, a Russian military intelligence (GRU) illegal who according to Walker was "probably the best-placed Soviet spy anywhere in the world." Sorge learned that Germany was planning Operation Barbarossa, an invasion plan that would violate the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Sorge's unpopular intelligence collection led to cutting Sorge's expense budget. Interestingly, Walker does not go much further in discussing the Sorge case, including the latter's eventual recall to Moscow and execution.

Walker's omission about Sorge's fate highlights the only flaw in Walker's otherwise well-researched and compelling study of KGB and SVR illegals—the lack of any substantive discussion of the GRU's illegals program. The GRU itself is only mentioned a few scant times in *The Illegals*. Given Walker's thesis that his work discusses illegals comprehensively, the omission is difficult to understand, although all too commonplace among Soviet and Russian intelligence historians who focused strictly on the SVR or the FSB. The absence of commentary about the GRU's illegals program, which has also existed for 100 years, seems even more of a puzzle given the uptick in open-source information regarding the exposure of GRU cyber, HUMINT, and illegals operations in recent years.[a] Interestingly, during an interview at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in June 2025, Walker was asked about the greatest current risk posed by illegals. Walker's response cited not an SVR example but the story of a GRU illegal, Olga Kolobova (alias Maria Adela Kuhfeldt Rivera), who had been in place near a NATO base in Italy until 2018, when she returned to Russia after the attempted assassination of Sergey Skripal and his daughter Yulia in England.[b]

Telling these compelling stories of KGB and later SVR Directorate S (Illegals Support) illegals and

a. Another historical GRU illegal is Leopold Trepper, who ran a large agent network in Europe in the 1930s known as the Red Orchestra. See a review by John Ehrman of Trepper's autobiography, *The Great Game,* in the "Intelligence Officer's Bookshelf" in this issue. Trepper is only mentioned in passing in Walker's book (96).

b. Skripal, a former GRU colonel and MI6 penetration, had been arrested by the FSB in December 2004 and eventually convicted. He was released in mid-2010 as part of a spy swap in the wake of Operation Ghost Stories and was resettled in Salisbury, England.

their work in both Western and Eastern Europe leaves open questions as to why the resource-intensive endeavor still exists, especially in a world of biometrics which facilitates false document detection and more economical forms of espionage. Here Walker discusses the rise of what he assesses are off shoots of the more long-term traditional illegal, such as "fighting," "fly away," and "virtual" illegals. Although on the surface Walker would seem to be conflating other types of Russian intelligences officers with the core illegals cadre—when one considers the more philosophical definition of Lenin's illegal work, these new types of activity do pass muster as potential illegals-like activity using his tradecraft concept of Russian *konspiratsiva.*

June 27, 2025, marked the 15th anniversary of the arrest of 10 SVR illegals in the United States. The multi-year joint CIA-FBI investigation yielded mountains of information about SVR tradecraft and how unproductive the illegals program appeared to be. In the eyes of many, this would have been a natural place for the SVR to potentially end this costly and relatively unsuccessful program. Like many Russian military and intelligence stratagems, the illegals program relies on churning out as many of these types of operatives as it can (although Walker points out there are probably not as many illegals deployed as we might think). For the KGB and now the SVR, the hope remains that perhaps they only need one Illegal to be successful for the entire program to be lauded.

This is also why the US government needs to remain vigilant, according to Walker's sources. Regardless of the ultimate foreign policy victories such officers actually provide to Putin, he himself remains highly invested in propagating the myth of the illegals. He opened a new memorial at SVR headquarters for intelligence officers in 2020 featuring a nameless illegal couple. In 2024, Putin also presented the Russian Order of Courage to Artem Dultsev and Anna Dultseva, an SVR illegals couple swapped (in addition to two GRU illegals Pavel Rubtsov and Mikhail Mikushin) during the historic US-Russia prisoner exchange on August 1, 2024, that also returned multiple wrongfully detained US citizens.[a] With public acknowledgments such as these, we have certainly not seen the last of the illegals program. ■

a. For insights into the SVR's and the Russian Government's perspective on intelligence, see Mel Miller's review of the SVR's publicly available *Razvedchik* journal elsewhere in this edition. *Razvedchik* often features profiles of illegals.