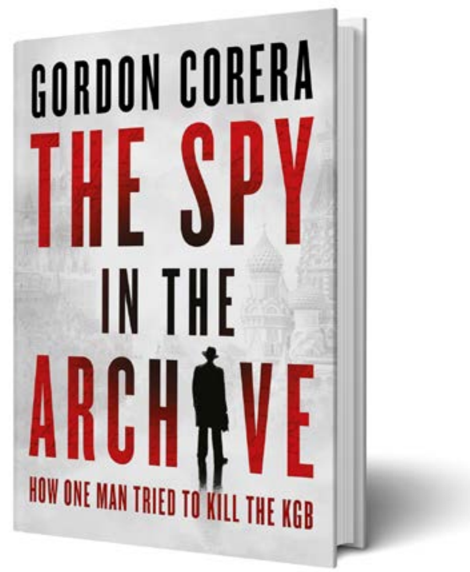
intelligence in public media

The Spy in the Archive: How One Man Tried to Kill the KGB

Reviewed by Ian B. Ericson



Author:	*Gordon Corera*
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Reviewer:	Ian Ericson is the pen name of a CIA officer.

A retired CIA case officer once observed that the great US advantage in the spy business is that our adversaries produce many more unhappy people than America does, giving CIA and allied intelligence services a consistently greater pool of potential recruits. Disgruntled Americans have many outlets for their angst, including social media and the promise of future elections. In contrast, authoritarian regimes offer their people no legal means of expressing opposition to stultifying repression, censorship, and endemic corruption favoring those with friends in high places. This remains true today, but it was especially the case in the Soviet Union in the 1970s under the sclerotic leadership of Leonid Brezhnev.

By the early 1970s, few citizens of the Soviet Union had any illusions that the Communist Party had the ability or inclination to make good on its endless promises of material prosperity and surpassing the west. The KGB enforced compliance with Party directives and used its vast resources to stifle dissent. The Soviet system aspired to little more than survival, with much of the population silently seething at the government's violent and arbitrary rule.

Vasili Mitrokhin was in the nerve center of this police state. Mitrokhin worked for the KGB's First Chief Directorate (FCD), predecessor of what is today Russia's external intelligence service, the SVR. His dour and introverted personality curtailed his own spy career after inglorious and/or botched overseas assignments in Israel and Australia led to his transfer to the FCD archives in 1956. As ably recounted in British journalist Gordon Corera's new account of the Mitrokhin saga, *The Spy in the Archive*, this banal personnel move would have historic consequences.

Mitrokhin's gray, nondescript countenance masked a man of unique determination and patience. The contrast between Soviet propaganda and the truth as described in the KGB archives hardened Mitrokhin's attitude toward the organization and dictatorship he had hitherto served with unquestioning loyalty. The yawning gap between, for example, the narrative of brave Ukrainian and Soviet intelligence partisans in Odessa serving side by side to thwart Nazi invaders during World War II was an almost total inversion of the truth. In fact, Ukrainian and Soviet fighters had slaughtered one another by the score in caves and catacombs. Mitrokhin spent decades contrasting the truth of events as detailed in the FCD's meticulously documented files with the rote regurgitation of the official line by Party apparatchiks. The more lies he consumed, the more his rage grew.

In 1972, Mitrokhin's disgust with the KGB, the Communist Party, and the *nomenklatura* (elites) that ruled the Soviet dictatorship finally paired with opportunity. That year the KGB opened a second nerve center specifically for the FCD in the midst of a wooded compound on the outskirts of Moscow called Yasenevo. Mitrokhin was given the task of moving and cataloging the vast FCD archive of 300,000 files as it moved from Lubyanka, the original KGB building in downtown Moscow, to Yasenevo. This mammoth task would take years and afforded Mitrokhin the chance to take revenge upon an organization he had grown to despise.

Mitrokhin's goal was both simple and quixotic. He sought to destroy the KGB by publishing its secrets and lies, showing the world its moral degeneracy and bankruptcy. For the next 12 years, Mitrokhin took cryptic notes on files he reviewed, hiding them in his jacket, shoes and socks, and summarizing them at night at his Moscow apartment and on weekends at his dacha. Echoing Andy Dufresne of *Shawshank Redemption* fame, Mitrokhin walked out of the archives each day with a small piece of the KGB's criminal history hidden on his person, confiding in no one (not even his wife and son).

Corera explains Mitrokhin's motivations and the means by which he executed his vision in compelling detail. How could such a breach happen, daily, at the headquarters of the world's most infamous secret police? Corera explains that, surprisingly, security at Lubyanka was much laxer than one might imagine. On one occasion, a woman was seen wandering the halls looking for toys ("That would be the department store next door...." (140) In another, a drunken vagrant was found asleep on a window sill and no one, including the vagrant, could figure out how he had entered the building. Mitrokhin understood the KGB's security shortcomings better than most and took full advantage.

Mitrokhin's rage at the KGB's lies and "filth"—a word he scrawled repeatedly on his notes—fueled his mission. Corera writes that the KGB became "bloated by feeding on a culture of denunciation…by the 1970s the KGB had built an entire culture around informers…Mitrokhin could see that beneath the (KGB) facade with all its talk of defending the Motherland, lay a system which encouraged deceit, petty ambition, immorality, and betrayal." (143) Corera explains how Mitrokhin drew inspiration from arguably the 20th century's greatest dissident, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who had also hidden his subversive writings.

In addition to being an inspiring testimony of one man's rebellion against tyranny, *The Spy in the Archive* is also a good spy story. Mitrokhin's escape from Russia in 1992 with the assistance of MI6 and the Lithuanians was no easy feat. Russian security was in disarray, to be sure, but it remained a potent force that would have dealt harshly with Mitrokhin had it discovered his activities. Corera's account provides new detail on Britain's skillful handling of Mitrokhin's exfiltration and resettlement.

Corera also describes CIA's embarrassing mishandling of Mitrokhin's attempts to volunteer. Britain was something of a last resort for Mitrokhin once CIA had turned him away. How CIA passed on a volunteer offering the FCD archive at the very moment it was hunting for an FCD penetration of CIA—who turned out to be Aldrich Ames—is almost inexplicable. The fact that MI6 graciously turned the Mitrokhin debriefings into a joint effort does little to mitigate this unforced error.

Mitrokhin's contribution to our understanding of KGB methods, personalities, and history is impossible to overestimate. Christopher Andrew's magisterial

The Sword and Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB, coauthored with Mitrokhin and based on his archive, is the standard reference work on KGB history. Corera's volume repeats much of what has been published in that volume, but it also adds color and detail to the narrative. Corera's descriptions of spy cases that resulted from Mitrokhin's materials demonstrate that Mitrokhin's value was not solely historic, but also sparked or reinvigorated FBI counterespionage investigations. These include cases against George Trofimoff (a colonel in the US Army Reserves), former NSA officer Robert Lipka, and the US-based KGB illegal Jack Barsky.

One modest complaint is the lack of footnotes. It has helpful source notes, but specific citations would have been preferable. This is a trifle, however, given the quality of Corera's writing and the short, compelling chapters covering aspects of the Mitrokhin story.

Mitrokhin died in 2004 at age 81, living long enough to witness the elevation of Vladimir Putin to the Russian presidency. Unlike his inspiration Solzhenitsyn, Mitrokhin understood that Putin's KGB background assured continuity with the Soviet past and inspired Mitrokhin to toil away on the vast FCD archive until the very end of his life. Corera writes, "The end of communism had not brought the return of the deeper, ancient, more spiritual Russia whose idea (Mitrokhin) had nurtured. It had brought something bleak and garish; there was no socialism with a human face. Just an unholy mafia capitalism." (284)

Mitrokhin's assessment of Putin's Russia has proved grimly accurate. His story nonetheless indicates that future Mitrokhins are surely walking the halls of today's KGB successor organizations with similar courage, animated by disgust at a system whose lies and aggression have brought death to hundreds of thousands and stifled all dissent. In time, perhaps their efforts can build upon the work of quiet heroes like Vasily Mitrokhin. ■