

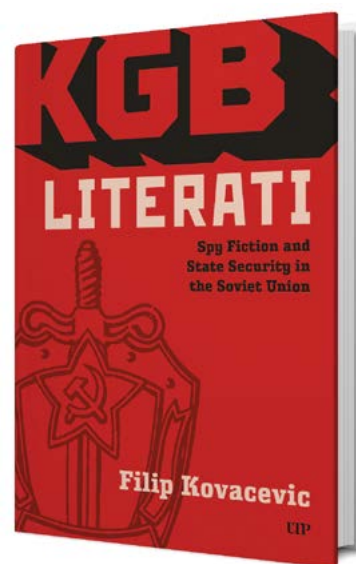
intelligence in public media

KGB Literati

Spy Fiction and State Security in the Soviet Union

Reviewed by John Ehrman

Author: Filip Kovacevic
Published By: University of Toronto Press, 2025
Print Pages: 211 pages; notes, bibliography, index
Reviewer: The reviewer is a retired CIA officer.



Decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the great US and British spy novelists of the Cold War—Ian Fleming, Graham Greene, Len Deighton and John le Carré—remain well known to global audiences; all of them also had experience as intelligence officers. But how many people outside of Russia and the former Soviet Bloc know that the Soviets also had writers, including at least one woman, who had served in the KGB or its predecessors before turning to writing espionage tales? In *KGB Literati*, Filip Kovacevic explores the lives and work of these little-known, at least in the West, authors. The result is a fascinating look at how the Soviet version of the genre developed and how it continues to influence Russian culture and politics.

Kovacevic approaches his subject in a straightforward style. He starts by working chronologically through three

major authors who were active from the late 1940s to the 1970s. He begins with Roman Kim, who might be considered the father of Soviet espionage novels, and then looks at the specific subgenres that emerged during the seventies and eighties. Kim was an especially interesting figure—an ethnic Korean, he may have joined the Cheka as early as 1921, becoming a successful and highly decorated counterintelligence officer, working against the Japanese in the Soviet Far East. Like so many other Soviet intelligence officers, he was arrested in 1937 and narrowly escaped execution. Kim eventually was released from prison in 1945 and began a literary career that lasted until his death in 1967.

Kovacevic describes how Kim made an in-depth study of US and British detective fiction, which he believed had tremendous cultural influence around the world—far

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more than Soviet literature—even though he argued it had declined into an ugly brew of violence, materialism, and sensationalism. This led him to advocate for creating a Soviet “humanist alternative” that, based on true events and emphasizing “social justice, fairness, patriotism, and altruism,” would counter harmful Western influences. (18) Kim followed this approach in his novels which, along with his mentoring of younger writers, established the template for the Soviet spy novel.

Like Kim, Zoya Voskresenskaya-Rybkina began her career in Soviet intelligence in the 1920s, and also like Kim she experienced ups and downs during it. Her assignments took her and her husband, also an intelligence officer, to postings in Helsinki and Stockholm; for a time she was even the acting resident in Stockholm. After her husband’s death in 1947—apparently killed by a Stalinist murderer—she retained high-level positions in the KGB, apparently through the patronage of the storied Soviet operative Pavel Sudoplatov. After Stalin’s death and Lavrenti Beria’s execution, however, Sudoplatov was purged and sent to the Gulag. Rybkina then was dismissed from the service, but she managed to find work as the chief of security at the Vorkuta labor camp in Siberia. She retired in 1955, and began a literary career that focused on fictional tales of Lenin’s use of espionage tradecraft to evade the Tsarist police.

Similarly, Oleg Griбанov, who became head of the KGB’s Second Chief Directorate (domestic counterintelligence) in 1956, was dismissed in 1964 following the downfall of Nikita Khrushchev. He then took up the pen and became popular enough that his novels had print runs of hundreds of thousands of copies (though Kovacevic believes he might not really have been fired, just reassigned to writing).

A most interesting aspect of the literature of this period is that the stories and novels were bottom-up efforts. That is, while these authors certainly hewed to official ideology—their tales focused on heroic revolutionaries and Chekists combating bloodthirsty capitalists and Americans, often using classic KGB

methods of deception and double agents—they were true believers in the Soviet system and wrote on their own initiatives. But this does not mean that they were mere regime hacks. Kovacevic, in one telling passage, points out that they did not shy away from portraying the flaws of Soviet society. Griбанov’s descriptions of consumer goods shortages, bad food, and the difficulty of surveilling enemy spies when the Chekists lacked cars and public transportation was unreliable and slow, Kovacevic notes, gave Griбанov’s stories a verisimilitude that resonated with readers.

This changed, however, in 1969, when then chairman of the KGB Yuriy Andropov established a Press Bureau in the KGB. Among the bureau’s missions was building popular support for KGB activities. Until the fall of the Soviet Union, the bureau would publish eight volumes of stories aimed at enhancing the service’s reputation. Kovacevic describes how these officially-sponsored tales were constructed to send consistent messages to readers. Foreign intelligence services, often using unrepentant Nazis or their wartime collaborators as assets, were constantly working to destroy the Soviet system; citizens had to be constantly vigilant; and, especially, only a “psychologically disturbed individual” would cooperate with these vicious plots.^a (101) Kovacevic also has chapters on stories and novels published by the regional KGBs—for example, who knew that Dagestan was a hotbed of Cold War espionage? These stories sent an additional message to readers, one promoting harmony among Soviet national minorities and a sense of their shared interest in protecting the socialist system. Nonetheless, while Andropov’s project created a large body of propagandistic espionage fiction, Kovacevic’s reviews imply that none of the KGB’s authors left a literary legacy as significant as Kim’s or Rybkina’s.

This is a first-rate book on what at first glance might seem to be a niche topic. A Macedonian-born intelligence historian and human rights activist who teaches at the University of San Francisco, Kovacevic has done a prodigious amount of research in archives, secondary sources and, of course, reading large numbers of Russian-language spy novels and stories.

a. Not that Nazis were unknown in postwar Western spy fiction—Adam Hall’s first Quiller novel, *The Quiller Memorandum* (1965), featured Nazis plotting a comeback. Overall, however, by the mid-60s Nazis had been supplanted by Communists as the villains in Western novels and disappeared completely in the seventies.

(Curiously, though, he omits from his citations and bibliography Julie Fedor's *Russia and the Cult of State Security* [2011], which also covers Andropov's propaganda campaign.) Kovacevic's capsule biographies of Soviet intelligence authors and analyses of their works are interesting in themselves, as they outline a literary culture that few would expect in the KGB. This is also a highly readable book. Kovacevic's style is concise, and he works through a large quantity of material and makes a number of insightful points in only 140 pages of text. Perhaps the book's only downside is that in his chapters on the Andropov-era books the plot summaries all sound the same—no doubt because the KGB authors essentially wrote the same stories over and over.

Kovacevic concludes on a disturbing note, one that goes beyond the stories themselves. Overall, he concludes the KGB's effort was a success. While admitting that hard evidence is difficult to come by, he cites survey data from the winter of 1991–92, the time of the USSR's collapse, that found a high degree of respect in Soviet society for the KGB and its professional abilities. The promotion of spy stories "aimed at shaping the hearts and minds of the Soviet public ... left a notable trace in the collective post-Soviet consciousness," he writes. (140) Russian authori-

ties apparently agree, as the FSB in 2006 resumed sponsorship and prizes for spy novels, movies, and TV shows. The films and stories, many of them authored by serving or former intelligence officers, continue to feature heroic Russian intelligence officers outsmarting their evil Western counterparts.

This is not simply an academic issue. Kovacevic points out that Vladimir Putin was himself shaped by the Andropov-sponsored fiction, and he and the KGB veterans with whom he surrounds himself "have identified with these fictional characters to such an extent that they see them as authoritative guides on what it means to live and act as true Soviet (now Russian) patriots." (141) Looking at KGB spy fiction, Kovacevic continues, provides an unexpected source for insights into Putin's foreign policy views and potential actions. Indeed, given the prominence of Nazi revenge plots in the KGB novels and Putin's accusations that present-day Ukraine has fallen into the hands of Nazi revanchists, it is hard to argue with Kovacevic.

Many of the books about Putin's reign stress the continuities with Soviet-era views and practices. *KGB Literati*, besides providing an informative review of Soviet spy fiction, fits well within this analytic school. For this reason, it is doubly worth reading. ■