

Intelligence in Public Media

Russians Among Us: Sleeper Cells, Ghost Stories and the Hunt for Putin's Agents

Gordon Corera. (William Collins, 2020) 438, notes, index.

Reviewed by J. E. Leonardson

With Russian intelligence and espionage in the news so much these days, general audiences and specialists alike could use a good primer on Moscow's operations. Fortunately, British journalist Gordon Corera's new book, *Russians Among Us*, provides just such a survey.

Corera's theme is that Russian President Vladimir Putin, driven by what he views as Russia's humiliation in the 1990s, has an insatiable hunger to strike back at the United States and the West. Just as powerful, Corera further notes, is that Putin is determined to rebuild Moscow's global power. For Putin, having strong intelligence capabilities are a critical part of this project, and he therefore has worked relentlessly for 20 years to rebuild, modernize, and weaponize the Russian services.

With this in mind, Corera begins by focusing on Ghost Stories, the case of the 10 US-based SVR illegals who were arrested in 2010 and swapped for four prisoners in Russia. He provides an up-to-date description of how the SVR's Directorate S, the home of the illegals, works and how illegals train and operate. He then uses this to document the threats they pose to the security of their target states. The "natural progression of an illegal's career," he points out, is to spend "years building their cover and working their way into influential circles." (230). Donald Heathfield and Cynthia Murphy worked to do exactly that by completing degree programs at Harvard and Columbia Universities, respectively, and then finding jobs in Cambridge and New York that enabled them to mix with academics, think-tankers, and political types to spot and assess potential recruits.

Corera's description of the case and the investigations relies almost entirely on publicly available sources and, while his account is well researched and generally accurate, one suspects that in spots it would have

benefitted from access to the full records of Ghost Stories, which are likely to remain under wraps for decades. Until then, *Russians Among Us* will stand as the standard open-source account of the case. His analysis of the illegals' movements and efforts, too, is a useful corrective to the view that the Ghost Stories illegals were outmoded and hapless.

In his last 100 pages, Corera moves beyond Ghost Stories to discuss the evolution of Russian espionage since 2010. As effective as illegals have been for a century, he notes that the SVR is moving away from a traditional model of such operations because the laborious process of creating and backstopping their false biographies now is easily undone by instant searches of digital records and other large data sets.

Corera cites several recent US cases to show how Moscow has refined a new method for illegals—first used experimentally in Ghost Stories—that uses large numbers of amateurs, who are given cursory training and then sent to the West in their true identities to collect information as well as to infiltrate and influence political processes; at the same time, he points out that Moscow is undertaking enormous cyber operations to steal information and wreak political havoc. As if that's not enough, Putin has also authorized the services to undertake assassinations, including operations using chemical weapons, regardless of the consequences for innocent bystanders. Given Putin's goals, Corera warns, none of this is going away anytime soon.

In providing a clear explanation of how Russian intelligence operations are evolving and placing them in geopolitical context, Corera has given us a timely and well-written wake-up call. Highly recommended.



The reviewer: J. E. Leonardson is the penname of an analyst in CIA's Directorate of Analysis.

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