

Intelligence in Public Media

The Lockhart Plot: Love, Betrayal, Assassination and Counter-Revolution in Lenin's Russia

Jonathan Schneer (Oxford University Press, 2020), 340 pages, notes, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by J. E. Leonardson

On the penultimate page of *The Lockhart Plot*, Jonathan Schneer, a retired US historian, summarizes his story. It is, he says, a tale of “suspense, treachery, violence, love and desire, larger than life personalities.” As if this isn’t enough to recommend the book, one could add that it is an incredibly complex story of revolution, espionage, and counterintelligence that, in Schneer’s capable hands, becomes clear and gripping.

Bruce Lockhart was a British diplomat posted to Moscow during World War I. He was a talented and perceptive officer whose dispatches were read carefully in London, but he was also reckless, a risk taker, and a serial womanizer. In the early days after the November revolution, Lockhart believed Britain could work with the new Bolshevik regime to protect the interests of the UK and its allies, but he soon realized that this would be impossible. Working with a motley collection of Western diplomats, Russians, and adventurers, he organized a plot to, in conjunction with Allied military intervention, bring down Lenin’s regime. The effort no doubt was doomed from the start, as it was run by amateurs (including Sidney Reilly, the famous “Ace of Spies”) who were guided by their own illusions and ambitions rather than any rational evaluation of the situation or expectation of success.

Plotting a counterrevolution against Lenin’s regime, in any case, was no job for beginners. Lockhart’s opponent was Feliks Dzerzhinsky, the founder of Soviet intelligence, who quickly penetrated the British diplomat’s ramshackle organization and outwitted him at every turn. The plotting and counterplotting became “wheels within wheels, mirrors reflecting mirrors reflecting mirrors,” most of them controlled by Dzerzhinsky and his equally able deputy, Jakov Peters. Lockhart’s conspiracy came crashing down in August 1918, and he and almost all his confederates (many of whom were diplomats) were arrested or forced to flee. Lockhart returned to England in a prisoner exchange, while Reilly made it out of Russia by means still not clear.

The details of the conspiracies and events are too complicated for any attempt at a summary here, but no matter. For intelligence officers today, the key reason to read *The Lockhart Plot* is to see the contrast between Dzerzhinsky’s counterintelligence operation, which deserves a great deal of professional respect, and Lockhart’s slapdash efforts. It is an object lesson in how, in the absence of rigorous planning and analysis, operations can quickly go wrong, as well as the need to know your opponent.



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

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.
