

The Secret History of CIA

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

By Joseph J. Trento. Roseville, CA: Prima Publishing, 2001. 542 pages.

Reviewed by Len M.

In terms of respect for facts and an understanding of the intelligence collection and analysis process, *The Secret History of CIA* is the worst book yet purporting to provide an account of the Agency's past. It outdoes Edward Epstein by an order of magnitude.¹ It is even worse than the author's previous effort, *Widows*, which also floundered through huge territory.² Let me recommend right off that anyone interested in something this inaccurate and uninformed wait until it hits the "remainder" pile and get it for three dollars, as I did *Widows*. Annuitants from the Soviet intelligence services are the only audience likely to enjoy the book, and they will roll in the aisles laughing.

To correct all the errors would require writing another book, probably longer than this one. Then a second volume would be needed to explain to the author the flaws in his analysis. The book does not deserve that much attention, and corrections to the record would never reach the same readership, anyway. To start with, the title is entirely misleading. The book does not deal with "CIA history." After a brief rehash of the Agency's origins, it launches into a disjointed account of clandestine operations. Soviet counterintelligence operations predominate, but the author patches in US operations in Berlin, Vietnam, Cuba, and Chile. Actually, it is hard to know what to call such a hodgepodge. The title was probably selected to pander to Cold War scavengers and those who love to hate the CIA. My own title would be *Garbled Accounts and Ingenious Interpretations of Selected CIA Operations*. Most of the footnotes refer to 1988-1990, so it would appear

that much of the book is based on interviews done for *Widows* and perhaps some commentary that came in after the publication of that book.

A major problem is that the author has no intelligence experience. Putting aside the unreliability of the substance, the author manifests not the least understanding of the elementary terms used in intelligence. A knowledgeable reader is faced with the mental gymnastics of trying to straighten out endless anachronisms, *non sequiturs*, and pregnant pauses, as well as a need to translate everyday terms—such as "defector," "agent," "double agent," "covert," and "clandestine"—into what these individuals actually were. The unforgivable error that even a neophyte in the intelligence literature cottage industry would not commit is to call CIA officers "agents." Trento does that. His definition of "bona fides" is so weak that even *Webster's* would have helped.³ These definitional problems by themselves should serve as a warning to users: how could the author hope to understand the most complex intelligence cases of our time when he came away from interviewing the various sources listed in the footnotes with so little understanding of the basic terms those sources were using? The answer is: he did not understand, and so went off in search of explanations and extraneous fragments to fill in the inevitable inconsistencies and gaps. Very deep water, indeed, even for the baptized. The difficulty arises, first, in sorting out just what the author was told; then, in divining whether the source possessed the knowledge that he claimed or the background to make the judgment that he made; and, finally, in separating the author's interpolations and extrapolations from that. Trento presumes to superior knowledge and analytic talent that qualifies him to evaluate clandestine operations, analyze the product of those operations, and then make independent assessments of crucial aspects of Soviet internal politics and strategy.

Then there are the names; and not just the Russian names. A disturbing number are misspelled at least once—some several times, some two different ways—even though most of these names have appeared before in scholarly works. Surely the spelling of a name of a principal player in a book should be correct. If a reader cannot get beyond the names without a caution light flashing, why should he or she trust the substance of the narrative? Since most of the meaningful substance in this book has been covered in previous, better-researched books—by David Martin, Thomas Mangold, David Wise, and Jerrold Schechter and Peter Deriabin⁴—and in essays in *Studies in Intelligence*, and the Central Intelligence Retirees

Association publication, it would not have required too much humility to copy the names correctly, along with a generous helping of the facts.

So how does one approach this dubious mosaic? It is not difficult in my case. In 1988, with approval from the Directorate of Operations' senior leadership, I spoke to Trento and his wife regarding Nikolay Artamonov [aka Shadrin], a Soviet destroyer captain who provided Washington with military intelligence of immense value. My goal was to clear up some of the errors in Henry Hurt's *Shadrin: The Spy Who Never Came Back*.⁵ Hurt's book now looks like a fine bit of writing in contrast to Trento's tangled version. I spoke with the Trentos in sincerity and trust, believing that the information I gave them was pertinent to their research and would find its proper place in the chapters they were writing about one of the vital contributors to US intelligence holdings on the USSR in the most perilous decade of the Cold War. I was devastated when the book *Widows* appeared with an interpretation of Artamonov's sacrifice that destroyed his reputation with no basis in fact, the authors having drawn their information entirely from a version disseminated by Artamonov's worst enemy, and ours—the KGB.

Most writers who undertake to make qualitative judgments about CIA activities tend to overlook a major factor that governs our work—we are directed to undertake certain tasks, often with restrictions on what we may or may not do to accomplish them. Another significant gulf between a CIA analyst (in both the collection and analysis directorates) and a writer who undertakes to collect individual accounts, piece them together, and try to make sense of them, is that the insider is working against a background and learning curve of countless events, vigorous disagreements and discussions, and an extensive array of overt, imagery, and signals intelligence. This was never more true than with the USSR. No event occurred in a vacuum. Cumulative, reinforcing reporting from a long string of valuable defectors, most of whose contributions have never been published, refutes all of the "analysis" in the two books by this author. Granted, no outside writer can match this internal knowledge base. A few, however, have managed to do well skating along the top of it, such as Martin, Mangold, and Wise, mentioned before.

It would seem that no useful purpose could be served by further review of the endless errors, misguided assumptions, and presumptions of this book, but perhaps I can provide at least one more example to illustrate why the reader will gain no reliable new insight into the CIA's past from slogging through *The Secret History of CIA*. The author maintains that Oleg Penkovsky was sent to us in 1960 as a Soviet deception operation. Almost

everything Trento says about the Penkovsky case is inaccurate, except for the brief sketch on Penkovsky's trouble getting to us, which indicates that the author had not read Schechter and Deriabin. Having prepared the intelligence agenda for each meeting with Penkovsky, briefed and debriefed the case officers on the spot, prepared or supervised every report which came from him, and met with analysts receiving the reports to discuss their evaluations and get their requirements, I find the account of the operation in this book to be bizarre.

Let the reader beware of the other chapters.

Footnotes

- 1 Edward Epstein, *Deception* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989).
2. William R. Corson, Susan B. Trento, and Joseph J. Trento, *Widows* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1989).
3. *Webster's II New Riverside University Dictionary* defines "bona fides" as "authentic credentials," as in "a defector whose bona fides could not be checked."
4. See: David C. Martin, *Wilderness of Mirrors* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980); Thomas Mangold, *Cold Warrior* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991); David Wise, *The Spy Who Got Away* (New York: Random House, 1988); and Jerrold L. Schechter and Peter S. Deriabin, *The Spy Who Saved the World* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992).
5. Henry Hurt, *Shadrin: The Spy Who Never Came Back* (New York: Reader's Digest Press, 1981).

Len M. The author served in the CIA Directorate of Operations for more than 30 years. This article is unclassified in its entirety.

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