

Shattered Illusions: KGB Cold War Espionage in Canada

Donald Mahar (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 221 pp., notes, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by John Ehrman

Shattered Illusions is a quirky example of intelligence history. It tells the story of a Soviet illegal in Canada, Yevgeniy Brik, who became a double agent for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) in the early 1950s, was betrayed and imprisoned in the Gulag, resurfaced after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and finally resettled in Canada. The case is little known—Mitrokhin gave a brief summary and Sawatsky a longer, though necessarily incomplete account—but Mahar’s recounting shows why it is one to be familiar with.^a

It’s easy to see why the KGB chose Brik to be an illegal. His father worked in the Ministry of Foreign Trade and in 1926, when Yevgeniy was five, was posted at the Soviet Trading Corporation office in New York. Yevgeniy and his mother joined the elder Brik a year later and the family lived in Flatbush, where Yevgeniy went to school and became a native English speaker, until they returned to Moscow in 1932. Yevgeniy continued his education at the Anglo-American School until he went to a Russian school in 1936, and was a university student when he was drafted in 1939. He served as an army communicator during the war, achieved a high level of proficiency in Morse, and joined the Communist Party. Small wonder, then, that in the late 1940s when he was back in school and working as a part-time English translator, the KGB came knocking. Yevgeniy needed none of the years of language and cultural training that most illegals recruits require; trained in tradecraft and equipped with a false identity, Brik arrived in Canada in November 1951, with the mission of ultimately moving to the United States to become the communicator for another illegal, Rudolf Abel.

Despite his promise, Brik was a disaster as an illegal. He spent much of his time binge drinking and whoring, and then fell into an affair with the wife of a Canadian soldier to whom he eventually confessed his identity and

mission. She, in turn, convinced him to walk in to the RCMP, whose Security Service at the time was responsible for Canadian counterintelligence. He did so in November 1953, and soon was giving his debriefers full details of his biography, mission, and tradecraft. He also handed over his shortwave communications schedule and one-time pads, enabling the Mounties to read all of Moscow’s messages. The KGB, with no idea that Brik had been doubled, increased his operational responsibilities, and gave him agents to run. He promptly identified all of them to his RCMP handlers.

Brik was a handling nightmare for the Mounties, frequently drunk and erratic in his behavior, but overall the case went well until February 1954. Then, in a decision that violated the basic rules of operational security, the head of the Security Service, James Lemieux—who had risen in the RCMP’s criminal side and had no intelligence experience prior to his appointment to run the Security Service—asked Corporal James Morrison, a Mountie who was not read into the case, to drive Brik from Ottawa to Montreal. (Morrison had managed to ingratiate himself with Lemieux, and the Security Service chief’s main reason for detailing Morrison to the drive seems to have been to have the corporal bring back some smoked meat from their favorite Montreal deli.) Morrison, like Brik, was a womanizer. In addition, he was a spender and chronically in debt, to the point that he began to steal RCMP funds. The inevitable came in June 1955 when Morrison, realizing his thefts were about to be discovered and that he needed to replace the money, approached a Soviet intelligence officer in Ottawa and betrayed Brik for \$3,000.

Two months later, Brik was called to Moscow for training; before he departed Canada, the RCMP and British (to whom the Mounties had declared the case) gave him a communications plan. Brik, however, was arrested on his arrival, interrogated, tried for treason, and sentenced in 1956 to 15 years imprisonment. Brik likely was saved from execution by his decision to tell all and then cooperate in a deception operation that identified Daphne Park—who eventually rose high in SIS and was made a

a. Christopher Andrews and Vasilii Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield* (Basic Books, 1999), 165–71, and John Sawatsky, *For Services Rendered* (Doubleday, 1982), chaps. 4–6.

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baroness but at the time was a first-tour officer at the British Embassy in Moscow—as an intelligence officer.

More twists were to come. Morrison continued his espionage—he no longer had any meaningful access and, to the Soviets' annoyance, little to give up after Brik—until he was caught in 1958. Rather than charge Morrison, however, the RCMP cashiered him and covered up the affair. Not until 1983, after journalist John Sawatsky published *For Services Rendered*, did the Brik case, Morrison's treachery, and the RCMP's cover-up become public knowledge. He was charged under the Official Secrets Act, convicted, and sentenced to 18 months. Meanwhile, Brik survived the Gulag and, after his release, became a low-level railroad worker. He retired in 1985 and, with his pension, also received a lifetime railroad pass, which he used to go to Vilnius in 1992 and, recalling his 1955 instructions, walk in to the British Embassy. There, he asked the British to contact the Canadians. In June, after several months of careful preparation, Brik was exfiltrated and flown to Canada. There he lived until his death in 2011, as much a handling problem in resettlement as he had been decades earlier. Morrison died in 2001.

This summary barely hits the highlights, let alone captures the complexities and tragic ironies of the Brik case. Making Brik's case even more interesting is the number of others it touched. Brik's was the first of a number of Soviet cases to go bad for the RCMP and, as the mole hunt began, suspicion fell on Leslie James Bennett, who happened to be a personal friend of Morrison's from whom the traitor elicited information (and also the focus of Sawatsky's book). In what has become a classic example of a CI investigation gone bad, Bennett became the lead suspect, eventually resigning from the Mounties and emigrating to Australia (he was publicly exonerated in 1993). Others who came into contact with Brik include his cellmate, Grigoriy Maironovskiy, who developed poisons for the KGB; one of his formulations was used to kill Cy Oggins, an American who had spied for the Soviets but wound up in the Gulag. Two more prison acquaintances were Pavel Sudoplotov, who had been in charge of assassinations for the KGB, and his deputy, Leonid

Eitingon, who had directed the murder of Trotsky. One certainly could meet interesting people in Soviet prisons.

The author of *Shattered Illusions*, Donald Mahar, started his intelligence career with the Mounties and retired from CSIS, which took over Canada's CI mission when it was established in 1984. He worked on Brik's exfiltration and debriefings in the 1990s and now, with the aid of declassified files and interviews with surviving figures, has written a fast-paced account of this fascinating case. Therein, unfortunately, lies the problem with the book. Mahar keeps the story moving so fast—189 pages broken into 38 chapters—and writes in such a terse, just-the-facts style that the reader is left wanting additional detail to flesh out the characters and operations. While he writes with commendable clarity, Mahar gives so little background, in fact, that his book is best suited to readers who already are familiar with the history of Russian intelligence and illegals operations, the Bennett case, and the recent history of Canadian intelligence. Additional background information would have made *Shattered Illusions* accessible to an audience beyond specialists.

The reader is also left with the nagging feeling that Mahar has left out important points. For example, while Mahar understandably withholds details of Brik's exfiltration in 1992 because the particulars remain classified, one wonders why there was such a complex operation at all. Brik had no trouble taking a train to Vilnius, so why did the Canadians not simply fly him to North America right away, rather than spend months making elaborate preparations? (Other former Western agents left Russia during this period by openly obtaining visas from the countries they had worked for and then flying or taking trains out of Moscow.) It makes no sense, unless the explanation still is too sensitive for publication, which raises the question of what else Mahar may have chosen to omit or was required to leave out.

These issues aside, *Shattered Illusions* is a solid and accurate account that tells the basics of its story and fills in the historical blanks. For that reason, it is a worthwhile addition to the literature on Soviet and Russian intelligence.

