

A Single Spy

William Christie (Minotaur, 2017), 391 pp.

Reviewed by John Ehrman

“A single spy in the right place and at the right moment may change the course of history,” says a Soviet spy master midway through *A Single Spy*, and who are we to argue? William Christie’s espionage thriller revolves around this observation, using historical events to provide a foundation for his story as well as for the larger points he wants to make. Whether he succeeds or not depends on how the reader chooses to approach the book.

A Single Spy is the story of a young Soviet, Aleksii Smirnov. Left alone in the rural upheavals of collectivization and dumped into a Soviet state orphanage, he escapes and lives by his wits until caught by the NKVD in 1936. Given the choice of signing up to train as a spy or be executed, Aleksii agrees to work for Soviet intelligence. As soon as his training is finished, he is dispatched to Nazi Germany, taking on the identity of a dead ethnic German boy he had known on his collective farm (and whose family had taught Aleksii German). Living with the boy’s uncle, a well-connected diplomat, Aleksii eventually becomes an officer in the German army and is picked up by the Abwehr.

From there the plot rolls on, becoming ever more improbable. Aleksii uncovers the plans for the German invasion of Russia and warns Moscow months in advance, only to be told to stop reporting British provocations. Disgusted, he takes an Abwehr assignment to Iran, which ends with a narrow escape and return to Berlin. With Germany’s fortunes in decline, Aleksii then takes on an assignment from the Gestapo to return to Tehran and . . . well, no sense spoiling the fun.

If nothing else, Christie has mastered the craft of giving modern-day thriller readers what they want. Chapters average about six pages, which keeps the story moving and does not burden the reader with character development or convincing atmospherics. Violence comes along at regular intervals to keep things lively, as does some

laughably bad sex. Historical characters—Admiral Canaris, Walter Schellenberg—have cameos, to lend an air of verisimilitude, though they sound more like the cardboard Nazis of 1960s television shows than anything else.^a This is hardly great literature, and Robert Harris and Philip Kerr both do much better with genuine Nazis, but *A Single Spy* is perfectly acceptable vacation entertainment.

Christie would have done well to be content with writing a fast-paced spy novel. At some point, however, he decided to use his story to make a statement about the nature of the Nazi and Soviet regimes—that both, staffed by opportunistic thugs, existed solely to crush the people they ruled and, therefore, that there was little difference between them. Christie is absolutely right about this, as anyone with a passing familiarity with 20th century history will know, but in his telling, the point seems a bit flat.

Two reasons account for this. First, Christie simply is not steeped enough in Aleksii’s world to give a convincing portrait of what his character had to endure. His research is enough for a light thriller, but is not up to the task of recreating the grim world of Stalin’s Soviet Union or Hitler’s Germany. Second, Christie just isn’t that strong a prose stylist. His writing is admirably concise and direct—the better to keep the tale moving—but at the cost of omitting the details that give the reader a sense that he is immersed in another world. Christie’s ambitions call for the experiences of an Arthur Koestler or the writing of an Eric Ambler, but he just isn’t up to it.

Christie has written a pleasant bit of escapism and, on that level, *A Single Spy* succeeds. Anyone who hopes it will fulfill the author’s ambition to provide more than that, however, will be disappointed.

a. Aleksii’s NKVD handler is named Grigory Petrovich Yakushev; in real life, an Aleksandr Yakushev was an OGPU officer who worked against Russian monarchist exiles in Paris.



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