

Spy Handler

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

By Victor Cherkashin and Gregory Feifer. New York: Basic Books, 2005. 338 pages.

Reviewed by John Ehrman

Spy Handler is an unusual example of a cold war espionage memoir. Victor Cherkashin, a retired KGB counterintelligence (CI) officer, at first appears to have written a straightforward, unexceptional account of his life in the Soviet service, with little of the score-settling in which authors of such books often indulge. But it soon becomes apparent that Cherkashin has much more to offer. With his co-author, journalist Gregory Feifer, Cherkashin not only tells a fascinating story but also provides numerous insights—some of them probably unintended—into the world of the KGB that make this a rewarding book for specialists and general readers alike.

Cherkashin had a long career in the KGB. The son of an NKVD officer, Cherkashin was born in 1932 and vividly recalls growing up amid the horrible conditions of World War II. After graduating from a railway engineering school in 1952, he accepted a job offer from the MGB, the NKVD's successor organization. After training, he was assigned to the Second Chief Directorate of what was by then the KGB, and sent to work CI against the British in Moscow. In 1963, Cherkashin was moved to the First Chief Directorate, the KGB's external intelligence organization, and became a foreign CI officer. Postings to Australia, Lebanon, and India followed, along with assignments in Moscow, before he was sent to Washington, where he served from 1979 until 1986.

Washington was, by any standard, a remarkable tour for Cherkashin. He oversaw the recruitment of Ronald Pelton, a former NSA employee who volunteered in 1980 to spy for Moscow; the recruitment in 1985 and running of Rick Ames, the CIA turncoat; and the handling of Robert Hanssen, after the FBI agent resumed his espionage in 1986. In addition, Cherkashin identified a spy for the FBI at the KGB's Washington *rezidentura*, Valery Martynov, and, by assigning him as an escort for returning defector Vitaly Yurchenko, tricked Martynov into flying to Moscow, where he was arrested.

Cherkashin's career peaked in Washington. After he returned to KGB headquarters in 1986, he was given unsatisfactory assignments. In his telling, he was a victim of his own success—the KGB leadership was embarrassed when Ames and Hanssen's betrayals revealed the large numbers of US agents in the Soviet service and so, instead of rewarding Cherkashin for helping to uncover the spies, they shunted him aside. Finally, as the Soviet Union fell apart in late 1991, he retired from the KGB rather than be present for what he expected to be the collapse of the service.

Cherkashin comes across, no doubt unintentionally, as an unattractive figure. While he portrays himself as an honest, hardworking CI officer who tried to avoid bureaucratic politics, he freely admits to having been a true believer in communism and the Soviet system until the bitter end. Indeed, his reference to the communist party's "illustrious past" and disparaging remarks about former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and the fate of Russia since the Soviet collapse make it clear that he still longs for the old days (279).

Other aspects of Cherkashin's memoir are even more disturbing than his nostalgia for Soviet power. He says little about his father's career in the NKVD, for example, but what he mentions—joining the Bolsheviks in 1917, overseeing collectivization before his assignment to the Ukraine in the late 1930s, and having been away "fighting counterrevolutionaries" in the days before Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941—strongly suggests that the elder Cherkashin had a great deal of blood on his hands. Nor does Cherkashin seem bothered by the character of the post-Stalin system he served or of the service in which he worked. He claims, unconvincingly, to regret that spies he helped uncover, like Martynov, were executed rather than given long prison terms, but he makes no comments about the KGB's role in the Gulag or other Soviet crimes. Indeed, in the few spots where he considers the morality of his profession and service, Cherkashin asserts a simplistic argument of moral equivalence between the Soviet and Western services. Many of the operational activities of intelligence services, he claims, are pointless games—"thieves stealing from thieves," as he puts it (109).

For the reader who is willing to tolerate Cherkashin's moral obtuseness, however, *Spy Handler* has much to offer. The book is especially useful for its insights into the inner world of the KGB. Cherkashin does not provide a single, discrete description of life in the KGB or its performance; instead, he scatters details throughout the book that, taken together, portray a bureaucratic institution that was, in many ways, unimpressive. For example, he describes his arrival in Beirut in 1965, where he was assigned to carry out CI operations against the CIA. The Soviets had "no agents, operations, or contacts to go up against the Americans;" the "other operations officer in the anti-CIA group was inexperienced and too timid to do his job properly;" and the Beirut *resident* was in his last posting before retirement and showed little interest in aggressive CI operations (80). Similarly, when he arrived in India in 1971, Cherkashin says he found CI operations directed at American targets to be badly disorganized—"officers scattered all over the country ran a myriad of badly connected sources and agents" (103). In both cases, he describes how he set about recruiting assets, organizing networks, and collecting information that in some cases proved to be useful years later in other countries. The overall impression, however, is that the KGB's performance often was uneven, to say the least.

Cherkashin also paints an unflattering portrait of KGB headquarters. Moscow Center, according to Cherkashin, was a place of constant intrigue, where patronage was vital to a career. A fortunate relationship or alliance could advance or protect a career, but an officer unfortunate enough to be the protégé—real or imagined—of someone whose star had fallen could see his career ended. Other writers, especially Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, have touched on this in passing, but Cherkashin provides useful details of how internal political maneuvering damaged the KGB.[1]

The portrait of the KGB that emerges from *Spy Handler* is of an organization that had little trust in its officers, an institutional trait that made fear of betrayal self-fulfilling. An unusual event could end a career, and being pitched by an opposition service was viewed as especially suspicious—"fear of losing their jobs inevitably led some to work for US intelligence," says Cherkashin as he relates the story of Sergei Motorin, a KGB officer recruited by the FBI after he tried to trade vodka for stereo equipment in a Washington store (13). Cherkashin believes that

the pervasive suspicion and intrigue made the KGB blind to its counterintelligence vulnerabilities. While accepting defections and betrayals by lower-level officers as a fact of life, he asserts that few in the leadership would consider the possibility that a hostile service could run a long-term penetration of the KGB. Doing so, claims Cherkashin, would have been an unacceptable admission of weakness (218).

Much of what Cherkashin has to say is not new but still is worth considering. That the KGB, like many intelligence services, simultaneously was capable of brilliant successes and colossal incompetence has long been understood. So, too, are the facts that CI operations often take many years to pay dividends; service leaders are loathe to face up to the possibility of treason in their ranks; and patronage and bureaucratic politics probably play larger roles in the inner workings of intelligence agencies than other bureaucracies, if only because they tend to be closed societies. The KGB, however, seems to have suffered from exaggerated cases of these problems, probably because they were compounded by the suspicious nature of Soviet society and the importance of ideological correctness. The resulting heightened vulnerabilities are not unique to the KGB; they can be found in the intelligence services of similar social and political systems, such as those of China, Cuba, and North Korea.

Cherkashin also makes a number of worthwhile observations, both general and individual, about spies. He has no sentimentality about the people recruited by the KGB or any other service. In fact, he notes that services actually recruit very few agents—most are volunteers who recruit themselves when they get the chance. He also points out that almost every spy signs on for personal, selfish reasons—a need for money, a desire for revenge, or just the thrill of espionage—and that it is rare for a spy to volunteer for ideological reasons, despite the efforts of almost all services to portray their assets as brave people fighting for noble causes.

His discussions of Ames and Hanssen reflect this point of view. As much as he appreciates their efforts, Cherkashin has no illusions about either man or case. Ames, he admits, fell into his lap—“it was unimaginable, but true,” that someone came along who had valuable information and was willing and able to provide it (30). The same was true with Hanssen. This acknowledgement leads Cherkashin to make some points well worth remembering. He cautions that the US desire to view both Ames and Hanssen as losers who turned to treason to escape their failures obscures an important truth about their cases. Both men, he points out, performed well as spies and Hanssen—who took control of his case and, Cherkashin claims, successfully hid his identity from the Russians—was especially clever in his tradecraft. Some of this may be chest-thumping, but Cherkashin’s basic point is a good one: A reflexive dismissal of our traitors as contemptible quislings can skew the analyses of their cases and obscure some of the lessons to be learned and applied later.

Spy Handler is a solid addition to the growing number of KGB memoirs. It is a subtle, complex book—in this, it is a good reflection of the counterintelligence world in which Cherkashin spent so many years—but one that offers useful insights and lessons. For these reasons, it is worth the time of anyone interested in the craft and politics of espionage.

Footnote

[1]Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

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