

Book Reviews

SPY HANDLER:¹ INSIDE THE WORLD OF A KGB “HEAVY HITTER”²

MAJOR JOHN C. JOHNSON³

In *Spy Handler*, former KGB official Victor Cherkashin, writing with Gregory Feifer, shares nearly forty years of experience as a Soviet foreign intelligence officer.⁴ Cherkashin handled renowned spies Aldrich Ames and Robert Hanssen and participated in many other Cold War intrigues in the course of a career that took him from Moscow to Australia, Lebanon, India, and Washington, D.C.⁵ By Cherkashin’s own admission, the nature of his work prohibits him from being entirely forthcoming.⁶ Nevertheless, *Spy Handler* has much to offer students of the history of the Cold War, of modern Russia, and of the business of espionage alike, without cumbersome details or technicalities that might discourage the casual reader. Cherkashin’s memoirs⁷ are a credible, readable, and valuable account of the activities and perspectives of intelligence agents on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

At the outset, Cherkashin indicates his primary motivation to write *Spy Handler* was to respond to certain misrepresentations and inaccurate reports regarding his activities.⁸ In particular, Cherkashin was irked by claims that he was involved in “betraying” Aldrich Ames’ identity when, on the contrary, he felt he “handled” Ames “with all the care and devotion [he] could muster.”⁹ As an effort to set the record straight, *Spy Handler* is largely successful. First, Cherkashin enjoys a distinct advantage—he is in the best position to relate what he did and did not do with respect to Ames and the other agents and operations he handled.¹⁰ Second, Cherkashin enhances his credibility by generally keeping his account straightforward and dispassionate rather than indulging in gratuitous attacks on others’ character.¹¹ Third, Cherkashin convincingly portrays himself as a loyal and conscientious KGB officer, for whom betraying a high-value agent like Ames would be quite unlikely and out of character.

Yet the primary value of *Spy Handler* for most American readers will not lie in resolving squabbles among past and present Russian intelligence officials, but in Cherkashin’s accounts of Cold War espionage and the lessons to be drawn from them. Beginning during the Korean War and ending after the failed coup attempt of August 1991, Cherkashin’s KGB career

¹ VICTOR CHERKASHIN WITH GREGORY FEIFER, *SPY HANDLER: MEMOIR OF A KGB OFFICER: THE TRUE STORY OF THE MAN WHO RECRUITED ROBERT HANSEN AND ALDRICH AMES* (2005).

² *Id.* at 137.

³ U.S. Air Force. Written while assigned as a student, 54th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General’s Legal Center and School, U.S. Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

⁴ See CHERKASHIN WITH FEIFER, *supra* note 1, at 41-42, 254, 282. Cherkashin joined the Soviet Ministry of State Security (MGB), precursor to the Committee for State Security (KGB), in 1952. *Id.* at 41-42, 45. He resigned from the KGB shortly after the attempted coup against Mikhail Gorbachev in August 1991, having attained the rank of colonel. *Id.* at 117, 282. Cherkashin was well-known and respected in the American intelligence community. See *id.* at 137; Andrew Meier, *Spooky Seduction; A KGB Legend Describes How He Convinced Americans to Spy for the Soviet Union*, NEWS & OBSERVER (Raleigh, N.C.), May 8, 2005, at G4, available at http://www.lexis.com/research/retrieve/frames?_m=233c391335a4cee516cfef775be84a5&csvc=fo&cform=bool&_fmtstr=XCITE&docnum=1&_startdoc=1&wchp=dGLbVtb-zSkAV&_md5=52944bd74e8802876ccf3b98ad3233da (book review).

⁵ CHERKASHIN WITH FEIFER, *supra* note 1, at 11-31, 47-52, 69-73, 77-99, 101-06, 182-207, 228-48.

⁶ *Id.* at ix. Cherkashin explains “intelligence work doesn’t lend itself to memoir writing. . . . Its essence is secrecy. For those like me who have spent their careers in espionage, publicizing its details goes against instinct and tradition.” *Id.*

⁷ Cherkashin writes his story “almost entirely from memory,” as one might expect in an autobiography. *Id.* at xi. The authors do cite a few books, articles, and other documents from time to time. See *id.* at 315-18. The scarcity of additional sources, however, does not seriously affect Cherkashin’s credibility. Interestingly, there are uncited quotations attributed to several American and Russian intelligence officials throughout the book. See *id.* at 56-57, 80-81, 83, 86, 94, 109-10, 129, 137, 146, 158-59, 182, 193, 230-31, 233. Presumably these come from interviews Feifer conducted in the course of preparing the book, but this could have been better documented. See *id.* at xiv (Feifer thanking “those who agreed to be interviewed”).

⁸ See *id.* at xii, 6-10.

⁹ *Id.* at 8. In Russia, Cherkashin successfully sued the author and publisher of a 1999 book alleging that Cherkashin betrayed Ames’s identity to former KGB officer Oleg Kalugin. *Id.* at 303-04. Kalugin, once a rising star in the KGB, fell out of favor with the agency and was accused of spying for the CIA. *Id.* at 129-34, 287-88. In 2002 Kalugin was tried in Russia *in absentia*, convicted of treason, and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. *Id.* at 288.

¹⁰ See *id.* at xii, 305.

¹¹ See Dan Danbom, “Spy” *Freely Dishes on KGB*, ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS (Denver, Colo.), Jan. 21, 2005, at 24D, http://www.lexis.com/research/retrieve/frames?_m=223c391335a4cee516cfef775b5e84a5&csvc=fo&cform=bool&_fmtstr=XCITE&docnum=1&_startdoc=1&wchp=dGLbVtb-zSkAV&_md5=52944bd74e8802876ccf3b98ad3233da (book review). This is not to say Cherkashin does not criticize the behavior of several former supervisors, colleagues, adversaries, agencies, and politicians. See, e.g., CHERKASHIN WITH FEIFER, *supra* note 1, at 167-68 (criticizing CIA handling of Soviet defector), 207-08 (criticizing KGB superior for taking undue credit), 273-75 (criticizing Gorbachev’s reforms).

spanned nearly the duration of the Cold War.¹² Although “[i]ntelligence consists chiefly of workaday routine” and the book offers few “James Bond-style exploits,”¹³ Cherkashin and Feifer keep the reader engaged. The authors maintain a brisk pace and a readable style while including numerous dramatic incidents that illustrate the relationships between the Soviet intelligence services, their Western (primarily American) adversaries, and the agents employed by both sides. Cherkashin touches on many diverse incidents and operations that are impossible to summarize here. They include safe house infiltrations,¹⁴ the Cuban missile crisis,¹⁵ theft of military aircraft designs,¹⁶ escapes across the Russo-Finnish border,¹⁷ defections,¹⁸ redefection,¹⁹ executions,²⁰ and many other episodes, both well-known and obscure. Although the authors sacrifice some depth in their account for the sake of breadth, readability, and perhaps discretion,²¹ *Spy Handler* for the most part captures the highlights in a coherent and engaging narrative.

Cherkashin gives special emphasis to his interactions with two agents in particular, Aldrich Ames of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Robert Hanssen of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). In 1985, while Cherkashin was assigned to the Soviet embassy’s KGB detachment in Washington, Ames approached the KGB through an embassy official “to offer [the KGB] information on CIA operations against the USSR in return for \$50,000.”²² At the time Ames was the “CIA’s chief of Soviet counterintelligence.”²³ By the time he was caught in 1994, Ames had been paid \$2.7 million, betrayed over twenty American agents (ten of whom the Soviets executed), compromised multiple intricate and extremely expensive American operations inside the Soviet Union, and “all but shut down CIA operations in Moscow”—at least for a time.²⁴ Also in 1985, FBI counterintelligence agent Robert Hanssen volunteered to work for the KGB by sending a letter specifically to Cherkashin.²⁵ Described by a fellow agent as ““diabolically brilliant,””²⁶ Hanssen continued spying for the Soviet Union and later for Russia for over fifteen years until his arrest in 2001.²⁷ During that time Hanssen provided Moscow with “thousands of documents” and information “worth tens of billions of dollars.”²⁸

Ames and Hanssen were crown jewels, not only of Cherkashin’s career²⁹ but of the entire Soviet counterintelligence effort in the mid-1980s.³⁰ In addition, their names are perhaps the most recognizable for an American audience³¹ among the dozens of intelligence officers and agents Cherkashin refers to in the book. The authors clearly recognize this and have

¹² CHERKASHIN WITH FEIFER, *supra* note 1, at 41-42, 45, 282.

¹³ *Id.* at x.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 87-90.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 62-63.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 96-98, 149-51.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 176-77, 179-82.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 152-58, 192-93.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 166-73.

²⁰ *Id.* at 66, 113, 149, 190-93.

²¹ *Id.* at xi (“[I]n such accounts it’s not possible to reveal everything.”)

²² *Id.* at 16; *see id.* at 11-29.

²³ *Id.* at 26.

²⁴ *Id.* at 4; *see id.* at 1-2, 193, 210. For an in-depth account of the Ames case, see PETE EARLY, *CONFESSIONS OF A SPY: THE REAL STORY OF ALDRICH AMES* (1997).

²⁵ CHERKASHIN WITH FEIFER, *supra* note 1, at 211-13.

²⁶ *Id.* at 230.

²⁷ *Id.* at 245.

²⁸ *Id.* For more information on Hanssen’s life and espionage, see DAVID A. VISE, *THE BUREAU AND THE MOLE* (2002).

²⁹ Cherkashin makes clear that although he was directly involved in “recruiting” both Ames and Hanssen and handling their early operations, he of course did not manage their entire careers. *See* CHERKASHIN WITH FEIFER, *supra* note 1, at 16-33, 187-93, 207, 211-14, 228-45, 248, 257. Cherkashin ceased handling Ames when Ames transferred from Washington to Rome in July 1986, and Cherkashin’s career handling foreign spies effectively ended upon his return to Moscow from Washington shortly thereafter. *Id.* at 257; *see id.* at 261-65.

³⁰ *See id.* at 257 (“The major coup I helped pull off put us squarely on top of the Cold War intelligence battle.”)

³¹ Cherkashin avers he wrote *Spy Handler* “for a general Western audience, which has shown more interest in the real facts—the good and the bad of intelligence history—than Russians have.” *Id.* at xi.

structured the narrative to bring Ames into the story from the start.³² Rather than beginning the narrative chronologically with Cherkashin's childhood in Ukraine,³³ the authors devote the prologue and first chapter to facets of the Ames case and its aftermath.³⁴ This is a wise choice, despite some minor disruption in the narrative flow.³⁵ This structure engages the reader by bringing one of the most interesting and dramatic episodes to the foreground and by underscoring Cherkashin's personal significance to Cold War espionage. This structure also bolsters Cherkashin's credibility by explaining his avowed purpose in writing the book—to rebut certain false reports that he betrayed Ames's identity.³⁶ In all, the prologue and two chapters are devoted to the Ames case and another chapter to Hanssen.³⁷

In addition to providing a wealth of factual information about Ames, Hanssen, and many others, Cherkashin also offers some analysis and develops certain themes. Some of his conclusions are more convincing than others. One lesson Cherkashin draws from his experiences is that “ideology very rarely, if ever, motivates treason.”³⁸ He explains,

Spies tend to focus on their personal problems, not political ones. Most don't want to betray their countries and refuse to see themselves as traitors. They simply want to solve an immediate problem or satisfy a kindled ambition, and spying offers itself as a possibility. Money is a key motivation. Another is proving self-worth³⁹

Ames, for example, was motivated partly by money and partly by resentment of his CIA superiors.⁴⁰ Despite offering his services to the KGB, Ames was “against communism” and “felt patriotic about the United States.”⁴¹ Hanssen also took money from the Soviets,⁴² but he was primarily motivated by “control.”⁴³ Like Ames, he was personally against communism, but he wanted to prove his skill by becoming a “great wizard” of espionage, “to offer and glean information from intelligence agencies on both sides of the Cold War front line.”⁴⁴ Similarly, spies recruited by American agencies were motivated by career frustration, bitterness, revenge, money, and other personal reasons.⁴⁵ Cherkashin's assessment of human nature rings true and finds much support in his book.

Less convincing is a second conclusion Cherkashin draws: that governments should be lenient with spies they uncover and catch.⁴⁶ He declares himself “deeply convinced the spies Ames betrayed should have been fired and deprived of their pensions, but no more.”⁴⁷ At first blush, this seems to be a surprising view for a senior KGB officer and loyal Soviet official.⁴⁸ Execution was a common fate for spies caught by the Soviets.⁴⁹ Perhaps Cherkashin's leniency derives from his

³² *See id.* at 1.

³³ *See id.* at 35.

³⁴ *Id.* at 1-33.

³⁵ Cherkashin resumes Ames's story much later in the book, relying on the reader's recollection of the first chapters. *Id.* at 182-210.

³⁶ *See id.* at 6-10.

³⁷ *Id.* at 1-33, 179-210, 227-54.

³⁸ *Id.* at 63.

³⁹ *Id.* at 115.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 28. At his trial, Ames told the judge “[t]he espionage business, as carried out by the CIA . . . is a self-serving sham, carried out by careerist bureaucrats.” EARLY, *supra* note 24, at 333.

⁴¹ CHERKASHIN WITH FEIEFER, *supra* note 1, at 28.

⁴² At Hanssen's trial, prosecutors alleged the Soviets paid Hanssen \$600,000 in cash and diamonds and put \$800,000 more in an escrow account for him in Russia. *Big Ego, Big Money Cited as Alleged Spy's Motivation*, CNN.COM, May 10, 2002, <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/02/21/spy.profile/index.html>.

⁴³ CHERKASHIN WITH FEIEFER, *supra* note 1, at 250. Hanssen achieved his aim, becoming “the most prolific and damaging spy in U.S. history,” according to one biographer. *What Made the American Turncoat Tick*, CNN.COM, May 10, 2002, <http://archives.cnn.com/2002/LAW/05/10/spy.hanssen/>.

⁴⁴ CHERKASHIN WITH FEIEFER, *supra* note 1, at 238.

⁴⁵ *See, e.g., id.* at 63-64, 114, 151, 156-57, 175, 216.

⁴⁶ *See id.* at 210.

⁴⁷ *Id.* Cherkashin writes, “As far as I was concerned, officers who turned traitor should be fired and deprived of their pensions. That's enough.” *Id.* at 31.

⁴⁸ *See id.* at xii (“I continue to care deeply for the KGB's reputation. . . . The many years I spent working against the CIA were my contribution to the maintenance of my country as a great power.”).

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 116.

role as a spy handler, one who recruits spies and convinces them to expose others.⁵⁰ No doubt it might be easier on the conscience of the handler if the recruited spy and those he exposed were not facing execution or lengthy imprisonment.⁵¹

In any event, Cherkashin's rationale appears to have two primary bases. First, he suggests that spies, once exposed, are essentially harmless.⁵² Second, he contends severe punishment for espionage is counterproductive:

As long as punishment for espionage remains as dire as certain imprisonment (it was usually death in the Soviet Union), spies will have greater motives to broaden their activities than to come clean or stop their espionage before it becomes too serious. To pressure Aldrich Ames into betraying most CIA agents in the Soviet Union, I would remind him of the risks he was taking under U.S. law. . . . Thus prepped, as it were, he chose to protect himself by wading irrevocably deeper into the waters instead of retreating.⁵³

Cherkashin is correct to a degree. Obviously, espionage occurs despite the threat of severe sanctions. Moreover, once an agent begins to spy for an adversary, he has a strong incentive to expose moles within that adversary in order to conceal his own activities.⁵⁴ But Cherkashin fails to address the obvious counterargument. What of all the agents who might have been tempted to betray their agencies and countries but were dissuaded by the threat of severe punishment? What message would it send to effectively do away with criminal sanctions for espionage? It is hard to believe espionage would not increase if the only counterbalance to the enormous potential financial rewards and professional or personal satisfaction of spying was the risk of losing one's job. Cherkashin's position is unconvincing and seems remarkably naïve.

A third conclusion Cherkashin draws from his experiences is also surprising to hear from a senior KGB counterintelligence officer. He confides, "Intelligence work is less politically important than it may seem."⁵⁵ "Some of the best-known espionage cases were more about spy versus spy than real issues of national security. . . . It was thieves stealing from thieves, which raises the question of whether all the years of work and hundreds of millions of dollars were worth it."⁵⁶ By the late Cold War era, espionage had become "expensive and superfluous."⁵⁷

It may be true that, as Cherkashin suggests, the Cold War was ultimately resolved by the structural strengths and weaknesses of the competitors rather than by any specific conflict or espionage operation.⁵⁸ Yet Cherkashin's own narrative undermines his conclusion to some extent. Cold War espionage produced dramatic results from time to time. For example, a Russian scientist named Adolf Tolkachev provided the CIA with "reams of information about Soviet avionics, radar, missile and other weapons systems for fighter aircraft [that] enabled Washington to save billions of dollars and many years of research—and achieve superior technology."⁵⁹ Other agents betrayed Soviet "military planning, nuclear strategy and chemical and biological weapons research"⁶⁰ and "secret arms caches in Western Europe."⁶¹ It is difficult to believe that such matters were "superfluous."⁶²

⁵⁰ See *id.* at 31 (noting that Cherkashin "was as responsible as anyone else" for the execution of the agents Ames betrayed).

⁵¹ See *id.* at 66, 113, 149, 177, 193, 245. Many of the agents Ames betrayed were Cherkashin's friends and colleagues. *Id.* at 31. Cherkashin admits, "I was only doing my job, but the moral dilemma weighed heavily." *Id.* Cherkashin seems to have genuinely liked Ames as well. See *id.* at 5-6 (Cherkashin pitying Ames and planning to bring Ames's son to live in Russia); EARLY, *supra* note 24, at 350 (Cherkashin calling Ames a "humanitarian" and "a very fine fellow"). Cherkashin did not feel as close to Hanssen, who he never met and knew "almost nothing" about until Hanssen's arrest in 2001. CHERKASHIN WITH FEIEFER, *supra* note 1, at 248. Both Ames and Hanssen were convicted and sentenced to confinement for life without parole. *Id.* at 245; EARLY, *supra* note 24, at 333.

⁵² See CHERKASHIN WITH FEIEFER, *supra* note 1, at 210.

⁵³ *Id.* at 116.

⁵⁴ See *id.*

⁵⁵ *Id.* at 310.

⁵⁶ *Id.* at 108-09. By the mid-1980s, Cherkashin states, CIA and KGB activities were "little more than intelligence games. Their connection to real issues of national security, such as stealing military/technological secrets—let alone to the larger national interest as a whole—was often peripheral. Mostly they tried to ferret out moles and recruit enemy intelligence officers." *Id.* at 310.

⁵⁷ *Id.* at 312.

⁵⁸ See *id.* at 282-83.

⁵⁹ *Id.* at 150.

⁶⁰ *Id.* at 111.

⁶¹ *Id.* at 168.

⁶² *Id.* at 312.

Cherkashin concludes his account with his opinions about the proper role of the intelligence services in the post-Cold War world.⁶³ He strongly criticizes Boris Yeltsin and the leaders of post-Soviet Russia for attempting to dismantle the KGB.⁶⁴ He writes, “It was absurd to think we’d entered a new era of brotherhood and cooperation with the United States” when CIA operations in Russia were proceeding “full steam.”⁶⁵ He also decries the political manipulation of the intelligence services in the United States and Russia, citing the United States’ occupation of Iraq in 2003 as a prime example.⁶⁶ Cherkashin, however, recommends greater cooperation between the intelligence services in areas of common interest.⁶⁷ In his view, these areas include “[e]conomic development,” “combating organized criminal activities such as drugs and human smuggling,” and “[f]ighting terrorism.”⁶⁸ These final comments, while interesting, are of less value than Cherkashin’s description of his KGB career because they are merely his opinions on matters of general knowledge.

Ultimately, it is the factual information rather than the opinions and analysis that makes *Spy Handler* worth reading. Cherkashin and Feifer provide a fascinating view of Cold War espionage from within the KGB. As Cherkashin points out, the business of espionage is alive and well, and the legacy of the Cold War is quite relevant to relations between the United States and Russia.⁶⁹ *Spy Handler* is recommended reading for anyone interested in the history of the Cold War, relations between the United States and Russia, or the business of espionage.

⁶³ *Id.* at 307-13.

⁶⁴ *Id.* at 307-09.

⁶⁵ *Id.* at 309.

⁶⁶ *Id.* at 310-12.

⁶⁷ *Id.* at 312-13.

⁶⁸ *Id.* at 312.

⁶⁹ *See id.* at 254, 308-10.