

Alexander Vassiliev's Notebooks:
Provenance and Documentation of Soviet Intelligence Activities in the United States
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The history of intelligence and espionage can be a frustrating field for historians, particularly if their period of interest is within the last seventy-five years. Most nations are significantly slower to open their intelligence agency archives than their diplomatic records and many have not released even a tiny fraction of their intelligence materials, the only exception being the partial opening of the intelligence archives of a few of the collapsed Eastern European communist regimes. With the archives largely closed, the bits and pieces of information released by governments to placate public curiosity about espionage can be misleading. Official government statements often have more to do with public relations than the truth. The spies themselves have been rarely available to be interviewed and have good reasons to avoid being too specific or entirely candid, and when they do speak through memoir literature they are as prone as autobiographers in other walks of life to romanticize their own importance, minimize their mistakes, and pass over unpleasant or sensitive events with silence, misdirection, or flat out lies. In the United States and Great Britain the partial opening of the records of counterespionage agencies, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Security Service (MI5), offer some access into espionage directed at those nations, but even there the files are subject to severe redaction. Occasionally trials have brought to light information on espionage operations, but only a fraction of intelligence activities end up being the target of public prosecution.

For these reasons, Alexander Vassiliev's notebooks provide a uniquely rich insight into Soviet espionage. As Vassiliev explains in detail in his introduction to our co-authored book, *Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America*, from early 1994 to early 1996 he had unprecedented access to the archival record of KGB activities in America from the 1930s to the early 1950s. The Foreign Intelligence Service of Russia (SVR), a successor to the KGB, had decided to assist a project that partnered an active or retired KGB officer with a Western author to produce a series of books on selected intelligence topics. Vassiliev, who had resigned from the KGB in 1990 to become a journalist, accepted an SVR offer to work with American scholar Allen Weinstein to prepare a book on KGB operations in the United States.¹

While Vassiliev did not have access to all KGB files, he was allowed to examine many operational files from the KGB's legal stations, some personal files on both officers and sources, and the first volume of the file on "Enormous," the KGB's atomic intelligence project, that covered its assault on the Manhattan Project up to the end of 1945. Although he was prohibited from making photocopies, Vassiliev was allowed to make handwritten notes without restriction, including copying passages verbatim out of hundreds of individual documents. Under the policies of the project, however, the notes were only for his own use and were not to be shared with his American co-author. Instead, under SVR guidelines he prepared sanitized summaries of major topics and themes. With some exceptions, real names and identifying information about sources could not be disclosed, only their cover names, and certain matters could not be discussed at all. Once the summaries were prepared, an SVR committee of senior officers reviewed them to confirm that the guidelines had been followed.

By the spring of 1996, complications has arisen. Crown Publishers, which had arranged the publishing project, ran into economic difficulties and canceled the contract in 1995. While those books already underway found new publishers (the Weinstein-Vassiliev volume was eventually published by Random House), the SVR attitude toward the project also cooled. The SVR and its sister FSB (successor to the internal arm of the KGB) had regained their footing in Russian society and the need for a good press that had in part motivated the project was no longer urgent. Elements in the agency, particularly its still-strong communist faction, had always been hostile to any arrangement to publish Russian secrets, regarding it as a breach of security. Moreover, it appeared that President Boris Yeltsin faced defeat at the hands of Gennady Zyuganov, the communist candidate in the upcoming 1996 Russian presidential election. After receiving threats of retaliation from communist officers in the SVR, Vassiliev decided to leave Russia. He got a journalistic assignment in London. He has not returned to Russia and is today a British citizen.

Concerned about a physical search at the airport, Vassiliev did not take his original handwritten notebooks with him in 1996. Instead, he put his summary chapters, some of which had been approved by the SVR committee and others that were awaiting review, on computer disks and left Russia with this data. These summaries were given to Allen Weinstein and were the basis for *The Haunted Wood: Soviet*

Espionage in America – The Stalin Era, published in 1999. That Weinstein had only Vassiliev's sanitized summaries to use did not lessen the importance of *The Haunted Wood*, the first survey of Soviet intelligence in the U.S. written from KGB archival sources, but it did limit the information it contained.²

Vassiliev retrieved his original notebooks from Moscow in 2001. Friends had been keeping them and simply shipped them to him in London by DHL. As explained in our preface to *Spies*, in 2005 we learned of the existence of the notebooks and traveled to London to examine them and discuss their provenance with Vassiliev. This led the following year to a one-day private meeting in Washington during which experienced historians, archivists, and intelligence professionals examined the notebooks and discussed with Vassiliev how they were prepared. With the unanimous agreement of the participants at the meeting that the material was genuine, we obtained a foundation grant to have the notebooks professionally translated and a contract from Yale University Press to publish a book based on them. Alexander Vassiliev is a co-author of the book and was fully engaged in the project. He prepared a transcription into word-processed Russian of his hand-written original notebooks – a great assistance to translators Philip Redko and Steve Shabad – and reviewed the translations themselves, clarifying a number of ambiguities.

Alexander Vassiliev recorded his notes in eight separate notebooks, labeled *Black*, *White #1*, *White #2*, *White #3*, *Yellow #1*, *Yellow #2*, *Yellow #3*, and *Yellow #4*, plus a ninth collection of loose pages labeled *Odd Pages*. In total there are 1,115 pages. Three versions of the notebooks exist: the original handwritten texts, transcriptions into word-processed Russian, and translations into English. The latter two duplicate the pagination and page formatting of the original handwritten version. Thus the material on page 65 of the handwritten *White #1* is parallel to the material of page 65 of the transcription and translation of *White #1*. Researchers wishing to verify a passage because of a concern about translation or some other ambiguity can move among the three versions with a minimum of confusion. In the spring of 2009 Vassiliev donated the notebooks to the Library of Congress with no restriction on access, although he retained rights to reproduction beyond individuals being authorized to make one copy for personal research use. The notebooks were made available for research as soon as they were officially delivered to the Library. In addition, PDF files of the scanned original hand-written notebooks, transcriptions, and translations have been placed on the website of the Woodrow Wilson Center's Cold War International

History Project. Accompanying the notebooks is a lengthy concordance of proper names cross-indexed with cover names (in English and transliterated Russian) that assists researchers in keeping straight the often bewildering cast of characters, along with a guide listing the KGB file numbers and titles found in each notebook and their page location.

The notebooks contain both Vassiliev's summaries of KGB archival documents that he examined, along with quotations, many very lengthy, from those documents as well as citations to the particular document, file and page from which the information came. Since the KGB's archives remain closed, Vassiliev's notebooks are as close as we are likely to get to the actual documents for many years, likely decades. As extracts or quotations from contemporaneous documents written at the time the events they describe were occurring or shortly afterwards, they have the virtue of being a record of how the very agency that conducted the spying understood its operations. These official communications are not the guesses, sometimes inspired, sometimes incorrect, of counterespionage officers, reluctant, often minimal admissions from suspects, or statements from defectors who in some cases have a personal agenda. Instead, the notebooks contain the accounts of the successes and failures of the KGB by the KGB itself. They are not public "spin" offered by a bureaucracy anxious to demonstrate its value to a public or protect the organization's self-image.

Any archival historian knows that even contemporaneous documents can sometimes mislead because the creator for some reason didn't correctly understand the events he was reporting, harbored prejudices and assumptions that distorted what was reported, or for reasons of self-promotion or self-protection distorted what actually happened. But that is true of all archival records no matter what the subject and is why historians feel more confident when there are multiple documentary sources that corroborate each other and allow one to screen out the misleading outlier. And given the several thousand KGB documents transcribed, quoted, extracted, and summarized in 1,115 pages of densely handwritten notes, Vassiliev's notebooks provide researchers with an abundance of material that offers ample basis for validation with independent sources.

The notebooks not only complement and corroborate new sources that have appeared in the past decade but go considerably beyond them in detail. Material from Communist International (Comintern) and

Communist Party, USA (CPUSA) files, while significant and helpful and shedding some light on espionage in the United States, includes only KGB and GRU material that made its way to those bodies, and represents only a tiny fraction of KGB activities. We dealt with such material in two books, *The Secret World of American Communism* and *The Soviet World of American Communism*. The World War II KGB and GRU cables deciphered by the National Security Agency's Venona project and released in the mid-1990s, are also a very valuable documentary source, out of which we wrote *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America*. But as valuable as they are, the Venona decrypts are only a few thousand cables which, by chance, were vulnerable to deciphering, out of hundreds of thousands of total cables sent. Consequently, the subject of the deciphered messages ranged from the trivial to the important, and often they were only partially decrypted. Even when complete, they were messages boiled down for transmission by telegram – often short, terse and lacking detail.³

In 1992, retired KGB officer Vasili Mitrokhin defected to Great Britain. For much of his career he had been a KGB archivist, and his position allowed him to secretly make notes on some of the documents that passed through his hands. After he retired in 1984, he typed up his notes into ten manuscript volumes (eight geographical and two case histories), destroying the original notes. When the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) exfiltrated him to the West, he brought with him the ten volumes of transcribed notes and some envelopes of original notes not yet transcribed. This material formed the basis for two highly valuable books on Soviet intelligence, Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin's *The Sword and the Shield* and *The World Was Going Our Way*, as well as a KGB lexicon. Andrew is a leading historian of intelligence and Mitrokhin's material is extremely rich, but as valuable as the books are, scholars would like to have the underlying material open for independent review. As of 2008, the SIS and the Mitrokhin family have released only a small portion of the transcribed material or original notes, none of it dealing with operations in the United States. The released Mitrokhin material is available on the web as part of the Cold War International History Project's Virtual Archive. (And, in any case, only a portion of Mitrokhin's material dealt with American operations whereas all of Vassiliev's material focuses on American-related subjects.)⁴

Just as Mitrokhin's material cannot be checked against the original KGB documents still classified

in Moscow, Vassiliev's notebooks cannot be compared to the original files and folders he examined. Nevertheless, we are quite confident that his material is genuine. The information is congruent with other data on Soviet espionage that has emerged over the years, including material from archives and intelligence agencies that were closed at the time Vassiliev was doing his research. Thus, cables translated by the Venona project, can be found in Vassiliev's notes, with the undeciphered portions in plain text. Cover names that American and British counter-intelligence were unable to identify are linked in Vassiliev's files to real people, who, upon examination, fit the biographical details found in the KGB cables deciphered by the Venona project. The notebooks clarify occasional errors by American counter-intelligence in assigning cover-names to real people and, in each and every case, Vassiliev's notes are more plausible. They contain details that no fantasist or forger could possibly have invented.

That is not to say that there may not be errors or mistakes in transcription or note-taking, only that they are minor. Vassiliev occasionally failed to indicate where a quotation ended, sometimes could not recall what he meant by a cryptic summary phrase and may have miscopied words here and there. In short, he may have committed some of the same errors to which any researcher working in an archive over an extended period is prone. But anyone reading the notebooks will be impressed by the care and thoroughness of his research and deeply grateful for the contribution he has made to our understanding of Soviet espionage in the United States.

Notes

1. Alexander Vassiliev, "How I Came to Write My Notebooks, Discover Alger Hiss, and Lose to His Lawyer," in John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr, and Alexander Vassiliev, *Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). The predecessors to the foreign intelligence agency best known in the West as the KGB went through a number of organizational and title changes in the 1930s and 1940s. For reasons of simplicity, "KGB" will be used here uniformly to avoid the distraction of multiple titles and acronyms.

2. Allen Weinstein and Alexander Vassiliev, *The Haunted Wood: Soviet Espionage in America – The Stalin Era* (New York: Random House, 1999).

3. Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Fridrikh Igorevich Firsov, *The Secret World of American Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Kyrill M. Anderson, *The Soviet World of American Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

4. Christopher M. Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Christopher M. Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); V. I. Mitrokhin, *KGB Lexicon: A Handbook of Chekist Terminology* (London Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2001). “CWIHP note on the Mitrokhin Archive – A Note on Sources” (June 2000) and “The Mitrokhin Archive – A Note on Sources” (1990) in *The Mitrokhin Archive: Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive* at <<http://www.CWIHP.org>>. The cables deciphered by the Venona project are available online at <http://www.nsa.gov/public_info/declass/venona/index.shtml>. Hard copy of the cables is also available at the National Cryptologic Museum (Ft. Meade, MD). Histories of the Venona project include Robert L. Benson, *The Venona Story* (Ft. Meade, MD: Center for Cryptologic History, National Security Agency, 2001); Robert Louis Benson and Michael Warner, *Venona: Soviet Espionage and the American Response 1939–1957* (Washington, D.C.: National Security Agency; Central Intelligence Agency, 1996).

