

Book Review

Kevin P. Riehle (2022) *Russian Intelligence: A Case-Based Study of Russian Services and Missions Past and Present*. Bethesda, MD: National Intelligence Press, 368 pp., ISBN: 9781932946109

Ben de Jong

bendejong1976@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0183-8895>

Independent Researcher, The Netherlands

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Kevin Riehle is a former counterintelligence analyst and prolific author who makes ample use of Russian-language sources in his works on Russian intelligence.¹ These sources often add relevant and topical details that would otherwise not be accessible to a Western reader. Most often, books on intelligence history focus on a particular spy case, with one agent as the central figure in a specific episode of the Cold War. The biography and career of the main protagonist are analysed, and authors attempt to offer a convincing explanation as to why this person betrayed vital secrets to the adversary and what damage was inflicted.

There is not much of that approach here. The book *Russian Intelligence* is not a historical overview and certainly not of one case. The author discusses important thematic aspects of the work of Soviet and Russian services, the KGB, its present successor organisations, and the GRU (Main Intelligence Directorate). Among the topics discussed are political intelligence, counterintelligence, and covert activities. Assassinations, in both Russia and abroad, are also discussed in the context of covert activities. Riehle illustrates his text with

¹See also, for instance, [Riehle \(2024\)](#).

a wide variety of historical and contemporary episodes from Soviet and Russian intelligence history, which makes the book particularly useful. The book makes it clear that historical Soviet cases are often very relevant to understanding present Russian operations.

For instance, there are numerous recent reports that Russian intelligence is collecting information on the seabed infrastructure (vital communication and Internet cables, mostly) of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries, in the North Sea and the Baltic in particular. However, the practice of exploring military targets in the West as a preparation for a potential war was quite common during the Cold War. Riehle discusses the case of Oleg Lyalin, a KGB officer who defected to the United Kingdom in 1971. Lyalin had been tasked by his service to identify and gather information on critical infrastructure sites, such as public utilities, key government buildings, and military installations, with the aim of possible sabotage in case of war. Riehle refers the former KGB officer Oleg Kalugin, who came to the West in the mid-1990s and said that every large KGB *rezidentura*² in the world had one officer doing this kind of work. The Lyalin case places the recent reports on Russian intelligence gathering at sea in its proper historical context. These days, Russian operations in this field go much further than during the Cold War, of course. There are numerous recent reports of data cables on the seabed of the Baltic Sea that have been sabotaged by Russian vessels ([The Guardian, 2024 a,b](#)).

Another constant topic in the history of Soviet and Russian state security is the recurring harassment of American and other Western diplomatic personnel in Moscow and elsewhere in Russia. Such actions always increase in times of international tension between Russia and the West, as is the case at present. Riehle mentions this only briefly, but a recent American ambassador in Moscow offers an apt description of this Russian practice in his memoir:

The stressors were various and compounding: every non-secure phone call monitored, audio surveillance inside the embassy (except, we hoped, in secure areas), video and audio surveillance off the compound, “close access” physical surveillance every moment outside the embassy (e.g., a “random stranger” suddenly sticking a cell phone in a US diplomat’s face and taking a picture), approaches on the street soliciting cooperation with the FSB, poisoned pets, and, for those living off the compound, home invasions by the FSB when no one was [at] home ([Sullivan, 2024, p. 99](#))³.

An important concept mentioned several times by Riehle is the “chekist mindset.”⁴ It is characterised by a tendency to always perceive threats to the regime and to constantly seek ways to mitigate them. Importantly, the chekist mindset always sees foreign origins of domestic threats and problems. In other words, it is a cult of unbridled suspicion. The author emphasises rightly that this distorted view of reality on the part of the ruling elite was constant during the Soviet period, and it has survived to the present day. Putin blaming public unrest on the work of Hillary Clinton is a classic example. He did this after the rigged elections for the State Duma in December 2011, when demonstrations erupted in major cities in Russia. Another example, going a few years back, concerns Putin’s right-hand man and former director of the FSB Nikolai Patrushev, who told a group of women, so-called Soldiers’ Mothers, who defended the rights of Russian conscripts, that they

²*Rezidentura* is Russian intelligence parlance for an SVR or GRU station abroad, usually at an embassy. A major Western country like the United States has more than one *rezidentura* of those services on its territory.

³John J. Sullivan was the American ambassador in Moscow from December 2019 to October 2022.

⁴The term “chekist” is derived from Cheka, the Russian initials for “extraordinary commission for combating counterrevolution and sabotage.” The Cheka was established in December 1917. It was the security service of the then incipient Bolshevik regime.

were working for the CIA. Also, based on this mindset, terrorist attacks inside Russia are “naturally” seen as sponsored from abroad, by the United States in particular. The author quotes Putin and other Russian leaders to buttress his argument.

Another important point relates to the position of state security organisations within the Soviet and Russian political systems. Here, the author emphasises that Soviet and Russian political leaders always keep these organisations under their direct political control, as they are an important means to keep the ruling elite in power and to fulfill their political and other needs. At the same time, these organisations themselves must be prevented from presenting a danger to the system and the elite. The pre-Soviet state security organisation Okhrana also fitted perfectly in this concept. A quote by Riehle from an official source from the 1970s says it in perfect Sovietese: “The activities of the organs of state security wholly and completely serve the policies of the Communist Party at the fundamental stages of developing the Soviet state.” Roughly the same thing could be said, of course, of the relationship between the present Russian regime and its state security apparatus.

There is kind of a “handbook” feel about this work: it is very thorough but less of an easy read than, let’s say, a biography of the notorious British KGB agent Kim Philby. *Russian Intelligence*, however, is a treasure trove of small but often interesting tidbits of information on the topic. Riehle writes that the section responsible for gathering political intelligence is the largest in the *rezidenturas* of the SVR (Foreign Intelligence Service) around the world. Unfortunately, the author offers no source for this important observation. Also, he states, without giving a source, that the well-known Russian illegal Anna Chapman, one of the ten illegals who were exchanged at Vienna airport in the summer of 2010 for four people who had been incarcerated in Russia, was a staff member of the Russian foreign intelligence service, the SVR. In other words, according to Riehle, she was not an agent but an intelligence officer. Yet, according to Gordon Corera in his seminal work on the case of the ten illegals, Chapman was a “special agent illegal” (Corera 2020, pp. 138, 144, 209).⁵ Chapman, together with two others of the ten, represented a new type of illegal, also run by the renowned Directorate S, like the traditional deep-cover illegals with their false non-Soviet identities during the Cold War. Chapman’s Russian background was not a secret, as it would have been in the case of a “classic” illegal. She openly visited her parents in Russia but also had regular secret contact with the SVR for most of the years she spent in the West. Her English surname came from an early marriage with a British citizen, soon after her arrival in the United Kingdom in 2001. She came to the West at the age of 19, which makes it unlikely that she received the usual training by the SVR in Russia. She was, therefore, most likely not a fully trained intelligence officer, as some of the other ten illegals were.

These are minor criticisms, however, that do not lessen the great importance of this book for those interested in the very topical subject of Russian intelligence. Of great value is the additional information contained in numerous figures, tables, and charts put together by the author. Just to mention a few, there is a list of Soviet-era active measure campaigns mainly relating to disinformation. Another list—a long one, unsurprisingly—has the names of Chechens assassinated abroad in the Putin era, most of whom were barely mentioned in Western media at the time of their deaths (a list of Chechens murdered inside Russia would be endless, of course). Particularly instructive is a small section, where Riehle compares the number of security personnel in the Soviet era with today’s Russia. Calculations here are always tricky, of course, given the innate inclination of the powers that be in the Soviet Union and today’s Russia to keep topics like the number of security

⁵Corera’s book is largely based on materials released by the FBI on the case of the ten illegals.

personnel shrouded in a thick cloak of secrecy, as is also often the case in Western countries. One could probably come up with a different calculation, but the author concludes: “Russia today has nearly three times the number of people working in KGB successor organisations per capita than state security organisations had during the Soviet era.”

If this statement is correct, it seems a clear symptom of the deeply rooted paranoia that is omnipresent in Russia these days. This fear concerns the security of the state but even more the exclusive power of a corrupt and kleptocratic elite, with Vladimir Putin at its head. As Riehle puts it aptly: “Protecting the regime is the primary purpose of Russia’s intelligence and state security services.”

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