Spymaster’s Prism: The Fight against Russian Aggression by Jack Devine (review)

Sara Ferragamo

Journal of Advanced Military Studies, Volume 13, Number 2, 2022, pp. 227-233 (Review)

Published by Marine Corps University Press

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/866891

In Spymaster’s Prism: The Fight against Russian Aggression, Jack Devine shares his lifelong experience as an intelligence officer and spymaster for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Devine offers a unique perspective on the world of espionage due to his three decades of service with the CIA including working in both the Latin American and Middle East divisions and as acting director and associate director of operation. The book is an astonishing record of life experiences worthy of a spy thriller full of dangerous missions around the globe, misplaced loyalties, treachery, forgery, honeytraps, and covert media placement. Through a detailed analysis and an exciting recall of clandestine operations, Devine creates a complex and vivid web of spies, spymasters, defectors, whistleblowers, and disillusioned staff as well as a gripping account of infiltrations, betrayals, theft of military designs, entrapments, and executions to explain the confrontation between two major intelligence agencies: the CIA and the Soviet’s Committee for State Security (a.k.a. KGB). The context is wide and explores Russian espionage from its Cold War beginnings through the alleged interference in the election of President Donald J. Trump, but it is essentially molded on the political culture of the Cold War when United States-Soviet relations were based on mutual distrust and antagonism and espionage was a vital game of learning the rival’s secrets.

Spymaster’s Prism is presented in the form of a veritable compendium of Russian actions and tactics. It is divided into 13 chapters, significantly called lessons, with the instructive intent to explore the practical issues behind intelligence as well as rationalize the misjudgments affecting the CIA in the past. Devine’s purpose is based in his careful and farsighted understanding of Russia’s unchanged ability to conduct covert operations, which reflects its permanent wartime mentality. It is no coincidence that the author places the story of Sergei Tretyakov, code name Comrade J, at the front of the book because he asserted that the Cold War never ended. While being one of Russia’s top spies, he acted as a double agent, passing top-secret cases to the United States as well. Therefore, Devine says, “Russia had not ceased its effort to gather intelligence to aid it in navigating a new era. Tretyakov’s existence offered proof of Russia’s continuing espionage” (p. 4).

Each chapter dwells on one aspect at a time, which is part of the comprehensive range of the Russian toolkit such as disinformation, meddling, propaganda, subversion, and intimidation, showing the reader how intelligence has updated and weaponized information through the omnipresence of cyber tools and the proliferation of information. In fact, Devine affirms that “despite all the bombast and rebranding, this is not actually a new strategy. The underlying techniques have not changed since the beginning of the Cold War” (p. 34). Russia’s tactical readiness is exemplified by the author’s choice to include an
epigraph by the first amir of modern Afghanistan, Abdur Rahman Khan, who told his son to “never trust the Russians,” a sentiment that echoes throughout the book.

Devine’s in-depth and compelling observations provide the reader with the tools to think like an agent and evaluate the importance of time, luck, and expertise when conducting intelligence operations. In each chapter, he dispenses predictive analyses on the direction and possible measures that the CIA should take to counterbalance Russian influence. Devine points out that the competition with Russia cannot be treated as mere geopolitical rivalry, like the one with China. Instead, it should be seen as a relationship that has to be an end in itself.

Throughout the narration, Devine always emphasizes one element—Russia’s ability to take advantage of one of the U.S. weaknesses: misinterpretation of events. In parallel, he exposes Russia’s large scale and wide-ranging covert actions that depended on the ability to employ them together and reinforce each other to achieve the Kremlin’s political objectives. He claims that one of the biggest problems for the United States lies in its failure to recognize that even if the Soviet Union (USSR) is gone, Russia remains a major opponent that demands vigilant attention, especially in foreign policy issues. Most importantly, he asserts that intelligence should not be disjointed from the political sphere when confronting Russia, believing, “Intelligence is not merely a game to be played; it is an essential lever in foreign policy” (p. 63).

Devine maintains a vigorous pace and a gripping style that incorporates failures and successes on both sides in addition to displaying their two opposite ways of conducting spycraft. Devine illustrates how structure and degree of involvement characterize the way in which the CIA and KGB conducted espionage. In fact, the KGB was created in the military and then embedded in government. On the contrary, the CIA was established through the National Security Act in 1947 as a “civilian agency designated to be a counterweight to the Soviet military and Foreign intelligence agencies, the GRU and the NKVD,” but under a legal system preventing it from interfering in political affairs. These two divergent aspects led to the necessity to “take a significant time for the FBI and the CIA to develop counterintelligence expertise” (p. 17).

The first part of the book begins with Devine recalling the Moscow Rules, a secret negotiation between the CIA and KGB that served to set an important red line and some limitations on their respective activities. He talks about Soviet-style active measures (aktivniye meropriyatiya), which sought to blur the line between secrecy and acknowledgment, truth, and lie by relying on pluralism and the openness of Western society. In light of Putin’s struggle to ignore this agreement, Devine calls for an updated version of it together with a renewed containment policy.

Devine emphasizes how the myth of the Russian decline and the American hegemonic paradigm made the U.S. government “more driven and interested in pursuing stateless and rogue-state asymmetrical threats—terrorism, drugs, and counterproliferation” (p. 25). He describes how the illusory belief that Russia’s
decline was irreversible, making it incapable of resisting Western initiatives, led to a fatal misconception and the difficulty of accepting Moscow's pushback against Western policies and governments. Furthermore, Devine argues that the phenomenon of source proliferation is part of the active measures developed since the birth of the KGB, creating campaigns designed to “obliquely, perniciously and incrementally undermine the West, its freedom, its system of government, its institutions, and its values during the Cold War” (p. 34).

By their nature, covert actions are directed at changing things. In doing so, they have been linked to hybrid warfare techniques that produce a high degree of complexity. Hybrid warfare creates the ideal conditions for implausibly deniable operations with exploitable ambiguity. The Kremlin has relied prominently on the policy of plausible deniability to try to deploy deliberate obfuscation about acts. Devine argues that the technique of sowing doubt in the existence of objective truth is aimed at disseminating implausible narratives and developing an alternative version of facts. He mentions the case of the Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 shot down in Ukraine in 2014 as a significant example. While Moscow publicly called to investigate the incident, behind the scenes, the pro-Russian separatists blocked access to the crash site, prompting allegations “that it was a Ukrainian missile or aircraft that brought down Flight 17 in an attack meant to target President Putin” (p. 42).

The author also suggests that this kind of approach, which Yale historian Timothy Snider first developed, was adjusted by Russia to create ambiguity and that it is evident in recent activities in Ukraine, which he considers to be a geopolitical hub for Russian distortion of facts and a ground for aggressive military and covert political action. This strategic relevance is confirmed by one of the author’s personal life memories. Devine recalls when he went to Kyiv in 2014 on a promotional tour of his book Good Hunting and was accused by Russian state-sponsored media of trying to favor the schism between the Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox Churches, “pushing the bogus narrative that the CIA was behind the schism” and partnered with “authorities in Kyiv” (p. 35).

Devine also considers how Russian politics is highly unpredictable, as Putin’s rise to power illustrated. He points out how Putin’s background as a KGB officer and his training in Dresden, East Germany, in the waning days of the Soviet Union have shaped his political philosophy and tactical thinking. He stresses Russia’s ability to purchase or co-opt business and political elites to build a significant and reliable compliant network. Businesses searching for opportunities and bribes mirror the appeal of the Russian business culture and “byzantine bureaucracy” as well as its use of opacity, illegal acts, and corruption measures to recruit agents of influence in targeted countries (p. 58).

According to Devine, Russian interference methods are so varied and calibrated to multiple objectives that it is impossible to know their scope and breath. Therefore, it is difficult to assess the truthfulness of sources and accuracy of information when dealing with Russian covert operations. Devine writes, “Russian interference activity was aggressive and targeted, but we know very
little about how these strategies were designed” (pp. 88–89). He explains how Russian intelligence operations involve a high degree of scrutiny of people who gravitate around high-ranking government roles to ensure access to information. As the findings in Robert Mueller’s Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election proved, this system allows the creation of a Trojan horse, that is a network of informants among individuals and institutions.

Devine introduces the figure of the spymaster who did not enjoy the same reputation as secret agents, instead filling the role of running and handling spies and spy networks and defining strategies. Some of the most famous ones are Markus Wolfe, Allen Dulles, James Angleton, and George Kisevalter. Devine details how the KGB used fraudulent moves to expose and deceive their opponents nationally and abroad, to maneuver intelligence services into false paths, and, especially, to get into contact with foreign personnel with the intent of compromising them and recruiting them as moles. He lists famous and obscure cases in the history of espionage that caused a significant loss for the CIA and a competitive advantage for Russia, such as the Rosenberg’s spy ring in the 1950s; Soviet spies such as Aldrich Ames, Kim Philby, Heinz Felfe, Robert Hansenn and Klaus Fuchs; and individuals defined as “walk-ins,” such as Robert Lee Johnson or Jerry Chun Shing Lee. Devine mentions the recent case of National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden as a revealing example of a flaw within the NSA system, which has been the major source of attraction for Russia. He also claims that its prominent weakness is the lack of a full assessment of the security suitability of its contractors.

Devine explains that the active measures went beyond covert operations. He claims that, even decades after the official collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Kremlin’s involvement in political assassinations is still the same since it is the legacy of the Stalinism and part of the KGB practice of wet work (*mokryie dela*), which includes murders, kidnappings, and sabotage involving bloodshed (p. 44). He exposes the tragic deaths of some Russian political opponents, such as Sergei Magnitsky, Anna Politovskaya, and Alexander Litvinenko, or assassinations attempts, such as Alexander Navalny, Boris Berezovsky, and Sergei Skripal.

To this concern, Devine brings the reader’s attention to the Magnitsky Act of 2016 and its importance to the human rights world for unveiling the systemic injustices and corruption of the Russian elitarian state after the murder of Sergei Magnitsky. This legislation authorizes the U.S. president to impose visa bans and freeze assets of foreign individuals who commit violations against human rights defenders and try to hide money in the United States. Devine states that this is a foreign policy goal for Moscow, and explains Putin’s attempt to repeal it as well as his lobbying against the law and its proponent, Bill Browder.

Devine reveals another important element in the longstanding clash between the CIA and KGB—the structure of society. The Soviet Union’s traditionally closed society prevented Western agents from gaining access to secret
information whereas the United States’ open society allowed a certain degree of soft espionage. In this regard, the Soviets preferred human intelligence—the use of agents in place to gather sensitive information—while the United States relied heavily on technological solutions. Devine discloses that one of the main causes behind some failures of the CIA was the scarcity of reliable and timely intelligence information available to the analysts, especially during the 1950s when it was hard for the agency to obtain intelligence sources and built a network of agents inside the impenetrable USSR. By the early Cold War, the Soviet Union had already infiltrated the United States with an army of spies in all sectors of society, although they were particularly interested in science and technology. From the Rosenberg spy ring in the 1950s, to the capture of Aldrich Ames in the CIA, and Robert Hanssen in the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) during the 1990s, Soviet spies made headline news.

Devine remembers that in the aftermath of the attacks on 11 September 2001, President George W. Bush made a consistent increase in resources for the intelligence community, redirecting intelligence capabilities to face the threat of international terrorism and the war in Afghanistan. In doing so, the work of an intelligence officer was intertwined with that of warfighters in these major intervention wars. As a consequence, gathering and analyzing were downgraded in favor of counterterrorism priorities and actions against terrorist organizations.

In the central part of the book the author delves into the story of some of the most famous agents-in-place, such as Adolf Tolkachev, Pyotr Popov, Dimitriy Fedorovich Polyakov, Oleg Penkovskij, and Oleg Gordievskij, who contributed to the understanding of Russian strategic thinking and military thought. They have also helped avert nuclear accidents and allowed the United States to dominate the technological domain.

Tolkachev was an aeronautical engineer whose information was of the utmost importance for the United States to access classified Soviet weapons secrets and advances in aviation technology. He spied for the United States for seven years until he was betrayed by a CIA trainee, caught, and executed.

Pyotr Popov passed secrets about Soviet weapons developments and maneuvers for atomic warfare to the CIA while also providing it with extensive information about the procedures of the Soviet’s Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) procedures and the Soviet intelligence network abroad. General Dmitriy Fedorovich Polyakov and Colonel Oleg Penkovskij both provided valuable intelligence for the CIA and the British intelligence agency MI6 until they were betrayed by Aldrich Ames, a CIA counterintelligence officer who exposed several other U.S. spies working in Moscow. Polyakov, code name TopHat, was a GRU general who approached an American diplomat in Vienna in 1953 to offer his services as a spy for the United States. His information was of vital importance in detecting Soviet nuclear submarines and missile technology. He also alerted the CIA that the GRU knew about the Lockheed U-2 spy plane.

Penkovskij, in particular, spied for the United States in 1961 and 1962, a
strategic period in the Cold War that climaxed during the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. Devine emphasizes that Penkovskij’s intelligence was crucial because it came in the middle of the decision-making process, influencing President John F. Kennedy’s choices and his resolution to maintain a measured stance to resolving the conflict. Of the utmost importance was Penkovsky’s exposures on a Minox camera that included intelligence on Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Gordievskij was one of the most damaging double agents in the history of the KGB. He became a KGB rezidentura (head of station) in London in 1983 and decided to spy for the United States due to alienation and disillusionment with the Soviet system. His information proved to be decisive material about Soviet intentions because he alerted the British about the preparation of Operation Ryan, a joint KGB and GRU action for nuclear war, which Margaret Thatcher shared with President Ronald W. Reagan. He also warned Britain’s Signal Intelligence Service about Soviet monitoring and its fear of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s command-post exercise Able Archer in November 1983.

Devine argues that, despite the outdated conviction that espionage would decline in comparison with the emerging technical intelligence methods, human agents and human intelligence are still the most crucial tools to access secrets that cannot be gleaned by simply using technology. Without human interaction, even the use of cyber technology would stagnate and be useless. He suggests that President Jimmy Carter and his director of Central Intelligence, Admiral Stansfield Turner, pushed the CIA toward an emphasis on technical intelligence. “Where Carter and Turner went wrong,” he believes, “was the failure to understand that acquiring secrets, even those that were highly technical in nature, often requires human assets.” He contends that U.S. intelligence was “still a human source-based intelligence game, with agents needed to gain last- ing access both to the plans and intentions of our adversaries, and that remains the case today” (pp. 129–30).

On several occasions the author focuses on one of the most controversial U.S. foreign policy mistakes, the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, suggesting that it provides a lesson to avoid strategic miscalculation as well as being a reminder to improve critical analysis. Devine underlines the CIA’s tendency for overconfidence and optimism saying that some of its more bullish officials “learned hard lessons in Hungary, Indonesia, and then Castro’s Cuba, the CIA’s highest profile covert action failure” (p. 165). Operation Anadyr was the Soviet military deployment that prompted the United States to instigate the Cuban Missile Crisis on 16 October 1962, but, for Devine, is also an example of intelligence underestimation of Soviet intentions.

In the final part of the book, Devine explains how the CIA covert action programs during the Cold War aided military officers, including sending weapons and providing counterinsurgency training, in their seizure of power in a number of countries. In the 1960s and 1970s, Latin America became an obses-
sion for the United States due to the anti-American and anti-imperialist feelings that led to guerrilla movements that followed Cuba’s successful challenge to U.S. dominance. He claims that “since the creation of the CIA’s mandate in 1947 to combat Soviet aggression,” covert actions that the United States undertook “included such things as supporting political activities, designing and disseminating propaganda, aiding paramilitary activity, and fomenting regime change” (p. 155).

The unfounded fear of the domino theory, which Devine defines as “if one country fell to communism, surrounding countries likely would as well” and the growing sympathies for Marxist ideology prompted the administrations of Kennedy and his successor, President Lyndon B. Johnson, to destabilize governments in Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Colombia, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Uruguay as well as in Southeast Asia, particularly in Cambodia and Vietnam (p. 170). The author focuses on the rise of Salvador Allende in Chile, which induced the United States to destabilize his government until he suffered a U.S.-led military coup in 1973. Yet, Devine notes that the historical precedent of the CIA’s secret plans and covert action playbook emerged from its actions during Italian elections in 1948 that subverted a left-leaning uprising. For years after, it became “the CIA blueprint on how to run political campaigns on foreign territory” (p. 18).

Devine offers his insight into the future of covert actions as well. He believes that “a hybrid approach works best, with both strong intelligence collection and covert action” being “essential levers of U.S. foreign policy.” These actions, called “intelligence in action,” were first developed by Frank Wisner, who Devine refers to as “the CIA’s secret director of operations and an accomplished spymaster” (p. 156).

The reading of a book about espionage often involves a certain degree of boredom, being full of inevitable technicalities and cumbersome details about the operational and administrative features of intelligence activities. This element might discourage readers who are not familiar with the context. On the contrary, Devine succeeds in involving the reader with a lively presentation so that even readers who are not the most ardent lover of the espionage genre can catch the dynamics behind it. *Spymaster’s Prism* is an essential reading for insiders because it addresses the current strategic dearth of the United States and tries to delineate the possible ways to outpace the Russians. For the general public, it offers a broad historical and geographical scenario that offers plenty of background related to geopolitical competition, no matter the adversary.

*Sara Ferragamo*

*Winter cohort of the 360/Digital Sherlocks program by the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFR Lab), promoted by the Atlantic Council*