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Book Review: The Spy's Son: The True Story of the Highest Ranking CIA Officer Ever Convicted of Espionage and the Son he Trained to Spy for Russia

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Review of *The Spy's Son: The True Story of the Highest Ranking CIA Officer Ever Convicted of Espionage and the Son he Trained to Spy for Russia*

Bryan Denson (2015). *The Spy's Son: The True Story of the Highest Ranking CIA Officer Ever Convicted of Espionage and the Son He Trained to Spy for Russia*. London: Scribe Publications. ISBN: 9781925106657 (pbk). 368 pages

The same motivations that compel an individual to spy for their country can be the very things that motivate them to betray the same. Recruitment and running of intelligence agents versus counterintelligence and the discovery of spies in our midst have fascinated, and repulsed, those both within and without the business for centuries. They present extremes—often the ultimate acts of bravery or treachery depending, once again, from whichever viewpoint one sits.

In mid-1994, only 2 months after CIA counterintelligence officer Aldrich Ames was sentenced to life in prison for betraying many of the most closely guarded secrets of U.S. intelligence operations against the Soviet Union, another CIA operations officer, Harold James “Jim” Nicholson was offering his services to the recently emerged Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR); the newly renamed First Chief Directorate of the KGB.

A very good case officer Nicholson had had a number of overseas posting and deployments during his career with the CIA. Much of his case work, as explained in the book, was focused on transnational threat issues, including counterterrorism and organized crime, but one of his more recent postings at home was as a senior instructor at the CIA's training facility in Virginia—colloquially known as “The Farm.” It was here that Nicholson would be responsible for training the next generation of CIA case officers; he would know those who would be posted overseas in diplomatic roles, and he would know those being considered for “nonofficial cover” (or NOC) roles. Nicholson would have, of course, known the Ames story and surmised that the Russians might “be in the market for another highly placed mole inside the CIA.” He might not have direct access to the “crown jewels” in espionage parlance—how the Americans might have penetrated Russian intelligence—in the way that Ames and FBI mole Robert Hanssen would, but he would have the next best thing; the names of the next crop of American spies lining up to participate in “the Great Game.”

Fifteen years after Ames' conviction, the author Bryan Denson, an investigative reporter with *The Oregonian*, first came across Nicholson as he was about to be charged with espionage crimes for the second time. Nicholson's youngest child, Nathan, was also in the courthouse that day. Thanks largely to the 20-year-olds evidence, Nicholson senior would become not just the highest-ranking CIA officer ever convicted of espionage, but also the only U.S. intelligence officer caught betraying his country on two separate occasions, and the only American discovered and convicted of engaging in espionage activities with a foreign government from within the confines of an American federal prison.

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The result of that chance encounter saw Denson spend the next 5 years investigating the circumstances that lead to this extraordinary situation, and *A Spy's Son* tells what he discovered. Denson would initially discover that Nicholson had first been sentenced to nearly 24 years for spying for the SVR in 1997. As with nearly all espionage or intelligence cases like this one, much of the story in the public record, but a lot was not. It is believed that former KGB/SVR Counterintelligence Officer—and CIA source—Alexander Zaporozhsky—was responsible for pointing the Americans in the direction of Nicholson. The Soviet spy was to the CIA what Nicholson was to the KGB/SVR and, as Denson suggests, “Jim and Zaporozhsky weren’t all that different. They climbed to the higher rungs of their nations’ respective spy services, and picked their nation’s pockets to sell secrets to their competitors.”

The author pieces the more familiar background together with a selection of first-hand accounts from sources close to both cases. Members of the family, including Nathan—who spent some 200 hours being interviewed—provide further depth of background and context which enables Denson to examine the intertwined layers of betrayal and treachery. Denson describes how Nicholson was able to manipulate his son, and exploit Nathan’s desperate and unconditional love and loyalty, in order to re-establish contact with the SVR again. Nathan was soon his father’s enthusiastic agent, but in less than 2 years, he had been arrested by the FBI. How he was discovered, why he confessed, and what happened to both after they were convicted are described by Denson in a dispassionate, but genuinely sympathetic, narrative that places a more human face on what many will still regard—particularly after reading this book—as a most sordid profession.

The story of Jim Nicholson’s treachery is not a particularly well-known one compared to other Cold War and post-Cold War traitors; Ames, Hanssen, and the most famous “Harold” of them all—Harold Adrian “Kim” Philby. But what makes Nicholson’s act of betrayal all the more significant, and something that Denson draws out particularly well, is that his psychopathy seemingly knew no bounds. We ultimately see that Nicholson senior was of sufficient moral reprehensibility that he convinced his youngest son Nathan, who absolutely adored his father, to do exactly the same. The quality of tradecraft demonstrated by Nicholson senior, although impressive as it is, must stand to one side as the author weaves a sorry tale of destroyed ego, egomania, betrayal and self-aggrandisement of epic proportions; an individual described in the book as a “cunning, self-centred, self-righteous, and evil...master manipulator.” A worthwhile addition to any intelligence studies enthusiast’s library.

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