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Book Review: The Billion Dollar Spy: A True Story of Cold War Espionage and Betrayal

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Review of *The Billion Dollar Spy: A True Story of Cold War Espionage and Betrayal*

David E. Hoffman (2015). *The Billion Dollar Spy: A True Story of Cold War Espionage and Betrayal*. New York: Doubleday . 0385537603. Photographs. Notes. Index. Pp Xii, 336

The Billion Dollar Spy is easily one of the catchiest titles to come out of the nonfiction Cold-War war-in-the-shadows era. In fact, the dust jacket art makes it appear to be misplaced on bookstores shelves, as it looks like one of those seemingly churned out “thrillers.” Instead, David E. Hoffman has given us a real-life thriller that rivals its fictional counterparts, except there are no exotic locations, handsome James Bond, or Jason Bourne type men or exotic and dangerous femme fatales.

Adolf Tolkachev is the hero of the book and, unlike our cinema stars, was a hero in the greatest sense of the word. Tolkachev is perhaps as great of a hero as the earlier Soviet spy Oleg Penkovsky, code named HERO who informed the clueless West among other things of the presence of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba. In the West, those who sold secrets to the Soviets generally did so for financial gain. Robert Hansen stands to mind for sheer greed but so do the Walkers, a family that was a spy ring whose disclosures to the Soviets left the West vulnerable to a first strike by Soviet nuclear ICBM submarines as they disclosed how NATO tracked Soviet submarines through the critical UK–Greenland–Iceland gap. Then you have those who were attracted for ideological purposes, generally those of a leftist bent to start with such as the Cambridge Five and the Rosenbergs, and other Soviet agents that were attracted by the New Deal. Tolkachev is vastly different from these types because it is harder to get a grasp on his motivations. Penkovsky is easier to understand as his family, despite his rise to some prominence, had suffered from the Bolshevik Revolution. However, Tolkachev is harder to profile in any of the normal psychological aspects.

Yet Tolkachev seems to be a mere historical footnote until this work. How important was he? In the late 1970s, it seemed that the Soviets had moved ahead of the West in fighters and radars. Tolkachev from 1978 to 1985 gave his handler officers thousands of pages of top-secret documents. The book goes into great detail how Tolkachev had to be ingenious and innovative in gaining access to the materials as well as the necessary spy craft. The parts on his use of cameras, dead drops and such, all standard spy genre fare, become far more interesting when you realize a single slip means the death of not a fictional character but a man with a family. The key revelations that Tolkachev gave to the West dealt with their ground radars that defended against attacks, and radars on their warplanes that provided an unknown new capacity, that would gain a tactical advantage in aerial combat by achieving faster lock-on for their missile systems.

Hoffman savages the Central Intelligence Agency by taking them to task for their failure to respond to the Soviet threat by developing sources. Hoffman lays out in brutal fashion that James J. Angleton, head of counterintelligence from 1954 to

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1974, did as much damage as any Soviet agent. Angleton was obsessed with moles and feared that EVERY Soviet “walk-ins” were provocateurs. Admiral Stansfield Turner later ordered a freeze on any Moscow ops for fear of a penetration, turning away ALL valuable sources. It is with good cause why the American people have right to question the leadership of the Intelligence Community as they seem, time and time again, like Sisyphus, doomed to roll the rock of wrong decisions up the hill.

Like Macintyre’s work on Kim Philby, the British intellectual who betrayed the West, this book is a must read. It is interesting to note that what seemed dangerous to us from that era seems now almost polite compared to ISIS beheadings and mass suicide attacks in marketplaces. What the book drives home in an understated fashion is that the American and Western Intelligence Community, despite 60 years of effort, never really got a foothold in the Soviet system, despite the expenditure of billions of dollars. The lesson for today is relevant for when we hear the Intelligence Community talking about all the resources devoted to the fight against terrorism. Use this as a lesson—and note we have had no real defections from inside the Islamo-fascist movements. The lesson here is simply that individual heroism will sometimes win out over bureaucratic ineptness. Thankfully, the Soviets were as hidebound in some of their methods as the West; else, the bravery of individuals like Tolkachev would have been for naught, whose documents one must consider led to the final victory of both sides who did not find cause to unleash a nuclear Armageddon.

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