

Review of *Spies* by Calder Walton

Review by Jeremy Black

Ukraine, Espionage, Subversion, Russians, British, Ukrainians, Whom is the betrayer? Who the Betrayed? A brilliant start, for in this opening instance in Calder Walton's ably constructed, well-written and widely grounded study, we are in 1922. Continuity is a major theme of this excellent history of the West-East intelligence conflict, one focusing on the American-Soviet rivalry. Indeed, continuity is seen far wider than across the Cold War. For the story begins with the Anglo-Russian intelligence rivalry in the early stages of the Cold War which is dated (correctly) not to 1945, but, instead, to the Communist Revolution itself.

Moreover, far from ending with the fall of the Soviet Union, Walton takes the story up to the present. He does not so much see weakness as much as an offensive tool. But related to that comes Walton's argument that Soviet intelligence services broadly failed to provide leaders with accurate analysis, a situation repeated for Putin. This owed/owes much to the confirmation bias you find in autocracies, but also to the essentially tactical and operational level of their activities within a very fixed strategic context that left scant opportunity for informed analysis. There were clearly tactical and operational deficiencies with Western intelligence but they tended to be more effective in strategic terms. The balance in Walton's tale is on the Soviet-American rivalry, rather than its Anglo-Soviet counterpart or indeed the pre-1917 Anglo-Russian rivalries of the Great Game. The lasting influence of the latter deserves more attention. At the same time, the social dimension was new. Very briefly mentioned by Walton (as is Ian Fleming), albeit more than once, Agatha Christie had no doubts. In *The Secret Adversary* (1922), her second novel, 'Bolshevist gold is pouring into this country for the specific purpose of procuring a Revolution' and 'the Bolshevists are behind the labour unrest.'

The failure in the early 1920s of Communist hopes for rapid world revolution changed the nature of the Soviet intelligence assault, but not its purpose. And so also when the enmity of the Nazi-Soviet pact was transformed in 1941 by Soviet attack. This monumental failure for Stalin ended the happy prospect of the non-Soviet powers destroying themselves leaving a presiding Stalin as the fulfilment of Communist millenarianism. Walton argues that Stalin's purges and attitudes effectively institutionalised intelligence failure, greatly to the benefit of the Germans. He explains how the Purges hit hard at Soviet espionage. Indeed it is clear that they were more damaging than Western counterespionage which emerges in his book as inadequate prefiguring what he sees as the situation today.

Stalin's assumption that the wartime Grand Alliance could not be sustained after war, itself almost the definition of a self-fulfilling prophecy, combined with his suspicion of his allies, led him to press on hard with the intelligence offensive. Paranoid (although, significantly not about Hitler in

1939-41), Stalin exaggerated British commitment to the cause of hostility, to Communism, just as he had neglected British warnings about likely German attack. When, in 1941, Rudolf Hess, flew to Britain, this mission as seen by Stalin as a possible means of negotiation designed to isolate the Soviet Union, and thus a spur to Soviet espionage. So also, in the autumn of 1942, Stalin discussed whether Churchill wanted a separate peace with Germany so as to leave the latter free to oppose the Soviet Union.

The same failures (and Walton also finds no Soviet equivalent to ULTRA) helped offset the terrible problems for the West created by Soviet fellow-travellers. The damage repeatedly done by the latter emerges clearly in Walton's history. In addition, Walton suggests that a major failure of public assessment arose from an inability to hold two concepts at once. He specifies the degree to which the understandable rejection of McCarthyism led to an inability to see the scale and seriousness of Soviet penetration. So also with the hostility to certain CIA Cold War operations and later to the assessment of Iraqi military capabilities.

To Walton, this prefigures the challenge from China which helps anchor the present-day section of the book, alongside the argument that Putin represents a linkage of powerful old-style intelligence interests with organised crime such that, were he overthrown, his replacement, Walton argues, would be no different, if not worse.

The strong linkage in the case of Putin of the intelligence world with organised crime, a point seen in many intelligence agencies notably with the drug-trade, captures a point repeatedly noted by Walton, that of the ready criminality of Soviet/Russian intelligence systems for which the ends totally justify the means, the disruptiveness of the means are one of the means, and there is no sense of legality or accountability. This element was ably captured in Fleming's James Bond novels, as in *Live and Let Die* (1954), in which Soviet subversion is seen at work in America. Bond reflects:

'Never before in his life had there been so much to play for. The secret of the treasure, the defeat of a great criminal, the smashing of a Communist spy ring, and the destruction of a tentacle of SMERSH, the cruel machine.'

Bond is also revealed as already knowing Jamaica; he had spent time there assigned to protect local labour unions from Communist infiltration. Walton presents such infiltration as very much a Soviet tool, and argues that practices of accountability make it less common for Western intelligence agencies.

For Walton, the price of security is eternal vigilance and there is a total failure on the part of the West to face the challenge. This raises the question of China. To Walton and he demonstrates his point peaceful coexistence is only a device on the part of a Chinese regime that can plan for long term advantage. His view of Chinese strategic culture is not one focused on alleged Confucian values and

essentially defensive regional predominance. Instead there is an engagement with Chinese ambition that draws on a different pattern of the history of Chinese strategic culture. Suspicion on the part of the West is not sufficient. There is also the need for structures, processes and practices. All of these benefit from stability and unity, and the West is not currently brilliant at these. Indeed there seems in certain countries to be an open season in undermining and even trashing intelligence services. That of course weakens the confidence of allies, and does the work of China and Russia.

Linked to this comes the problem of leaders expecting simply the confirmation of their views. How far these issues are related to the major Western strategic failures of recent years invites debate. Some of these failures reflect wish fantasies about the possibility of engagement, notably with North Korea, but also in the deterrence that did not work with Putin, notably over Ukraine. More centrally, the extent to which China and Russia would come to cooperate was inadequately planned for. Again this reflected in part a lack of political attention to intelligence warnings.

Throughout Walton's book, there is a sense that Western intelligence professionalism benefited from the socio-political context. Whether that will be the case in the future is unclear. It is easy to avoid this question by focusing on technological silver bullets notably AI. They certainly offer much in terms of scanning sifting and classifying information, but such processes do not necessarily provide the evaluation and action required. There is of course the inherent flaw of assuming an optimal assessment and response when in practice such rationality is inherently subject to the politics of perception. Whose politics and which perceptions then become the issues of note both for intelligence analysis and for subsequent analysis.

He makes his case very well. Indeed, the principal criticism is a wish for more. Possibly, however, obviously important, we could have done with less on established individuals and topics such as Philby and the Cuban Missile Crisis, and, instead, increased the coverage of the pre-1941 section, as well, the naval dimension, throughout the powers covered and their inputs. It would have been good to see far more from France, Israel and many other states, all of which were not only part of the story but also contributed support or cross-currents to the main narrative of rivalry. Indeed, in the world of intelligence, the tail very often wags the dog.

But that point simply underlines the attraction of his work and the wish for more. Many long books are precisely that. With Walton, there are no longuers.

His work is also inherently significant because by convincingly arguing the case for a continuing threat he pushes to the fore questions about political and governmental effectiveness. In part these can be linked to structural factors but as Walton's book makes readily apparent there are also the personal and institutional views bound up in perceptions and priorities. This factor makes the character of leadership a key issue. In the case of understanding intelligence, this is a matter of appreciating strengths and weaknesses, content and contexts, overt meanings and possible

implications. This is not the politics of bravado, hunch and intuition. Instead as with military strategy, leadership involves the assessment of risk and the ability to think through and plan forward in many contexts.

(1522 words)

Jeremy Black is author of *A History of the Second World War in 100 Maps* (University of Chicago Press).