

Dominik Smyrgała
Collegium Civitas

ARE THEY STILL AMONG US? DISCUSSION WITH THE BOOK
ROSYJSKI SZTYLET. DZIAŁALNOŚĆ WYWIADU NIELEGALNEGO
(THE RUSSIAN DAGGER. ACTIVITIES OF ILLEGAL INTELLIGENCE)
BY ANDRZEJ KOWALSKI

Introduction

Every book written by an experienced intelligence officer deserves special attention. They are people with enormous knowledge and, even if (for obvious reasons) they cannot fully disclose that knowledge, it is always worth taking a closer look at their interpretations of facts and social phenomena.

Colonel Andrzej Kowalski is definitely this kind of an author. He spent his entire career as a counterintelligence officer in the Polish Internal Security Agency before becoming the deputy director and director of the Military Counterintelligence Service. After retiring from active service, he became an advisor to several parliamentary commissions in Poland.

His book, published in 2013, has a very meaningful title – *Rosyjski sztylet. Działalność wywiadu nielegalnego* (*The Russian Dagger: Activities of illegal intelligence*) – and clearly suggests that the author considers these kinds of activities as still being an effective asset of the Russian strategy. What is more, a dagger (or a sword) was one of the elements of the KGB coat of arms.

Background and assumptions

Col. Kowalski is fully aware of how difficult it is to write such a book in a scientific manner. He mentions the most important obstacles related to this: insufficient evidence, limited or no access to the archives of various intelligence services, and the questionable quality of available material. On many occasions, it is even impossible to distinguish between information and disinformation. Kowalski quotes James Jesus Angleton, who

in turns quotes T.S. Eliot, by describing intelligence and counterintelligence as “the wilderness of mirrors”. In other words, the same bits of information, analyzed from different angles, render different results. Furthermore, the knowledge about illegals is even more dubious. Col. Kowalski concludes that “our knowledge or what seems it” on the issue is very, very limited (Kowalski 2013, p. 24). However, there are several facts that may be considered as (more or less) direct evidence of the continuing use of illegals for intelligence operations. For example, the last meeting on long-term illegal intelligence planning in the Eastern bloc took place in 1989 (Ibidem, p. 33)

He also notes that there is not much Polish literature on the *illegals* (Ibidem, p. 30). The only two books available are *Archiwum Mitrochina* (the Polish edition of the two famous books by Christopher Andrew and Vasiliy Mitrokhin that were based upon documents exfiltrated from the KGB archives by the latter; Andrew, Mitrochin 2009) and a novel entitled *Nielegalni* by Vincent V. Severski, a former Polish intelligence officer (Severski 2011). The first one can only be used for historical analysis and remains the most important source of data for analysis. The latter, being a work of fiction, is valuable in terms of drawing a general picture of the illegals’ work. Kowalski is more interested in the Institute of National Remembrance’s archives and the contemporary media as a source of new data. Some attention is dedicated to interviews with intelligence officers and their memoirs, such as George Blake’s *Transparent Walls* (Kowalski 2013, p. 27). Blake himself is an important focal point of the book. The author challenges the idea that Blake was a British intelligence officer who eventually betrayed his country. Kowalski suspects that Blake in fact may have been an illegal from the beginning.

The author’s views on the contemporary role of the Russian illegal intelligence are quickly presented in the introduction. Col. Kowalski comments on the ongoing discussion between the critics and the supporters of the thesis that the illegals are still a factor of politics and international relations.

He refers to current events and processes, including the following:

- 1) the claims of the Soviet defector Sergey Tretyakov as presented in his memoirs: *Comrade J.*
- 2) a 2009 report by the British House of Commons. According to which, Russian espionage in the United Kingdom had reached levels not seen since the Cold War;
- 3) the cases of Russian spies arrested in Western Europe (Roberto Flores Garcia and Harald S.);
- 4) the case of Hermann Simm of Estonia, which is broadly discussed in the latter part of the book. Col. Kowalski notices that the information disseminated about

the case was to a large extent contradictory, suggesting that some sort of disinformation was conducted. The author supposes that Simm may have in fact been a “sleeper”;

- 5) the 2011 case of Andreas and Heidrun Anshlags (or Sasha and Ola Rust), two illegals in Germany. Interestingly, Col. Kowalski provides some examples of how the Russian spies used YouTube channels for communicating with their “Center”;
- 6) last, but not least, the 2010 case of the Chapman Ring being the most important one for the entire book.

In a way, the book itself is a collection of case studies. Col. Kowalski analyzes numerous historical cases of Soviet illegals’ known activities and tries to compare them to the modern cases. He assumes that since there was no significant organizational change between the Soviet and the Russian intelligence services that its *modus operandi* has not changed either.

In terms of methodology, the book has some weaknesses. A considerable amount of information is sourced from the Internet, which is not always of the best quality. However, as stated before, it is difficult to find a sufficient number of quality documents on such a topic. On the other hand (and sadly enough), it will probably never be possible to write a solid scientific work on the illegals as it would require some major intelligence services – specifically, the Russian intelligence services – to open their archives. Unless anything like the Mitrokhin Archive shows up again, researchers will be condemned to use a very narrow source base and, to a significant degree, speculate.

Blake. George Blake

One of the important focal points of the book is the case of George Blake. Col. Kowalski emphasizes the attention paid to him (as well as to other illegals) at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, starting with publishing his books and interviews with him. Kowalski refers to statements made by Blake about the past and continuing relevance of the illegals as well as Blake’s comments about never feeling any remorse for committing treason because he was never loyal to Britain in the first place. At the same time, it was revealed that Blake was actually a Russian intelligence colonel, which is unusual for a foreigner recruited as a foreign agent and suggests that Blake indeed could have been an officer, not an agent, of the Soviet services from the very beginning (Kowalski 2013, p. 27-30).

The author finds some other circumstantial evidence for his thesis in the detailed analysis of the case of Konon Molody and a pair of his agents, the Krogers (the so-called Portland Spy Ring), as well as in the story of Blake's escape (Ibidem, p. 117-125, 153-155). The author speculates that Molody and, in the first place, the Krogers may actually have been sacrificed by the KGB to cover Blake. Similarly, his escape from prison clearly required outside support. Blake was apparently too valuable to be left in a British prison and, for whatever reason, the option of a prisoner exchange was precluded.

Then, following the defection of Ion Mihai Paçepa, a three-star Romanian general, and his subsequent interview in the "The Frontpage Magazine", Col. Kowalski notices the interview of Vladimir Putin from 2007, which he views as a general message to illegals around the world (Ibidem, p. 27-30, Paçepa 2007).

There is another coincidence here that might suggest that Russia was addressing her illegals: the funeral and commemoration of Gevork Vartanyan in 2012, which was arranged in a grand style. The author also points out that there are several discrepancies in the biographies of Vartanyan that appeared in the media, indicating a great deal of disinformation (Kowalski 2013, p. 34-44). Such a concentration of events and phenomena inspires Col. Kowalski to speculate about a possible hidden symbolic meaning behind the sudden "revival" of Blake's story.

This construction is very tempting, yet it is difficult to prove it. Existing documents do not support the thesis of Blake's alternative life story. His lack of loyalty to Britain is usually explained by the fact that he was a Dutch Jew. His biography was closely analyzed for the purpose of his trial and never countered this (Attorney General vs. Blake 1961), neither did the Mitrokhin archive (Trahair 2004, Andrew Mitrokhin 1999).

Zarubin and *coup d'etat* in Yugoslavia

Although Col. Kowalski does not describe it as such, the book is in fact a collection of case studies. The case studies include a series of biographies of the most notable Soviet illegals from the time of the revolution up to the disintegration of the Soviet bloc (Kowalski 2013, p. 54-285). The author divides the timeframe into three historical periods which the author refers to as the "waves of illegals": 1945-1949 (the end of World War Two and nuclear espionage), 1958-1963 (the Shelepin report and the Cuban missile crisis), and the contemporary era (from the Prague Sprint to present day, which includes the cases of Kuzminov, Tretyakov, the Olshanskys, Hampel, etc.).

This part does not bring much new information about the illegals as it is mostly based on previously known sources. Nevertheless, it is probably the first compendium of all the biographies of the most famous illegal officers of the Soviet intelligence community. However, it is not free of mistakes, starting with minor errors like the transcription of foreign names and ending with more serious ones. For example, quoting some other sources, Col. Kowalski claims that the NKVD sent Vasiliy Zarubin to Yugoslavia in 1941 to stage a *coup d'état* there that was supposedly successful. The goal of this operation was to draw Yugoslavia away from the coalition with Hitler and force Germany to attack the Balkans first in an attempt to delay as much as possible a German invasion of the Soviet Union (Kowalski 2013, p. 111).

The existing literature denies it. The issue has been previously investigated from several different perspectives. This special interest resulted from the fact that the history of war in Yugoslavia was traumatic. Apart from the extermination of the Serbs, Jews, and Romas by the Ustaša movement and the Independent Croatian State (NDH), it includes an actual civil war between several guerrilla factions and the cruel revenge sought by Josip Broz-Tito's communist partisans against his opponents after the war. All these disasters fell upon Yugoslavia after March 1941, when the Kingdom abandoned the Anti-Comintern Pact and joined the allies. It was followed by an immediate German invasion and an outright military defeat. Yet, the government of communist Yugoslavia could not admit an alliance with the Nazis. Therefore, the coup was usually presented as a rebellion of army officers against a treacherous government (Priručník, 1958, p. 148; Mijanović, 1960, p. 62-66; Teržić, 1963).

The Yugoslav émigré movement in London had its own conflict over the issue. Coincidentally, William Seton-Watson, who, in 1950, was asked why Britain did not fulfill her obligations resulting from the alliance with Yugoslavia, caused it. Allegedly, he replied, "We paid for the entry of Yugoslavia into the war with the sum of 500,000 pounds and we owe the Serbs nothing" (Rezun 1995, p. 58).

Moreover, it is known that at least some of the conspirators that arranged the coup in Yugoslavia worked for British intelligence and were encouraged by British diplomats to overthrow the government. The coup was supposed to be a part of the "diplomacy of survival" and "setting Europe ablaze" that the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) was overseeing (Ibidem, p. 58).

However, two other British researchers accuse the Yugoslav political elites of more serious derelictions. Neil Balfour and Sally MacKay claim that on March 28, 1941, Churchill received a report from the SOE, which reported it had paid at least 100,000

pounds to overthrow the government of Dragiša Cvetović. It also listed the parties and organizations that were being financially supported (Balfour, MacKay, 1980, p. 230-231). If there was any foreign inspiration behind the March 1941 *coup d'état* in Belgrade, it was British, not Soviet. On the other hand, it is quite interesting to think why anyone would want to attribute it to a certain Soviet illegal.

Contemporary illegals

As mentioned before, Col. Kowalski considers the case of the Chapman Ring to be one of the most important pieces of evidence that the illegals are still an asset used by the Russian intelligence services. The circumstances of the Chapman case, including its disclosure, the methods of communication, and the fate of the Russian spies, are analyzed. He suspects that the whole case might have been about something other than is commonly thought. Generally, the media considers it to be a major failure on the part of Russian intelligence and a proof that the activities of the illegals are no longer possible. But Col. Kowalski has different thoughts on this matter. It is unknown for sure what the Chapman Ring actually achieved. From what has been disclosed, it can be concluded that the old methods of the Soviet/Russian intelligence services were creatively enriched with the latest technology. Moreover, there seems to be some new, long-term planning in exploiting technology. From testimonies and information revealed in the media, one might imagine that the SVR is looking for an opportunity to raise a whole new generation of loyal spies brought up *inside* the territory of their target country (Kowalski 2013, p. 246-283).

Such a turn in strategy could result from technological change that has been taking place in the world in the last several decades. According to the author, the development of the IT sector, the general digitalization of society, and the increasing capacity of databases seriously hinders the preparations of the illegals. With the digitalization of personal data, it is practically impossible to use a deceased person's data to create a backstory for such a spy. Moreover, new identity recognition systems, including biometrics, make it even more difficult (Ibidem, p. 390-391).

Perestroika revisited

Another set of problems discussed in the book is related to the political transformation in Central Eastern Europe. Col. Kowalski concludes that the "official history" of the

collapse of communism may not be necessarily true. He emphasizes the still unknown aspects of “Operation Progres”, a large-scale action of sending the illegals to Czechoslovakia before, during, and after the Prague Spring in 1968. He notices that this operation coincides with changes in Poland in the 1970s. It may suggest that, as some other authors have insisted in the past, Czechoslovakia and Poland might have in fact been a kind of “laboratories of perestroika” or a process of democratization conducted under the control of communist authorities (Kowalski, 2013, p. 69-71, 373).

Col. Kowalski revisits some of the older theories related to political transformation of Central Eastern Europe. Probably the most prominent representative of this kind of thinking is Anatoliy Golitsyn, the famous Soviet defector, who in his *New Lies for Old* and *The Perestroika Deception* (Golitsyn, 1984; Golitsyn, Story, 1998), openly claimed that the transformation (including the Solidarity movement and the Prague Spring) was staged from the very beginning. His books inspired very vivid discussions though the research of Polish scientists emphasizes the natural decay of the system of power (Codogni, 2009).

Col. Kowalski does not go that far. Nevertheless, he expresses serious concerns about the background and the true nature of the problem. He notes that there were some Soviet illegals operating in Poland in the 1970s and 1980s. Logically, this should not have taken place since Poland was a member of the Soviet bloc, dependent and controlled by Moscow. The purpose of their activities remains uncertain. Moreover, it is known from documents held by the Polish Institute of National Remembrance (an institution established, among other duties, to take control over the documents of the communist political police) that the intelligence and counterintelligence services of communist Poland were closely controlled by their Soviet counterparts (Kowalski, 2013, p. 178, 374-377). Moreover, there existed KGB structures (both official and unofficial) and GRU residenturas in the staff of each Soviet military garrison in Poland.

Conclusion

Col. Kowalski admits that his book does not bring a lot of new research material to light. However, it proposes a new interpretation of previously known facts and data. According to him, the existing perception of the Soviet/Russian illegal intelligence, based primarily on the revelations of Mitrokhin, is not sufficient to fully understand the frameworks of the Russian grand strategy. The illegals are still to play a vital role in it (Kowalski, 2013, p. 381).

To sum up, despite some mistakes and disputable statements, the book is very interesting, inspiring, and is definitely worth reading. This discussion does not cover all of the aspects of the book due to the formal limits of the journal. It would certainly be worthwhile for other researchers to analyse them all.

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Dominik Smyrgała

Are they still among us? Discussion with the book
Rosyjski sztylet. Działalność wywiadu nielegalnego
(The Russian Dagger. Activities of illegal intelligence)
by Andrzej Kowalski

Abstract

The article discusses some of the theses presented in *Rosyjski sztylet. Działalność wywiadu nielegalnego* by Col. Andrzej Kowalski. The former director of the Polish Military Counterintelligence Service presents the most important aspects of the illegal intelligence of the former USSR. On that foundation, he analyzes media and news about the contemporary intelligence activities of the Russian Federation. He concludes that the use of illegal intelligence is still an important element of the Russian strategy and poses an underappreciated threat to the West. The book is not free of mistakes, namely that some statements cannot be confirmed by the sources. Nevertheless, it is a valuable research perspective; its greatest value being the practical knowledge and experience of the author.

Keywords: *intelligence, counterintelligence, illegals, Russia, Soviet Union*

E-mail to the Author: dominik.smyrgała@civitas.edu.pl