

Intelligence in Public Media

Spies: The Epic Intelligence War Between East and West

Calder Walton (Simon and Schuster, 2023), 672 pages, notes, index.

Reviewed by John Ehrman

Lucky are the people interested in intelligence history, for they are living in a golden age. Since the mid-1990s, when NSA and CIA jointly released the VENONA documents^a and other Cold War–era archives began to open, scholars have produced a steady stream of books that have changed the public’s understanding of the role of intelligence in international affairs and how, especially, it affected post-1945 diplomacy. The quantity of new material shows no sign of diminishing—memoirs and new releases (whether authorized or not) continue to give researchers plenty to chew on.

Much of this material, however, has been used for limited studies, such as biographies, case histories, or chronicles of individual intelligence services. What has been lacking, and what Harvard-based intelligence historian (and former English barrister) Calder Walton provides in *Spies*, is a book that ties together the histories of the major intelligence services. Walton’s contribution is a survey of the development and operations of the Russian intelligence services, and then their competition with British and US counterparts, during the past century. It is a valuable work, but not quite as authoritative as Walton may have hoped.

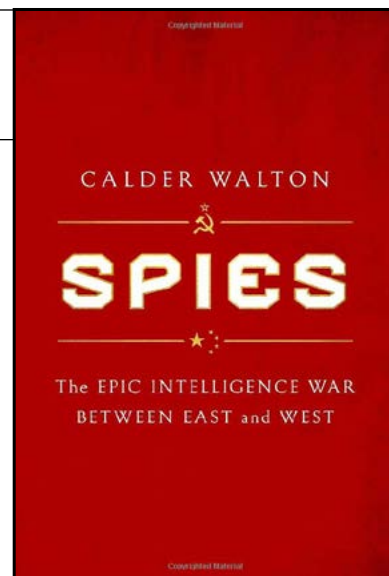
Walton’s major theme is that Western intelligence—first the British and then the Americans and British working (more or less) together—constantly had to play catch-up with Soviet and Russian intelligence. This, according to Walton, was because of deeply rooted differences in national political cultures. For the Soviets, suspicion, conspiracy, and clandestinity were fundamental to the Bolshevik and communist experiences and were integrated into the revolutionary state from its beginning. With these as their roots, the Soviet intelligence services served as instruments of repression as much as, if not more than tools, for collecting information.

Britain and the United States between the World Wars, with radically different political cultures, barely had intelligence services worth mentioning, even as the Soviets

undertook hugely successful efforts to penetrate their governments. “On the eve of World War II,” says Walton in one of his typically dry observations, “thanks to its Cambridge recruits, Soviet intelligence perversely [employed] more graduates of British universities than Britain’s own intelligence services.” Not until late in World War II did the UK and the United States realize the scope of the threat and begin to take steps against it.

By the late 1940s, however, Soviet foreign intelligence had passed its peak. It did not become clear until much later, of course, but VENONA-inspired investigations and a wave of defections led to the collapse of the Soviet spy rings. The recruits and volunteers who stepped forward during the next few decades were far fewer in number and lacked the ideological commitment of the Cambridge Five or the Rosenberg ring. Despite occasional successes, such as Geoffrey Prime, the Walkers, and Ames and Hanssen, Moscow never again enjoyed access to the inner circles of the US and UK governments and intelligence communities.

The British and Americans after World War II gradually built large espionage services of their own, but they never matched the Soviets’ achievements of the 1930s and 1940s. Still, even without large-scale or top-level penetrations, Walton notes that the United States and the UK acquired valuable assets—especially Penkovskiy and Gordievskiy—who provided critical information. The services of the two countries also proved much more capable than the Soviets of using the information they collected. Unlike the KGB, which had to tailor its reporting



a. Robert Louis Benson and Michael Warner, eds., *VENONA: Soviet Espionage and the American Response, 1939–1957* (National Security Agency, Central Intelligence Agency, 1996), <https://cia.gov/resources/csi/books-monographs/venona/>

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to official ideology and the preferences of the leadership, Western analysts were free to report what they believed. They did not always get it right, to say the least, but American and British leaders were overall much better informed than their Soviet counterparts. Walton especially credits objective reporting and analysis for enabling the US and UK policy decisions of the mid-1980s that led to the relaxation in tensions during the last years of the Cold War.

Meanwhile, and even worse for the Soviets, the British and Americans drew ever closer, especially in technical intelligence. Building on their wartime codebreaking collaboration, the two allies quickly outpaced Moscow's development of computers and satellites, building an essentially insurmountable lead in SIGINT and imagery. Because of London's declining economic and strategic position, Walton points out, much of this was financed by Washington and built with US technology, but Britain still contributed as much as it could afford to ensure that it remained a full partner.

Walton also provides a substantial account of the role of intelligence in East-West political competition in the Third World. When it comes to covert action, he does not like what he sees. The "CIA told anyone willing to listen that it could do the impossible," and politicians in Washington, as well as Moscow, came to believe that covert action could bring successes on the cheap even as the regional actors they sought to manipulate played the two sides against each other. In the end, says Walton, the results mostly "did immense damage to the governments and societies targeted." There is a good point to be made about this, but Walton tends toward oversimplification. Even in the absence of covert action, it is hard to believe that many of the countries on which it was focused—Zaire is of particular interest to Walton—would have done much better.

Returning to his main narrative, Walton chronicles the intelligence services' transitions to the post-Cold War era. Here his point is that little has changed. The USSR disintegrated, but the KGB and GRU continued their intelligence wars against the West and, since 2000, have become integral to Putin's project of avenging the Soviet collapse. The Washington and London, for their parts, assumed in the 1990s that the threat had disappeared along with communism, slashed their services, and turned many of their remaining capabilities to terrorism and

other issues. As before, it took some 20 years for London and Washington to realize the scale of Moscow's espionage, hacking, disinformation, and political interference activities. Walton concludes that the use of intelligence to destroy as much as to inform remains as deeply ingrained a feature of Russian political life as ever. Similarly, distorted reporting to the leadership continues to warp Moscow's views and actions, leading to such disastrous decisions as the invasion of Ukraine, as well as to making it impossible for Moscow to trust the West. (Walton is particularly good on the Russian maintenance of its biowarfare establishments because they could not comprehend that the United States truly was destroying its own.) Thus, Walton says, the "West needs to brace itself for a long struggle" against Russian intelligence.

Spies is an impressive and accessibly written synthesis, deeply researched and drawing on the latest releases, intelligence histories, and the growing literature on the Putin era. Walton's overall point—that Russian intelligence for a century has been a continuous, often-underestimated threat—is spot on. Readers with backgrounds in intelligence history will find that they already are familiar with much of what Walton recounts, but his addition of new details and situating of services' behavior and operations in their larger political contexts will make *Spies* worth their time. Moreover, as a history of Soviet and Russian intelligence, it updates Jonathan Haslam's *Near and Distant Neighbors* (2015) and supplements the recent operations described in Gordon Corera's *Russians Among Us* (2020) and Catherine Belton's *Putin's People* (2020). Anyone reading *Spies* along with one of these books will come away with a good understanding of the intelligence battles of the past hundred years.

That said, *Spies* has its share of errors that keep it from being the authoritative book it seeks to be. Most are of a kind common in any intelligence history, the result of reliance on open sources or the flawed memories of interviewees rather than still-classified files. Some are the minor mistakes that happen in books of this length (Yezhov did not get a show trial before his execution, and it was William Casey, not William Colby, who was DCI under Reagan). Others, however, raise questions about Walton's (or his research assistants') familiarity with the details—he mixes up the KGB's and SVR's Directorate T and Line X; Khrushchev may have been poorly educated, but he did know how to write; and the number Walton cites for Congolese killed by Belgians seems at the very

high end of scholars' estimations. The dates in Walton's account of Rick Ames's career are off by half a decade. More unfortunate, he gives Robert Baer's "Fourth Man" theory far more attention than it deserves^a and includes unnecessary speculation about former President Trump's links to Putin and Russia. The cumulative effect is to make the reader question an otherwise scholarly effort.

Walton closes on a pessimistic note. We are repeating our Russia experience with China—acting late against an underestimated intelligence threat—and he says the West remains badly behind in dealing with the threat from

Beijing's intelligence services. In addition to the obvious threats from industrial, political, and military spying, Walton believes that, as with Russia, ideology and the need to show loyalty to top leaders causes the Chinese services to provide distorted reporting. The chances of a disastrous miscalculation by Beijing, on a scale far greater than Putin's in Ukraine, are high. Given the near misses we had with nuclear disaster during the Cold War, it is a point well worth considering, and another reason to read *Spies*.



The author: John Ehrman is a retired CIA intelligence analyst who has focused on counterintelligence.

a. Robert Baer, *The Fourth Man: The Hunt for a KGB Spy at the Top of the CIA and the Rise of Putin's Russia* (Hachette Books, 2022) and Dr. Richard Rita, "Review Essay: Former Intelligence Officer Responds to 'The Fourth Man'" in *Studies in Intelligence* 67, no. 1 (March 2023) <https://cia.gov/static/3-Response-to-The-Fourth-Man.pdf>