Stalin's Agent: The Life and Death of Alexander Orlov

Review Number: 1861

Publish date: Thursday, 26 November, 2015

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ISBN: 9780199656585

Date of Publication: 2014

Price: £30.00

Pages: 832pp.

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Publisher url: <http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780199656585.do>

Place of Publication: Oxford

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Stalin's Agent is a biography of one of Stalin's illegals who was known by the alias of Alexander Orlov (1895–1973). Orlov entered the history of Soviet espionage primarily due to three reasons: First, he was credited with presiding over the shipment of 500 tons of Spanish gold reserve to Moscow in 1936, thus effectively stripping the country of her assets in exchange for limited supplies of military equipment to republican Spain. Second, in fear of being executed by his paranoid bosses, who cannibalized the Soviet secret services cadre during the 1937–9 Great Terror, Orlov brilliantly outmaneuvered Stalin's agents and defected (along with his wife and daughter) to North America. Moreover, rather than leaving empty-handed, he took \$68,000, the entire operational fund he stole from the Soviet station in Spain, in addition to \$22,800 he claimed he had 'saved'. With this nice chunk of cash (an equivalent of \$1,500,000 in present money), Orlov lived quietly, laying low until 1953. Third, that same year when the Soviet dictator died, he again played his cards right, immediately 'coming out of the closet' and making a name for himself with a bestselling book *The Secret History of Stalin's Crimes* (1953).

Orlov was born as Leiba Feldbin in a very religious Yiddish-speaking Russian Jewish family in the town of Bobruisk (present-day Western Belorussia); at the turn of the 20th century, this was a part of the so-called Jewish Pale – a 'reservation' carved by the Tsarist regime to isolate the sons and daughters of Abraham from surrounding Slavic populations. In common with thousands of his compatriots, the First World War and the 1917 Russian Revolutions pulled Orlov from the traditionalism and isolation of the Pale and threw him into the whirlwind of modern life with its dramatic social and political changes. Again, along with thousands of his diaspora compatriots facing the rising tide of local Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, and Baltic nationalisms that were frequently tinged with anti-Semitism, Orlov gravitated to the cosmopolitan message of universal liberation peddled by the early Bolshevism.⁽¹⁾ More urban and more educated than the surrounding masses of illiterate Slavic peasants, he and his compatriots took advantage of the incredible social mobility offered by the new communist regime; having phased out the old Russian-German aristocracy, the Bolshevik revolution was now preoccupied with building up its own new revolutionary elite.

Due to their numerous ethnic and family connections, diaspora multilingual people of Jewish as well as Polish and Latvian origin could freely operate in Eastern and Central Europe. As such, they were in high demand in the Bolshevik diplomatic service and foreign intelligence.⁽²⁾ A former Jewish resident of Warsaw

or Galicia could easily speak Polish, Russian, and German, in addition to his native Yiddish. Many of these early recruits into the Bolshevik secret police were educated in *heder* (Jewish elementary religious schools), had some secondary school education, or had received university training either in Europe or in Russia. It was natural that in the early Soviet regime, a large number of educated and highly motivated Jews, along with Poles and Latvians (who also had higher literacy rates than the rest of the populace of the former Russian Empire), made it up to the very top of the communist elite. It was hardly surprising that, by the end of the 1920s, four out of eight of the top chiefs of the secret police (so-called collegium) came from the former Jewish Pale; this is explained by the high educational requirements for such positions.

By joining the economic department of the Bolshevik secret police in 1924, Orlov followed in the footsteps of his cousin Zinovy Katznelson who had been hired there earlier and became chief of that department. Two years later, Orlov was moved into the so-called INO, the foreign intelligence department of the secret police, which, by the early 1930s, numbered 94 officers. To be fair, it was not only his family connections, but also his genuine revolutionary record that propelled him into the communist elite. Like many Jews who were born in the multilingual 'middle ground' of Western Russia, Orlov became indispensable to the advancing Red Army during its disastrous 1920 Polish campaign. That year, the Bolshevik regime launched a cavalier crusade, trying to spread proletarian revolution to Poland and farther westward. Yet the nationalist instinct of the Polish 'wretched of the earth' completely overrode their class solidarity, and brought them together as a nation against their Russian 'liberators,' whom they viewed as imperialists.

Under these circumstances, along with a few revolutionaries of Polish origin, the Bolsheviks had to rely on such 'cultural brokers' as Orlov, who were well familiar with local ways, but who, at the same time, were hostile to Polish nationalism, which was aggressively anti-Semitic. Orlov was responsible for the 'logistics' of the Red Army advance: sabotage and espionage behind the Polish lines. Along with his later brief stints as a lower-level secret police officer in northern Russia and an assistant criminal prosecutor, the Polish campaign became his ticket to the Bolshevik secret service. Incidentally, Walter Krivitsky [Samuel Ginsberg] (1899–1940) and Ignace Reiss [Nathan Poretsky] (1899–1937), two of Orlov's colleagues who also defected and who had a similar ethnic and social background, also jump-started their espionage careers during the Polish campaign.⁽³⁾ When in service, Feldbin changed his name to the more Russian-sounding Nikolsky, and, after a few other brief name changes when he worked undercover in Europe and the United States, he became Orlov during his last Spanish assignment.⁽⁴⁾ It was the name Orlov that he later began to use as an author, which stuck to him in espionage literature.

Volodarsky reminds us that many earlier histories of Soviet espionage in the inter-war years, including the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), depend heavily on Orlov's writings and also on Krivitsky's *I was Stalin's Agent* (1940), all of which are filled with omissions and distortions. Volodarsky's major goal is to debunk Orlov's self-serving and misleading account. For example, it is known that in order to boost his credentials in the West, Orlov falsely portrayed himself as chief of the Soviet spy station in France, as a high-positioned officer in charge of the Western European espionage network, and also as Stalin's personal envoy in Spain. Moreover, from the 1950s he arrogantly began introducing himself as 'General Orlov' – a rank that the English edition of Wikipedia still ascribes him to the present day; Volodarsky stresses that there was no such rank in the Soviet secret police in the 1930s (p. 171).

Showing no mercy to his major character, Volodarsky demonstrates that this mid-level intelligence operative (whose highest-earned rank was that of major) was a mediocre spy who experienced various blunders during his assignments in France and the UK and who, prior to Stalin's Great Terror, was reprimanded and relegated to the transportation department. While intelligence history literature credits Orlov with running the famous 'Cambridge Five' (Kim Philby and company), Volodarsky shows that this was not exactly the case. Moreover, if this inept operative, who did have a brief encounter with Philby, had stayed in London longer, the 'Cambridge Five' would probably have never materialized: during his short stay in the UK, Orlov designed a plan to make 'Sonny' (Philby's early alias) go to India to take the position of a press liaison with the Indian Civil Service. Fortunately for the Soviets, they turned this project down along with other wretched intelligence plans coming from Orlov, and quickly recalled him to Moscow, which led to his

temporary relegation to the transportation department. Later, when debriefed by the FBI, Orlov turned this professional failure into a sign of 'dissent' by claiming that this was his attempt to move away from the centre of secret police power.

Exploring Orlov's failures in London, Volodarsky simultaneously introduces new archival materials that shed more light on the activities of Arnold Deutsch, the person who actually recruited and originally ran Philby and the others. This half-forgotten Vienna-educated intellectual and Freudian Marxist of Austrian-Jewish extraction excelled in spy craft to such an extent that he became a commissioned INO officer, one of the aces of Soviet foreign intelligence. Volodarsky provides an article-sized attachment (pp. 477–91) that chronicles Deutsch's activities, from his early Vienna years as an extoller of free love and a communist activist, to his London encounters with young Philby, and, finally, to his alleged disappearance in Atlantic waters while traveling on a Soviet ship torpedoed by a German boat.

Orlov also claimed that Stalin personally put him in charge of shipping the entire Spanish gold reserve to Russia at the end of the Spanish Civil War in 1938 and consulted with him on this and other matters. In reality, Orlov was only part of the operation that included several other people. At the same time, we learn that Major Orlov indeed became a key figure during the Spanish Civil War, but in another capacity. Rather than intelligence gathering, he was supervising executions of Spanish 'Trotskyites' – the euphemism that Stalin's gang utilized to label not only a tiny group of Trotsky's supporters but also all communists who disagreed with the Soviet party line. In fact, hunting for the 'Trotskyites' became a high priority for Soviet foreign intelligence at the end of the 1930s. With other operations being sidelined, the Soviet espionage apparatus rushed to cater to the ideological paranoia of the Red dictator.

Orlov's major assignment in Spain was to eliminate the leadership of the POUM, a small Marxist group headed by Andres Nin. This former Comintern activist openly challenged the validity of Stalin's purges. Orlov developed a plan to abduct him and extract a false confession, which led to nowhere due to his resilience. Hence, Nin had to be secretly executed. To be exact, the actual job of organizing an execution squad and the murder itself were performed not by Orlov but by Joseph Grigulevich (1913–88), a professional assassin-turned anthropologist (pp. 211–3). Orlov later heavily sanitized this part of his narrative for US immigration purposes. However, detailing the history of Orlov's crimes in Spain, Volodarsky points out that the contrary statements holding Orlov responsible for 100s of assassinations of left activists are equally devoid from reality. The actual number of their victims never exceeded 20 individuals (p. 218).

As Stalin's regime was increasingly acquiring 'National Bolshevik' features and closing itself to the outside world, the paranoia about 'Trotskyites' and internationalists escalated into a xenophobic campaign against all foreign and diaspora (German, Hungarian, Jewish, Latvian, Polish, Finnish, and Greek) segments in the Soviet bureaucracy. In her memoirs, with the characteristic title *Our Own People* (1969), Elizabeth Poretsky, the wife and colleague of Reiss, who, like Orlov, made a decision to defect from Stalin's spy apparatus, vividly shows the suffocating suspicion that was gradually growing around multilingual, foreign-born, and diaspora elements in the Soviet military and secret police intelligence departments. In fact, by 1952, when 'cosmopolitan' segments were purged from all branches of Soviet intelligence, a strict informal requirement was introduced to hire neither Jews nor the foreign-born into the Soviet security services – a rule that is firmly in place to the present day.

Existing writings on Soviet intelligence and espionage history are frequently tailored as a factual 'sword and shield' narrative with occasional insights into military and diplomatic history, which is understandable considering the nature of the subject. At the same time, it might also be beneficial to pay more attention to ethnic, cultural, and social, as well as gender dimensions of intelligence and espionage history. For example, using such lenses might shed more light on choices made by particular Soviet operatives during the Great Terror. Thus it would be enlightening to compare and contrast Orlov with his colleague Theodore Maly (1894–1938), a former priest and Hungarian-born Soviet intelligence officer, who, in 1937, chose to return to Soviet Russia fully aware that he would be executed. Personally, I would like to see more biographical

research within ethnic, cultural, gender, and family contexts on how, for instance, a Jewish intellectual girl with a beautiful name, Lisa Rozensweig ('a branch of a rose'), who was born in Galicia at the Russian-Austrian 'middle ground' and who worked on her history dissertation at Vienna University, gradually evolved into an experienced and ruthless intelligence officer with a scary-sounding Russian name Elisabeth Zarubina (Zubilina) [Cutter (Chisel)] (p. 68). *Female Intelligence: Women and Espionage in the First World War* by Tammy Proctor (5) might serve as a good methodological blueprint for these types of identity studies in espionage research.

Volodarsky does point (p. 375) to some striking similarities between, for example, Grigulevich's family background and recruitment route and those of Joseph Katz, another of Stalin's illegals of a lesser caliber. Yet he simply states this fact without going any further, for instance by bringing up and exploring the backgrounds of other 'diaspora' spies. What looks surprising here might, in fact, have reflected a general cultural and ideological recruitment route traveled by such people as Orlov, Mark Zborowski, Krivitsky, Reiss, Nahum Eitingon, Grigulevich, and Rozensweig, who were lured to the internationalist vision of the early Bolsheviks – an emotional and professional choice that provided them with security, purpose, hope and fulfillment. One who is more keen to look into cultural sentiments of the Jewish, Polish, and Latvian diasporas before, during and after the 1917 revolutions would not have made the following puzzling remark regarding Grigulevich: 'despite Grigulevich's Karaite upbringing he became a communist' (p. 191).(6) On the contrary, given the virulent German, Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian nationalisms surrounding the Eastern European Jewish populace from 1900 to the 1940s, it was natural for people like Grigulevich to drift toward communism and socialism. Its vision of a future cosmopolitan 'peaceable kingdom' for all nations became a spiritual anchor for them, literally providing a new faith that would come to replace the faith of their parents and communities. In this context, as Andre Gerrits reminds us, to become a communist was not so much an act of assimilation as an act of exchanging one form of identity for another.(7) One needs to remember that Orlov came from a Yiddish-speaking family with a strong religious background. So did two other of the aforementioned famous defectors: Krivitsky and Reiss.

In fact, Volodarsky himself stresses that originally, in the 1920s, belonging to a diaspora segment was considered a good asset for Soviet intelligence and espionage work (pp. 36, 197, 343). Unfortunately, he does not explore how and why that trend changed in the 1930s, and how it might have played with 'diaspora' officers like Orlov. Incidentally, Orlov's 'neighbors' from the Razvedupr military intelligence, where the Latvian element played an important role, similarly sought to utilize ethnic 'underground railroad' channels for the purpose of espionage. Interestingly, prior to 1917, Baltic Germans played a similar role in the Russian imperial bureaucracy, including the Tsarist secret police, providing the regime with a cadre of a mobilized diaspora to act as an intermediary abroad.(8)

Volodarsky's comprehensive volume belongs to the genre of espionage biographical history, which by now has generated a number of no less enlightening texts about Stalin's illegals, who were Orlov's contemporaries, such as *The Red Orchestra* by Gilles Perrault (1989), *Deadly Illusions* by John Costello and Oleg Tsarev (1993), *A Death in Washington* by Gary Kern (2003), *Stalin's Romeo Spy* by Emil Draitser (2010), *The Lost Spy* by Andrew Meier (2009), *The Dangerous Otto Katz* by Jonathan Miles (2010), and *A Spy Among Friends* by Ben Macintyre (2014).(9) What sets Volodarsky's book apart from the aforementioned texts is that *Stalin's Agent* is not simply a story about Orlov's 'life and death'. In addition to the major character, it fills important gaps in existing research, profiling in detail the lives of dozens of other men and women who happened to be drawn into the murky world of Soviet espionage during the inter-war years and who were directly, indirectly, very loosely, or barely linked to Orlov.

Meticulously researched and based on a variety of archival records from Russian, European and American depositories, Volodarsky's book is focused on major and minor details of the inter-war Soviet spy games: dates, names, and events, with the character of Orlov either coming forward or looming somewhere in the background. Volodarsky is all over Soviet espionage history: from secret police operations against Ukrainian nationalists in the 1930s to Leopold Trepper's anti-Nazi underground Red Capella during the Second World War in the 1940s. Had I the opportunity to retitling his erudite study, instead of using the 'life and death'

publishers' cliché, I would have called it 'Stalin's Agent: Alexander Orlov and the World of Early Soviet Espionage'. This would better convey the format of this informative encyclopedia-type book, which is the most comprehensive text so far on the topic of Soviet espionage in the inter-war period.

Notes

1. Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, NJ, 2004), pp. 105–203.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See, for example, the history of the Eitingons "clan" that has been recently explored by Mary-Kay Wilmers. Spread over Western Russia, Germany, and the United States, in addition to a prominent American businessman and a German Freudian scholar, it included Nahum Eitingon, Orlov's close colleague and one of the chief spearheads of Stalin's terrorism in the West, including the 1940 assassination of Leon Trotsky. Mary-Kay Wilmers, *The Eitingons: A Twentieth Century Story* (London, 2012).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Gary Kern, *A Death in Washington: Walter G. Krivitsky and the Stalin Terror* (New York, NY, 2003), p. 18-19.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. The Bolshevik secret police espionage apparatus that Orlov joined similarly went through numerous name changes: Cheka (All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combatting Counterrevolution and Sabotage) (1917–1921), the GPU and the OGPU (State Political Directorate and Joint State Political Directorate) (1920s and the early 1930s), NKVD (People Commissariat for Internal Affairs) (1930s), MGB (Ministry of State Security) (the late 1940s to the early 1950s), and finally the KGB (Committee of the State Security) (the 1950s to 1991). Soviet foreign intelligence operations were also conducted by Razvedupr (Soviet military intelligence), a competing espionage Soviet organization, which was later known as the GRU (Chief Intelligence Directorate). Moreover, in the 1920s and occasionally in the 1930s, many intelligence operations were performed by Comintern (the Communist International) that in the beginning provided some cadre for both the Bolshevik secret police and Razvedupr.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Tammy Proctor, *Female Intelligence: Women and Espionage in the First World War* (New York, NY, 2006).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Karaites were a small and heavily traditionalist Jewish group that originated from Crimea.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. André Gerriets, *The Myth of Jewish Communism: A Historical Interpretation* (New York, NY, 2009), p. 39.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. John A. Armstrong, 'Mobilized diaspora in tsarist Russia: the case of the Baltic Germans', in *Soviet Nationality Policies and Practices*, ed. Jeremy R. Azrael (New York, NY, 1978), p. 88.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Gilles Perrault, *The Red Orchestra* (New York, NY, 1989); John Costello and Oleg Tsarev, *Deadly Illusions: The KGB Orlov Dossier Reveals Stalin's Master Spy* (New York, NY, 1993); Kern, *A Death in Washington*; Emil Draitser, *Stalin's Romeo Spy: the Remarkable Rise and Fall of the KGB's Most Daring Operative, the True Life of Dmitri Bystrolyotov* (Evanston, IL, 2010); Andrew Meier, *The Lost Spy: an American in Stalin's Secret Service* (New York, NY, 2009); Jonathan Miles, *The Dangerous Otto Katz: the Many Lives of a Soviet spy* (New York, NY, 2010); Ben Macintyre, *A Spy Among Friends: Kim Philby and the Great Betrayal* (New York, NY, 2014).[Back to \(9\)](#)

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