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# Book Review: Comrade J; The Untold Secrets Of Russia's Master Spy In America After The End Of The Cold War

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**PERSPECTIVE**

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Book Review

**Comrade J; The Untold Secrets Of Russia's Master Spy In  
America After The End Of The Cold War**

(G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York 2008)

By Pete Earley

Reviewed by Fabian Adami, ISCIP Research Fellow

In October 2000, Sergei Tretyakov, nominally First Secretary for Press Relations at the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United States, but actually a high ranking officer in Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), defected to the United States. According to an FBI source, Tretyakov "held the keys to a Russian intelligence gold mine." Comrade J constitutes both his memoir and an exposé.

Written by Washington Post journalist Pete Earley with introductions facilitated by Tretyakov's FBI and CIA handlers, the book traces Tretyakov's career in the KGB and then in the SVR. The book is divided into four parts, each addressing different periods in Tretyakov's life, and ending with an epilogue by Tretyakov himself, explaining the reasons behind his turn-around and defection.

Sergei Tretyakov's family in every sense belonged to the Russian/Soviet *nomenklatura*. His father's family descended from Russian nobility, while his maternal grandmother worked as one of Lavrenty Beria's typists and was followed into the KGB by her daughter, Tretyakov's mother. During the 1950's Tretyakov's father, having first worked in the Soviet Union's nascent atomic weapons program, was appointed Trade Representative to Iran, thus giving the family the rare privilege of being allowed to travel outside the USSR.

Tretyakov followed the standard elite route to the top from the Young Octobrists and the Pioneers, to Komsomol, and thence to party membership. After finishing high school, Tretyakov was accepted into the Moscow Institute of Foreign Languages, where he would study in the Department of Interpreters, a unit funded by the KGB. Entrance to this prestigious institution meant Tretyakov was being primed for recruitment by the intelligence agency.

Tretyakov initially was posted to the All-Union Scientific Research Institute of Systems Analysis, actually a cover name for the First Chief Directorate's (FCD) foreign newspaper library. His task in this posting was to analyze foreign newspapers and journals on a daily basis, trawling for information that could benefit the USSR. Upon completion of this, essentially probationary, assignment, Tretyakov was sent to the KGB's Red Banner Institute, where he was schooled in espionage techniques such as the servicing of dead-drops. His description of the training and education he received from the KGB is a noteworthy element of this memoir. By the time Tretyakov enrolled, drinking and even card games were forbidden, but so was an exuberance for intelligence work: "The KGB never wanted the best or the brightest students, nor did it want the dumb or lazy ones. It wanted well-balanced prospects." Nevertheless, the nepotism of the *nomenklatura* system disrupted the selection process time and time again. Tretyakov was both the beneficiary and a skeptical observer of its effects, which were evident both at the KGB schools, as well as later in the field.

At this stage in his career, Tretyakov was a self-described, utterly loyal KGB officer. Addressing the British and American moles betrayed by Aldrich Ames, he writes of their death sentences: "I had a feeling of human pity toward those who were executed, but at the same time, I sincerely thought their punishment was justified. I believed the Soviet system, despite all of its obvious drawbacks, was still the best in the world, and I couldn't understand why a patriotic citizen would turn his back on his motherland. To me, it was unimaginable."

During his time of service, Tretyakov was posted abroad twice; first to Canada, and then to the US, with a brief interval in Moscow between tours. It was during these two foreign stints that Tretyakov produced some of his best intelligence for the KGB/SVR. The recitation of recruitment techniques and intelligence collection is one of the most compelling elements of Comrade J. Tretyakov's descriptions of his work make clear that SVR personnel had informal quotas and guidelines in recruitment; on numerous occasions, Tretyakov discovered agents overstating or inventing sources and the intelligence gleaned from them. Indeed, the classification of SVR sources seems to highlight the point that "information contacts" would not even be aware that they were providing information to KGB/SVR agents.

While in Ottawa, Tretyakov claims to have recruited and run several Canadian "trusted contacts," KGB/SVR terminology for an individual known by his or her country's counterintelligence service to be meeting with KGB/SVR operatives as part of their job, but whose "covert relationship" ergo, their treason, remained concealed.

Through these contacts, codenamed Arthur, Ilya, Semion and Lazar, Tretyakov obtained vital intelligence for headquarters on a number of issues, including the problem of Ukrainian nuclear weapons after the Soviet collapse. Perhaps his biggest coup however, related to the Northwest Passage. Deep in Canadian controlled Arctic waters, the passage serves as a transit from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans.

During the later years of the Cold War, Soviet Typhoon Class SSBN's (Ballistic Missile Submarines), which carried 20 ICBMs, patrolled under the Arctic ice. The largest submarines ever built, the Typhoons would be able to launch a massive strike against the US at short notice – and with little or no warning for Washington. Moscow viewed these formidable platforms as the key to its "triad" (land-based, sea-launched, and air-launched) nuclear deterrent policy.

In 1990, just before the end of the USSR, Tretyakov was able to provide the Soviet Navy with data on Canada's new submarines (which patrolled the choke points in the

Northwest Passage), as well as with significant details about the Arctic Subsurface Surveillance System, used by the US and Canada to monitor those waters. This information would have aided significantly the Typhoon fleet's attempts to avoid detection, and as a result, their ability to launch a massive first or second strike against the US or NATO.

Tretyakov's time in the United States, beginning in April 1995, was equally productive. Tretyakov was assisted in his intelligence gathering by the fruit of a program developed by the late Soviet Communist Party General Secretary (and former KGB Chief) Yuri Andropov. Andropov's program placed several ambitious individuals in "deep cover" both within and beyond Soviet borders. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, at least one of these SVR agents rose to prominence in the newly independent post-Soviet states. Tretyakov claims that Eldar Kouliev, Azerbaijan's Ambassador to the UN had been part of Andropov's "second layer of defense" plan. During Tretyakov's stint in New York, Rashid Alimov and Alisher Vohidov, respectively the Tajik and Uzbek representatives at the United Nations allegedly were recruited as SVR agents, who provided the Kremlin with vital information about oil pipelines, the burgeoning US-Uzbek relationship, and the Clinton administration's plans against the Taliban following various Al-Qaeda attacks against US targets.

In Comrade J, Tretyakov claims that the SVR tried to cultivate Henry Kissinger as a source, and that Strobe Talbott, Deputy Secretary of State under Clinton, was viewed as an SVR source, due to his candid discussions with Georgi Mamedov, Russian Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs. Mamedov, allegedly, was an SVR officer.

Tretyakov takes pains to stress that Talbott was not an SVR agent. Strobe Talbott, whose reply to the charges is reproduced in the book, explains that during his conversations with Mamedov, they both "presumed that the other would report back to his government." Talbott's answer further emphasizes the difficulties former Soviet bloc countries faced with lustration, particularly when labels applied by an intelligence

service covered not only a large grey area, but a potentially exaggerated report from an agent.

One of the difficulties of foreign intelligence work, made evident in Tretyakov's reminiscences, is determining the value of the information received. It is always a possibility that a source, in fact, is attempting to turn the situation to glean information from or pass disinformation to the SVR. Theoretically, this is why agents simply collect information and transmit it back to headquarters for analysis. However, while Tretyakov was assigned abroad, major changes occurred at home.

Tretyakov takes great care to describe both his own personal and his family's history of patriotism. He drives home the point that whether ruled through a Soviet system or a national government, Russia was the focus of his loyalty. The traumatic events related to the collapse of the Soviet Union, but even more pointedly, the early years of the Yel'tsin regime prompted Tretyakov to question the motivations for his profession. In Comrade J, he describes seeing Yel'tsin's 1993 shelling of the Russian White House on television while in Ottawa. He concluded that "my country had never been even close to becoming a civilized, democratic society...." Russia, was "showing the world..." that it would never develop into "a country that was free of corruption and chaos." According to Tretyakov, it was as of this point, that he and his wife began private, secretive discussions about defecting.

The turn against the new Russia continued during a brief tour to Moscow between April 1994 and April 1995. Tretyakov was struck by the obvious criminality and corruption in Moscow, but even more markedly within the SVR "center" itself. Working standards at Yasenevo (SVR's Headquarters) had all but disappeared; daily inebriation by officers had become commonplace, while some 40% of the agency's senior personnel had departed for the lucrative private security sector between 1991 and 1993 alone.

It is not precisely clear at which point Tretyakov began handing information to the United States: he only hints that he waited to act until the death of his elderly and infirm mother

in Moscow, in early 1997. His stated motivation for delay was that he wanted to leave no ties when he finally defected, fearing the consequences to his family. His decision to defect was based upon the conclusion that he could no longer serve a country that was “morally unsalvageable,” and in the desire to give his daughter Ksenia a better life. As such, he executed a 180 degree-turn during his career, from being a loyal Communist and patriotic Russian, to absolute disillusionment with the country of his birth, and a new-found sense of American patriotism.

The true value of Comrade J lies not in proving that the US intelligence agencies, in spite of the betrayals of Aldrich Ames and Robert Hanssen, were still effective. Rather, it consists of the light it sheds on the nature of the Russian foreign intelligence service. As Tretyakov himself describes his primary purpose in writing the memoir, it is “to warn Americans. ... the SVR is trying to destroy the US even today....” Despite the end of the Cold War, the Russian strategic view of the United States and NATO has not changed. The United States, NATO, and China remain targets 1, 2, and 3 (respectively) for Russia’s intelligence agencies. This terminology is but a cosmetic change from the Cold War era “main adversary,” employed by Yuri Andropov, et al. The SVR, Tretyakov states, continues active disinformation campaigns and espionage efforts against the United States. Several sentences in Tretyakov’s epilogue bear reproduction: “Russia is doing everything it can today to embarrass the US. The SVR *Rezidenturas* in the US are not less, but in some aspects even more active today than during the Cold War. What should that tell you?”

The concept that the United States and NATO continue to be viewed as the “main targets,” by Russia goes some way toward understanding Russian intransigence regarding the planned US-ABM shield, as well as the Kremlin’s fierce opposition to Ukrainian and Georgian membership in NATO.

Tretyakov also provides two glimpses into the thuggish and deeply corrupt atmosphere that envelops President Vladimir Putin’s regime: First, during both the Yel’tsin and Putin Presidencies, Russia was stealing massive sums from Saddam Hussein’s UN Oil for

Food accounts, through an SVR officer infiltrated into the program. The money, alleges Tretyakov, was funneled into the pockets of individuals at the highest levels of Russian power. A not particularly talented SVR agent with powerful friends in Moscow, Aleksandr Kramar, was moved into the Commission that oversaw Saddam Hussein's sale of oil under UN auspices. Through price manipulation, Hussein and unscrupulous commission members, allegedly were able to provide substantial financial incentives to other individuals, officials, and governments. Tretyakov draws a rough sketch of both the method and effects of the Iraq Oil for Food scam, while underscoring his distaste for the greedy Russian officials who benefited from the program. Aleksandr Kramar eventually received the Russian Federation's Order of Honor from President Putin.

Finally, Tretyakov recounts an advance visit to New York in the summer of 2000 by Colonel Viktor Zolotov, President Putin's Head of Security. Tretyakov recounts a story told to him by the deputy head of Putin's security force (FSO) about Zolotov and another close associate, General Murov. The two "Men in Black" discussed the need to assassinate Putin's enemies. At the end of the discussion, when a list of specific individuals had been drawn up, Zolotov allegedly argued; "There are too many. It's too many to kill – even for us."

When Tretyakov eventually meets Zolotov in advance of Putin's visit, one of their dinners at a Brighton Beach café ends with Zolotov knocking Tretyakov out cold in a mindless display of machismo. It serves as a fitting metaphor for the brutality and greed that drove Tretyakov from Russia's special services.

Sergei Tretyakov may well be "by far the most important Russian spy" the US has encountered. If so, the intelligence he provided likely is too current for publication. In that sense, Tretyakov's book may be less fascinating to those seeking in-depth analysis of Cold War espionage, than other volumes such as [The Mitrokhin Archive](#) or [Spy Handler](#). *Comrade J* reveals less about the intelligence Tretyakov gathered than about his own, rather healthy, ego.

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