

Artificial Intelligence

A entertaining account of life inside the KGB shows how large intelligence bureaucracies—East and West—spend more time producing pointless memos than useful information

BY DAVID CORN

Washington Station: My Life as a KGB Spy in America
Yuri Shvets, *Simon and Schuster, \$23*

The portrait is of a spy service packed with bureaucratic boobs worrying more about turf than espionage, tailoring intelligence to fit the political biases of superiors, overlooking failures, and deceiving themselves about what they dare term successes. The Central Intelligence Agency? No, this is the dreaded KGB, courtesy of one of its own.

In the mid-eighties, Yuri Shvets was a junior case officer in the KGB's station in Washington. He fled the service in 1990, disillusioned, he claims, with the incompetence of practically all around him and upset that his KGB had been a drag on Gorbachev's *perestroika* campaign. After he resigned, Shvets gave an interview to *The Washington Post* and soon procured a lucrative book contract from Simon and Schuster. The result is this tell-all memoir of life in the KGB that is fascinating and entertaining, but hardly credible.

This book is difficult to evaluate, because its trenchant events rest upon the word of a former intelligence officer trained in duplicity and whose accuracy on key points is weak. Still, Shvets offers a useful message: Large intelligence bureaucracies are bound to fail; they simply cannot practice the difficult craft of espionage without botching the job more often than not. Ultimately, the true accomplishment of *Washington Station* is that it supports Shvets's case—albeit unwitting-

ly—through its own faults.

Shvets arrived in Washington in 1985, posing as a reporter for Tass, the official Soviet news agency. His real job was to recruit Americans as spies. Before leaving for the States, he was advised by a fellow trainee in Moscow that "Nobody needs your undercover agents. An operative's career is shaped exclusively by his relationship to his superiors. You'd be better off thinking how to suck up to your boss." But not our hero. Shvets realized that his KGB—far from that ubiquitous and cunning institution portrayed in the Western media—was mostly a gigantic paper mill, churning out millions of reports of no practical value. Shvets resolved to be different from his comrades, to show initiative. That meant bagging an American agent—even if, as he himself puts it, he had as much chance as "an airline pilot had of flying to the moon."

Shvets thinks he hit the jackpot in an operative he calls "Socrates." The story of how Shvets recruited and used Socrates makes up the heart of his memoir. But while aiming to blow the lid off a sensational story, Shvets declines to name this super-agent, and that is a fundamental weakness of the book. The manner in which Shvets explains the missing piece raises questions about his reliability. In the epilogue, he claims that he chose not to use Socrates' name because Socrates did not respond to questions Shvets had sent him while he was writing the book. Privately, Shvets has told people that he wanted to identify Socrates but that Simon and

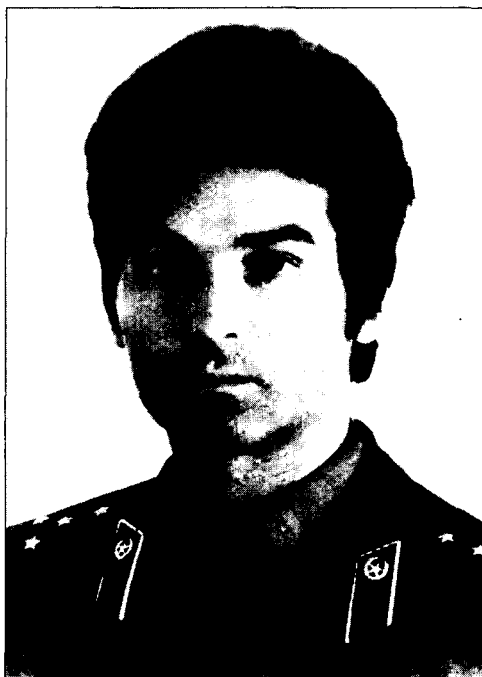
David Corn, Washington editor of The Nation, is author of the recently published Blond Ghost: Ted Shackley and the CIA's Crusades.

Schuster would not permit him, fearing a lawsuit. A representative of Simon and Schuster simply says, "We haven't [named Socrates] because we're unable to verify things Yuri says, not that we doubt him. . . . As a measure of prudence, we decided not to use his name." (As this is being written, Shvets has promised at least one network news show that he will identify Socrates during a televised interview.) By not identifying him in the text, Shvets is free to write what he wants of Socrates, for Socrates certainly is not going to come forward, proclaim himself as Moscow's man in Washington, and then deny specifics of Shvets's account.

Shvets characterizes Socrates as a "White House advisor" during the Carter years, who in the mid-eighties was a consultant of some sort who detested the hard-line foreign policy of the Reagan administration. Socrates was delighted to have an audience for his political views. At their first meeting, according to Shvets, Socrates "began initiating me into the secrets of a Washington political insider. He poured out names, positions, quotations, gossip, and rumor. Listening to him, I felt now in the State Department, now in Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Perle's presence, now in Senator Jesse Helms's office, now in President Reagan's bedroom. The roller-coaster trip took my breath away."

That Socrates could provide such a trip is a joke to those who have known him. I have spoken to people familiar with the person who Shvets says is Socrates. (I won't name him, as long as Shvets won't.) He had been a low-level functionary in the Office of Management and Budget in the Carter administration. He then flitted about town, as something of a journalist (he helped his wife with her articles) and a namedropper with a touch of paranoia, one of those familiar Washington characters who knows a little but talks a lot. He had a certain rough charm and proclaimed himself to be an intelligence expert, without producing proof of his

expertise. He was always ready with a conspiracy theory and insisted on being called "doctor," in deference to a Ph.D. he apparently had collected. But he was in no position to obtain routinely classified information. To consider Socrates and his wife insiders and prime sources of strategic information about the Reagan administration is absurd. But Shvets does not see that. In the land of the blind, the one-eyed spy is king.



The KGB's Finest: Yuri Shvets

I recently asked the real-life Socrates, who now resides in Moscow, to characterize his interactions with Shvets. He declined to answer in detail, noting it is unfair for him to be forced to respond to a charge that Shvets does not make publicly. He has a point. But he does assert, "I'm not Socrates. What Shvets has invented is not me." The real-life Socrates suggests that Shvets's Socrates is a composite character, left over from an unpublished novel Shvets had written. Shvets and Socrates—both men with healthy egos and penchants for claiming to know more than they probably do—had some relationship. My hunch: The information

Socrates supplied to Shvets—if he did supply—was his reading of the newspapers, plus a dash of Washington gossip. Shvets and Socrates were a perfect match: an eager-beaver who knew little of Washington and needed a source, and a self-important, on-the-outs mixer who surely appreciated an acolyte.

The serious problems with Shvets's account are evident in his telling of the first big coup he obtained with the assistance of Socrates. In August of 1986, Socrates, who supposedly had agreed to sell information to Shvets (still posing as a Tass man), approached Shvets with dynamite material not yet publicly known: The Reagan administration had diverted to the contras proceeds from the Iran arms sales, and the CIA, while aiding the contras, had helped the Medellin cartel. Socrates named his source: the International Center for Development

Policy. One of its employees, a past CIA officer in Central America, had drafted a report.

Imagine how Gorbachev could use such information in the coming summit with Reagan. Shvets needed that report. The next day—this is a wonderfully melodramatic and ludicrous scene—he conducted an elaborate trek through Washington to lose any FBI agents, donned a disguise, and visited the Center, where he encountered a receptionist behind a glass partition (“probably bulletproof”). A Center official handed over the report, confiding that no one outside the organization was aware of it and that the document had been written by an ex-CIA man with direct access to the source material.

Back at the station, Shvets discovered the paper contained no irrefutable proof of a CIA-cocaine connection. Nevertheless, the KGB residency fired off a cable to Moscow summarizing the report and Socrates’ revelations about Iran-contra. A reply came from HQ: Watch how we use this information. Days later, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua shot down a contra supply plane and exposed Oliver North’s covert network, Shvets maintains this was a direct result of his toils.

The story could not have happened as Shvets claimed. Socrates certainly could have known what was in the media about Reagan’s aid to the contras. However, the Iran arms deal was not revealed until months later. If Socrates had known of the arms for hostage scheme, his wife, a journalist, would have reported it. And if he had told Shvets, Shvets would have had a real intelligence coup and would have trumpeted this in his cable to Moscow. But Shvets didn’t, he now says he focused on the diversion, which he could not have known about at that time. The report touted by Shvets was a public document written by a former CIA analyst in Washington who merely had compiled incomplete information that had seeped into the media about the covert contra operation (not the diversion). The Center was distributing the paper to whomever would take it. (By the way, the glass in its reception area is not bulletproof.) It is ridiculous for Shvets to suggest that on the basis of his report, the Sandinistas blasted a plane and revealed the White House’s secret contra program. There happened to be a war occurring then, and the Sandinistas did not need tips from their Moscow friends—especially a lead based on American media reports—to realize there were aircraft to shoot.

This hints at a classic intelligence practice: inflate

the significance of an agent, claim your intelligence is more valuable than it is, brag that it made a difference in the grand scheme of history. *Washington Station* advertises the dilemmas inherent in the new I-was-a-KGB-spy literary genre. A former Russian intelligence officer can charge anything—for instance, that notable American scientists handed the secrets of the atomic bomb to the Commies—and claim as proof “I was there” or “I heard it from somebody” or “I saw the document.” Referring to one small mystery he encountered as a KGB spook, Shvets writes, “‘You never know’—these three words would be an appropriate epigraph to a truthful book about an intelligence service.” So true for his own work. Mostly truth? Mostly make-believe? Mostly exaggeration? Mostly disinformation? You never know.

Assuming he is not an utter fabricator, Shvets is good in sketching the details—silly and serious—of the intelligence craft: shaking tails, recruiting agents, running dead drops. He reports that when the KGB tried to mount active measures—disinformation and propaganda—it often did so with such a heavy hand as to be ineffective. His is not a KGB to be feared, nor one capable of mounting far-flung conspiracies in the United States, as right-wingers here have claimed. Shvets’s large themes follow much of what we know about our own spies. Bureaucratic caution and bumbling rule. Officers transform their open contacts with prominent Americans into secret intelligence reports. “Any bureaucracy is inherently flawed,” Shvets observes. “The bureaucracy in an intelligence service is probably worse because it is surrounded by a thick wall of secrecy, and it rots behind this wall. . . . The cost of [the KGB’s and CIA’s] failures dramatically exceeds their questionable effectiveness.” His bottom line: “shut down the so-called human intelligence” operations of both services.

Shvets’s self-serving book—if only partially true—is strong evidence for this proposition. Skeptic that he was about all that transpired around him, he still could not perceive the inanity of his own Socrates operation. It is no great surprise that any service that considered Socrates hot stuff (or one that would promote Aldrich Ames to a sensitive post) would miss the fall of the Communist world.

Both sides failed to catch it, and for similar reasons. The intellicrats of the KGB and the CIA should fear confessions such as this one, for it shows that they need each other more than their own nations need them. □

Memo of the Month



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Farmers
Home
Administration

Washington
D.C.
20250

FmHA AN No. 3032 (1943-A)
June 24, 1994

SUBJECT: Policy on Identifying Socially Disadvantaged
Applicants (SDAs)

TO: State Directors, District Directors, and County
Supervisors, FmHA

ATTN: Farmer Programs Chiefs

PURPOSE/INTENDED OUTCOME:

The purpose of this Administration Notice (AN) is to provide guidance to clarify FmHA's policy on identifying socially disadvantaged applicants (SDAs). The intent of this AN is to assure that SDA target assistance is provided only to eligible ethnic minorities and women in accordance with current regulations.

COMPARISON WITH PREVIOUS AN:

No previous AN has been issued on this subject.

IMPLEMENTATION RESPONSIBILITIES:

In general, FmHA policy is to accept the race/national origin designation claimed by an applicant or borrower on an application.

However, male individuals who have identified themselves as white on previous application(s), and wish to participate in FmHA's SDA Farmers Program as American Indians or members of other minority groups, should provide adequate information to prove their ancestry to the County Supervisor.

Any questions concerning this policy should be referred to Wilbert Campbell Jr., Director, Emergency Designation Staff at (703) 305-2077.

MICHAEL V. DUNN
Administrator