Many Americans are no doubt well aware of Russian spycraft, having been entertained for years by movies and television on the subject. In particular, Ian Fleming’s James Bond movies, which have enjoyed immense worldwide popularity over several decades, have helped to paint the picture of the secretive, paranoid regime that is the former Soviet Union. Just how many have truly gone beyond the fantasy and studied the intentions and motivations of this communist nation and tried to understand how it operated? The truth may be every bit as incredible as the fiction.

In Serhii Plokhy’s 2016 book, *The Man with the Poison Gun: A Cold War Spy Story* (the title certainly influenced by Fleming’s *The Man with the Golden Gun*), readers are able to put themselves in the position of a Russian intelligence operative tasked with murder, stalking a high-value target and preparing physically and mentally to “pass greetings,” in KGB parlance, to the intended victim. A true story, Plokhy spins an entertaining tale filled with characters within the Soviet spy apparatus, dedicated KGB employees who help fuel the system and keep it going. Much tradecraft is revealed, and one very quickly comes to the realization that the Soviets are experts at this, their skills honed by decades of experience. Readers are introduced to the inner workings of this organization, the methods of these individuals with unlimited authority and influence, all approved by the highest rungs of Soviet power: Stalin, then Khrushchev. The extent of the Soviets’ desire to crush resistance and rebellion through any means necessary—fear, manipulation, blackmail, and more serious avenues, including murder—are on full display. In addition, the “opposition” is equally represented. The Ukrainian resistance was alive and well during the Cold War, with a significant number of Ukrainian citizens willing to organize, revolt, and, if necessary, fight for independence from Russian rule.

The story begins the conversion of nineteen-year-old Bogdan Stashinsky, associated, through his siblings mostly, with the Ukrainian nationalist movement. Eager to solve the murder of a Soviet
propagandist, the local secret police blackmail the young man into working as an informant. It is fascinating to read how the agents use his desire for a college education against him, and the increasing pressure that is placed upon him to capitulate. Without much choice in the matter, he has no option but to perform his mission. He successfully infiltrates the nationalists, gains their trust, and provides the needed information to his handlers. In doing so, he betrays those close to him, is rejected by his family, and soon realizes that there is no turning back. Surprisingly, over the next ten years, he experiences much success in his new world, carrying out two high-profile murders and making a name for himself in the KGB. Eventually, he marries, and as his conscience takes over and fills him with regret, he makes a daring escape from Russia to the CIA in Berlin, who promptly turn him over to West German authorities. He is put on trial, with his admissions in court having international repercussions. If Stashinsky is to be believed, the world receives a glimpse of the corrupt tactics of the Soviet Union, a state apparently more than willing to carry out political assassination. Consequently, the Soviets suffer a significant hit to their credibility and see their image abroad tarnished.

Found guilty but given a short prison sentence, it is equally interesting to learn where Stashinsky ends up. Without giving away many details, a good bit of research was required by the author to track down various leads. Stashinsky’s experience as a KGB operative is highly sought-after, and he apparently ends up in other countries, under protection, advising his new hosts on various intelligence activities.

Plokhy winds up his book with a look at the current situation. He suggests that though the Cold War is over, perhaps little has changed—in particular, the logic used to justify assassination as a “legitimate tool of government policy”—and he references many current examples to include those carried out by the United States. *The Man with the Poison Gun* gives readers an exciting spy story, but successfully applies it to today’s national security environment.
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