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Spy High: The Secret of Secret Russian Agents

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Title: Spy High: The Secret of Secret Russian Agents

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Abstract: The author discusses Russian spying the United States, the psychology of espionage, and how spying as such may be part of the human condition.

They were living among us. They were just like us. They were us, or so we thought. 11 or so people living under false pretenses. Rolled up by the FBI, even if one or more are still on the lam as of this writing. Red-blooded spies, even if the red of the international Communist conspiracy has faded in the brave new world of Islamic fascists, cyberwarriors, the rise of a post-Maoist China, a proliferation of telecommunications-mediated global villages, and their enablers.

But why the spy high? Public charges for all the spies include conspiring to act as unregistered agents of a foreign country. For most of them there's the additional conspiring to commit money laundering. None have been publicly charged with espionage. There have been no intimations of purloined secret formulas; stolen doomsday machines; passed on classified technical parameters of surveillance and reconnaissance devices; reception and employment of special training as saboteurs, sappers, and seducers; or absconding with Helen, wife of King Menelaus. Instead, there are only suggestions of orders to socially encounter significant others—not so much the romantic kind, but the political, social, and cultural—and share their subjectivisms on thoughts, feelings, motives, and behaviors. Moreover, the FBI seems to have kept these people under scrutiny for years before the arrests.

Besides taking umbrage at not being viewed as a significant enough to be approached by at least one of these spies, one might wonder why the taskings could not have been better accomplished online and through viewing and even participating in cable television shows. Is the other shoe about to drop, or should one continue to wonder whether the spies were just part of an illegals program more vestigial than functional, more boondoggle than bane for US security.

So while the story is still reaping its 15 minutes of fame, let's review the psychology of espionage. It is often tempting to clearly demarcate two different groupings of spies. The first encompasses people who violate trust by working against the interests of their country, their religion, or some other entity towards which they have pledged loyalty. Let's call them those who violate basic trust. The second encompasses those who at least seem to demonstrate their trustworthiness by working against the adversaries, neutrals, and even allies of their country, religion, or other entity to which loyalty has been pledged. Let's call them those who violate secondary trust.

The common motives for the first grouping are often viewed negatively by those who are being hurt and, as well, those who are impelling spies to engage in hurt. (To this latter observation, one should note that even the beneficiary of spying usually views the violator of basic trust with some suspicion and as unusual and unnatural, so that trust from the beneficiary is highly unlikely.) These common motives include money, ideology, compensating for feelings of inferiority, retribution for real and imagined mistreatment, threat of blackmail, a lifestyle choice, resolution of intrapsychic conflict, and stress reduction at interludes of high stress and vulnerability. More sophisticated researchers will combine a number of these motives—usually with some socio-psychological trigger mechanism as a special event

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within a long-term narrative in which the soon-to-be-violator of basic trust is the main character. The spy as main character may be part of tragedy, romance, epic, satire, or other narrative form. That is, the spy—with differing degrees of awareness and control—simultaneously is writing, directing, producing, and acting in a poem, novella, novel, play, or film.

The key personnel security goals based on this psychology are to help create, maintain, and otherwise influence motives and narrative so that violations of basic trust are less likely and incipient violations are more quickly identified. Given that many people continually vary as to the basic parameters of psychological functioning, these goals are very difficult to achieve. The same is the case because information about a person may vary in meaning through time, at the same time for different analysts, at different times for the same analyst, and at all times for the spy or spy-to-be.

Now, the common motives for the second grouping of spies—those violating secondary trust—have often been viewed positively. (This view can be attested to by the continued success of the James Bond franchise and its countless imitators. This view, however, has suffered during times of irony, cynicism, and detachment from a logos and center on and from which belief systems are developed. Shapers of social knowledge like the Greek Sophists and the American interpreters of French Postmodernism are examples of contributors to such times yielding cultural products such as the Cold War works of John le Carré.) Yet, these common motives may be little different than those of violators of basic trust. It is because of this that the internal threat to a country, religion, or other entity is an unfortunate but necessary problem. It is because of this that not only is one man's spy another man's freedom fighter, but also that the very acts necessary for optimal spying violating basic trust are at times rightly viewed as spying violating secondary trust. And so some analysts allege that James Jesus Angleton's counterintelligence efforts within the Central Intelligence Agency hurt not helped—intentionally or not—United States intelligence efforts against the Soviet Union and its allies.

Back to the spy high and Russian agents lately in the news. Yes, they may not come close to the spying on the silver screen or ongoing beyond the awareness of the mass media. But their motives may be no different than these exemplars. And the newsworthiness of the story bears on something else in plain sight but often rendered as a secret. So much for distinctions between self and other. The motives are no different than those of all people in their everyday lives. Adding false pretenses as a means to further motive and in their apparent ineffectuality, the Russian spies are us.

(References. Shaw, E.D., Ruby, K. G., & Post, J. M. The insider threat to information systems. <http://www.pol-psych.com/sab.pdf>; Two more spy suspects admit they are Russian. (July 2, 2010). cbsnews.com; Herbig, K. (2008). The changing face of espionage in America: 1947-2007. Defense Personnel Security Center, Technical Report 08-05.)

(Comments may be sent to bloomr@erau.edu).

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