

STALIN'S ROMEO SPY

THE REMARKABLE RISE
AND FALL OF THE KGB'S
MOST DARING OPERATIVE

THE TRUE LIFE OF DMITRI BYSTROLYOTOV

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Foreword by Gary Kern



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PROLOGUE | Tea with a Master Spy

The most daring Russian spy ever to operate in the West . . . He stole British secrets for the Soviets years before Kim Philby . . . A doctor of medicine and doctor of law who learned from American gangsters how to shoot through his coat pocket . . . A "sexspionage" ace, an aristocrat by upbringing, an illegitimate offspring of Tolstoy's line . . . The shining star of Soviet intelligence who eclipsed Richard Sorge and Rudolf Abel . . . A talented painter, novelist, screenwriter, and memoirist . . . A polyglot with twenty languages at his disposal, including Flemish, Turkish, Chinese, Japanese, and some African dialects . . . A victim of Stalin's purges who served sixteen years in Siberian camps and lived to take revenge on his torturers.

I would read these sensational words about my protagonist in Russian papers three decades after I met him. But on that day, September 11, 1973, on my way to his tiny Moscow apartment on Vernadsky Prospect, I knew nothing about him. Not even his name . . .

A few days before, my father-in-law, a tailor working in a shop for the Ministry of Defense, called me with some news. One of his customers, while trying on his suit and talking about this and that, had learned about me and my profession. He took an interest and asked my father-in-law to give me his phone number.

I wasn't surprised. It often happened that people hoping to win a fight with a Soviet bureaucrat would seek the help of the press. Under my pen name, Emil Abramov, I had published articles and stories in *Izvestia* (*The News*), *Literaturnaya gazeta* (*Literary Gazette*), *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* (*Komsomol Truth*), *Trud* (*Labor*), and other newspapers and journals, as well as in the satirical journal *Krokodil* (*Crocodile*), so all sorts of people contacted me from time to time.

I called. In a light baritone, my father-in-law's customer asked me to come and see him at home. He gave me no reason. This, too, was not unusual in Moscow. I went to the meeting wondering what a man

who had his suits made at the Ministry of Defense tailor's shop could possibly want from me. After all, you couldn't criticize that ministry in print.

A tall, broad-shouldered man in his early seventies, a bit stooped, with blue eyes, the well-groomed gray beard of an academician, and boyish dimples, greeted me at the door. I entered, and while helping me off with my raincoat he introduced himself: "Bystrolyotov. Dmitri Aleksandrovich."

Bystrolyotov . . . What an unusual name! The son of a fast flier—that's what it meant in Russian. I looked at the old man again. Despite his age and the somewhat uncertain motion of his limbs, he was sprightly and had sparkling eyes. He might have been a fast-flying man in his younger years.

Meanwhile, trying not to offend his guest by showing mistrust, my host smiled pleasantly and asked, "I assume you have a press card on you?"

I showed him my membership card from the Union of Soviet Journalists. "Will this do?"

Still smiling, he nevertheless carefully examined it before nodding. "Good enough. Would you care for some tea?"

He sat me down at the table in his living room, which was no more than fifteen by fifteen feet. There was enough space for a cupboard of polished wood, a few bookshelves, and a table.

He resembled one of Moscow's many cultured retirees who frequent libraries and concert halls. I couldn't figure out anything more about him. Yet something about him was mysterious. Perhaps his dignified and pleasant demeanor struck me as unusual for an ordinary Soviet citizen.

We began drinking tea Moscow-style—the tea leaves brewed for a while in a small porcelain teapot and poured into glasses in tin holders, with small dishes of strawberry jam alongside. My host's hands shook slightly when he raised his glass, but there were no other signs of aging. His mind was clear and agile. He told me the reason for his invitation. He was looking for someone to assist him in writing his life story.

The rest of the evening I spent listening to him.¹

In a slightly rasping voice he recounted that back in 1919, during the Russian civil war when he was a sailor, he had been approached

and recruited by the Cheka, the first incarnation of the Soviet Secret Police and a predecessor of the current FSB. At first he was sent to Europe as a sleeper with nothing more to do than familiarize himself with the territory. Then, in the mid-1920s, he was activated to do intelligence work. Like all beginners, he made mistakes but got better with time. He operated in many European countries: England, France, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, and others.

His specialty was the recruitment of agents who had access to diplomatic codes and ciphers, and his *modus operandi* involved women. "I was young, good looking, knew several European languages. And I knew how to treat a lady," he added with a smile. Once he recruited a French diplomat, once a German countess, another time a Gestapo officer—all women.

"Once I received an order that came straight from Stalin: find a short man with a red nose in Paris. A short man with a red nose . . . That's all I knew about him. Nevertheless, I found him. By sheer logic."

Later Bystrolyotov successfully carried out a similar task involving the British Foreign Office. At a time when Hitler was just beginning to build the Nazi war machine, my host stole many German military secrets for the Soviet state. In the course of his work, he crossed European borders hundreds of times. A British lord, a Hungarian count, a Greek merchant—these were a few of his many disguises. His assignments took him not only to European countries but also to Brazil and the United States.

On one of his missions, he told me, he twice crossed the "gray hell" of the Sahara and the jungles of the French and Belgian Congos. In 1935, he had been sent to Africa to see whether French Foreign Minister Louis Barthou, who sympathized with the Soviet Union, could deliver on his promise, in the event of a German invasion, to bring over several hundred thousand African mercenaries.

"It was dark in the forest," he recalled, shaking his head. "Only here and there rays of sunlight would break through. Suddenly a vine would drop on your head, and you'd think it was a snake," he laughed. "Little crocodiles the length of your arm in the grass. Leeches dropping on you from the trees and sucking into your flesh."

Then he told me how his career ended. His successes in foreign intelligence didn't save him from trouble. At the height of Stalin's

purges, when he returned to Moscow, he was arrested and accused of working for the enemy. In Soviet practice, the way to prove an accusation was to extract a confession, and the way to extract a confession, especially for crimes one hadn't committed, was to apply torture. "Well, young man," Bystrolyotov said, "take it from me. They make everybody talk. Some talk early, others later. But everybody eventually talks."

He was sentenced to twenty-five years: twenty years of hard labor in Siberia and five years of exile inside Russia. Thus he entered the Gulag, the vast complex of Soviet prisons and labor camps, and he served nearly all of his term—sixteen years. His arrest and conviction ruined his family and his health.

By the time of our meeting, in the fall of 1973, I knew quite a bit about the Soviet camps. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* had been published in Moscow, and Radio Liberty had broadcast chapters of his *Gulag Archipelago* by shortwave into the Soviet Union. A few other stories by former camp prisoners had appeared in the state press and also in private editions, called *samizdat* (self-publishing). But all that had happened back in the liberal 1960s, and now in the reactionary 1970s such literature was forbidden. All the more exciting, therefore, was the fact that for the first time in my life I was sitting across the table from someone who had lived through the horrors of the Gulag.

Meanwhile, sipping his tea, my host turned his gaze to the present. Despite the tremendous injustice done to him by the KGB, he had managed to patch up the relationship to some degree. His small apartment was arranged for him after the agency intervened with the Moscow housing authorities on his behalf, and from time to time they invited him to come to the KGB school to pass on his experience to the cadets. He pointed to an honorary plaque on the wall, given to him on the occasion of the agency's anniversary.

But there was disappointment, even resentment, in his voice when he mentioned all these ego-gratifying little things. "Why," he asked several times in the course of the evening, "why did they give Manevich the award of Hero of the Soviet Union? He didn't achieve too much. The only good thing he ever did was not give away our agents and network when they caught him in Spain and tortured him. That's all."²

Bystrolyotov was also upset about the way the profession of espionage was trivialized in the Soviet media. A month before our meeting, a TV miniseries titled *Semnadtsat' mgnovenii vesny* (*Seventeen Moments of Spring*) had begun running. It presented a fictional version of the Soviet intelligence effort behind the German lines during World War II. It was an instant hit, and its star, a handsome Russian actor named Vyacheslav Tikhonov, became a household name. He played the part of a Soviet spy disguised as a Wehrmacht officer.

My host had nothing but ridicule for the show. To him it was full of clichés and far-fetched assumptions about intelligence work. And it glossed over the harsh realities.

"In real life," he said, "there's no need to penetrate the upper echelons of the enemy structure to gather simple information. Butlers, secretaries, housekeepers know as much about certain things as their employers." He took Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS and the Gestapo, as an example. "To confirm a rumor that Himmler was planning to go to Zurich for some negotiations," he said, "it would be enough to get to know his driver. You treat him to a fine cigarette. Ask him how things are going. People love to complain. Most likely the driver will tell you with a sigh that in a day or two he'll have to get up early, at the crack of dawn, to take his boss somewhere. Where? To a remote Berlin airport. And we know that from that airdrome they usually fly to Switzerland."

Bystrolyotov went on disparaging the TV serial. Referring to the romance between two Soviet intelligence officers working undercover deep in German territory, he sneered: "What nonsense! The radio operator gets pregnant and delivers a healthy baby! Such things couldn't take place in real life. If an intelligence worker got pregnant, she had no option. They ordered her to get an abortion right away. End of discussion."

Then he talked about his futile attempts to publish his memoirs, which were self-censored and watered-down, as I learned years later. He began to make fun of an editor of *Oktiabr'* (*October*), a well-known literary quarterly, and I caught a glimpse of his superb acting skills and sense of humor.

"He says to me, 'Here you write: *I drew my pistol . . .* You can't write that. A Soviet intelligence officer acts only in a humane way . . . Then

you write: *I pulled out a roll of bills . . . Our intelligence officer doesn't bribe anyone . . . I introduced the SS officer to a girl?* How horrible! Our intelligence officer would never do that. He operates by Marxist-Leninist persuasion alone."

When our meeting ended, I assumed that we would meet again. I went home and wrote down in my notebook as much as I could of our conversation. Considering the times—the Brezhnev regime was still going strong—I didn't dare transcribe the most sensitive parts of Bystrolyotov's story. In fact, I wrote his name down in pencil, in case I'd have to erase it . . .

I never heard from Bystrolyotov again. In October of the following year, I left Russia.

Since then, at various times over the years, I have recalled that unusual meeting. Bystrolyotov became fixed in my mind as the most remarkable man I had ever met. I thought of my notes and planned to do something, but my literary interests took me elsewhere. I wrote short stories and books on Russian folklore; I taught Russian literature and prepared a textbook of modern Russian poetry. Bystrolyotov's story began to fade from my memory.

Then, in the summer of 2002, on a trip to California, I visited an old friend, Gary Kern. At the time he was finishing a book on Walter Krivitsky, another pre-World War II Soviet spy, and as he told me about it, I thought I would mention my meeting with a Russian intelligence officer. "What's his name?" Kern asked. "Bystrolyotov," I replied. "What!" He nearly jumped out of his seat. Bystrolyotov, he told me, was legendary, one of the "Great Illegals." We spent the rest of the evening talking about him.

Returning back home to New York, I went through my files and pulled out a brown tattered notebook with my account of the spy I had met at the end of my former Soviet life. After rereading the notes, I decided to track down the facts in his case. Bystrolyotov, I discovered, was long dead. He had died of a heart attack in 1975, less than two years after our meeting.

Fifteen years later, during the period of Gorbachev's *glasnost*' (openness), his name was made public in Russia. First an article in *Pravda* paid tribute to his exploits, then other periodicals told various parts of his story.³

In the West, some of his most successful operations were known, but the person behind them was shrouded in mystery. Thus a 1986 book by William Corson and Robert Crowley, *The New KGB: Engine of Soviet Power*, attributes one of the most spectacular achievements in Soviet espionage—handling and controlling a British Foreign Office clerk in charge of codes and ciphers—to a Soviet agent whose code name, like Bystrolyotov’s, was HANS, but whose background was quite different.⁴

As in Russia, the name Bystrolyotov did not surface in Western accounts of KGB operations until the 1990s, and then only in books coauthored by ex-KGB officers who had access to his file. None of these accounts, however, whether published inside or outside Russia, tells the full story of his life. As I read them, I became increasingly intrigued. For me the man was not just a historical figure, but a real person I had met back in my Soviet days. I dug deeper, trying to find out more. I read his memoirs, *Puteshestvie na kraj nochi* (*Journey to the Edge of Night*), published in Russian in 1996.

Actually, this book, devoted to his years in the Gulag, represented only a small portion of his memoirs. It bore a preface by S. S. Milashov, who informed readers that Bystrolyotov had entrusted his papers to him. Here, I thought, was a lead.⁵

But how do you go about finding a person in Moscow with only his surname and first and middle initials? Well, I still had some old friends in the city, so I placed an overseas call to one named Boris and asked him for help. He explained that there was still no residential telephone book in Moscow, just as in the old days. And, just as before, if you didn’t know a person’s date of birth, you couldn’t find him through the city’s Information Bureau. Such was the Soviet system. Boris also doubted that the publisher of Bystrolyotov’s book would be willing to reveal the whereabouts of the man who wrote the preface.

Turning to the Internet, I went to the search engine Yandex, the Russian equivalent of Google, and one by one rounded up twenty-two entries for the name “Milashov.” Then I eliminated them one by one until I finally came to Sergei Sergeevich Milashov, Bystrolyotov’s grandson, or rather stepgrandson. Milashov was related to Bystrolyotov’s second wife, whom he met and married in the camps.

Contacting him by phone, I told him about my connection to Bystrolyotov and asked for assistance in my research. By now, I felt

committed to it, without really knowing why. Milashov confirmed that he was the guardian of his stepgrandfather's literary and personal archives and offered me his full cooperation. I could come to Moscow, he said, and get acquainted with Bystrolyotov's papers firsthand. He even offered to put me up in his apartment, although I declined. What a stroke of luck! How could I refuse?

It was hot and humid in Moscow in July 2003. Still jet-lagged, I called Milashov, and he came straight over to my hotel. A tall and agile man, an engineer by training, he complimented my spoken Russian, preserved in emigration over so many years. We struck up an immediate friendship and then went to his apartment.

There he sat me down and placed in front of me a pile of Bystrolyotov's papers. The first thing I discovered was a worn-out pocket-size address book. With a thrill, I turned to the first page and saw an entry under the letter *A*: "Journalist Emil Abramov (Draitser)." My old Moscow telephone numbers, both for work and for home, followed. My past Russian life, left behind so many years ago, came back to me in a flash. My curious meeting with the address book owner arose even more vividly before me.

Thereafter, I took the train every day to Solntsevo, the Moscow suburb where Milashov lived, to work my way through the materials. As a source of information, they proved to be difficult reading. Bystrolyotov had written his memoirs in the hope of seeing them published. To make his work acceptable to the censors, he resorted to a practice common among Soviet writers: self-censorship. I knew this practice only too well.

Talking with Milashov, I learned that he knew Bystrolyotov for the last twenty years of his life, from the time of his release from the camps in 1954 to the day of his death in 1975. Milashov credited him with exerting a decisive influence on his upbringing and world outlook. He recalled many conversations with his relative and mentor over the years, and these recollections provided me with many insights into Bystrolyotov's inner life.

Milashov also introduced me to Anatoly Razumov, a library scholar who published a study of the manuscripts Bystrolyotov deposited for safekeeping in 1968 at the Saltykov-Shchedrin State Public Library

(now the Russian State Library) in Leningrad. The study contains excerpts from interviews Razumov conducted with some of Bystrolyotov's former fellow prisoners, the most famous being Lev Gumilyov, son of two of Russia's great poets, Nikolai Gumilyov and Anna Akhmatova. Her long poem about her son's imprisonment, "Requiem," is considered one of the glories of twentieth-century Russian literature. Razumov directed me to the "Prague Archive," a collection of Russian émigré documents at the Moscow State Archives. As Bystrolyotov had spent several years in Prague, perhaps it would contain something related to him. Soon I was holding in my hands a violet folder from the Russian Law Faculty of Prague containing the student file of Dmitri Aleksandrovich Bystrolyotov. It took me back in time to the youth of the old man I had met. I was getting to know him pretty well.

Back in New York, I studied my booty. While it answered many questions about Bystrolyotov's life, it prompted new ones, especially about the beginning of his tumultuous career. He began as a "legal" intelligence worker—that is, as an employee of the Soviet Trade Mission in Prague bearing legitimate credentials. The work he actually did, of course, was not legal. It was there that he began his recruitment of women as Soviet agents. His turbulent married life also started there. I decided that I would have to wait for a break in my teaching schedule and then pursue my subject in Prague.

In October 2005, I flew to the city, walked the same streets that Bystrolyotov had walked some eighty years before, and sat in a reading hall of Charles University where he had read his textbooks to prepare for his law classes. On the city outskirts, I visited a dormitory where he had roomed. I stopped by a café in the fashionable Steiner Hotel (now Grand Hotel Bohemia) that had served as a meeting place for him and his spymaster. I walked the paths of Rieger Gardens, a city park where he pursued his femme fatale, Isolde Cameron. Then, at the Czech State Archives, with the help of Anastasia Koprivova, a Czech scholar working on a book about Russian immigrants in Czechoslovakia in the 1920s, I uncovered many items related to Bystrolyotov's life in Prague: college documents, police reports, and newspaper articles.⁶

I also traveled to Istanbul and Berlin, Paris and Zurich, following in my protagonist's footsteps. I looked into the French Foreign Ministry Archives in Nantes and the British archives in London.

Meanwhile, political developments in Russia have made me increasingly aware that telling Bystrolyotov's story was no longer my private and self-imposed mission but an urgent order of the day. While I was doing my research, an ex-KGB officer became the country's president, and many features of Russian life began making a comeback from the time of Bystrolyotov's spy career, the country of Stalin. Under President Vladimir Putin, state control of the economy, media, politics, and society had tightened, and Russia has begun sliding back to its Stalinist past. And, as in Stalin's era, behind a modern democratic facade, Russian nationalism and anti-Westernism have made a full comeback. The most troublesome of these developments are the revision of history and attempts to whitewash the KGB's bloody role in it.⁷

It has become clear to me that the time has come to set the record straight about the life of a man who bore witness to Soviet history and testified about it both in ink and blood.