



The Trials and Tribulations of KGB Assassin Bogdan Stashinsky

Lee Lukoff

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BOOK REVIEW

The Trials and Tribulations of KGB Assassin Bogdan Stashinsky

Plokyh, Serhii (2016). *The Man with the Poison Gun: A Cold War Spy Story*. Basic Books. New York. ISBN: 978-0-4650-3590-8.

The Man with the Poison Gun: A Cold War Spy Story is a must read for all intelligence scholars interested in learning more about the KGB's political assassination program and the role its most enigmatic hit man played in it. Dr. Serhii Plokyh, the Mykhailo S. Hrushevs'kyi Professor of Ukrainian History at Harvard University, is an expert on the intellectual, cultural, and international history of Eastern Europe and Ukraine. Plokyh is not primarily an intelligence studies scholar, but he nonetheless writes a thorough (and riveting) historical account of the life of KGB assassin Bogdan Stashinsky that effectively touches upon all the nuances of Cold War espionage. *The Man with the Poison Gun* draws upon a number of newly declassified files from the CIA, KGB, and Polish Security Services archives. These primary sources were supplemented with an array of KGB memoirs, and interviews with Stashinsky experts in Ukraine and South Africa. The author procured the most original sources available in the United States and former Soviet bloc countries which allowed him to cross-check key events in a variety of sources throughout his study of Stashinsky's life.

Stashinsky, a Ukrainian nationalist, finds himself blackmailed into joining the NKVD in order to prevent his family from being deported to Siberia (p. 22). Stashinsky saves his family from certain doom but is subsequently disowned for betraying the Ukrainian nationalist cause. Thereafter, Stashinsky is commissioned into a special unit of the Ministry of State Security (MGB) known for converting former insurgents into Soviet agents (pp. 25–26).

Stashinsky was trained by the KGB to infiltrate Ukrainian nationalist circles and assassinate their leaders. Stepan Bandera, a personal nemesis of Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev from the latter's days as party boss in Ukraine, was the most powerful Ukrainian nationalist leader operating in West Germany. After receiving weapons training using a unique poison gun that initiated cardiac arrest in its victim upon impact, Stashinsky is deployed to the streets of Berlin to carry out hits on leaders Lev Rebet and Stepan Bandera. Stashinsky assumes the alias of Josef Lehmann and hones his spy craft as a covert agent operating inside enemy territory. First, Stashinsky liquidates Lev Rebet, the publisher of the *Ukrainian Independentist*, before killing Bandera. Subsequently, Stashinsky returns to Moscow a hero and is awarded the prestigious Order of the Red Banner of Valor by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. This is a feat the author notes was personally expedited by none other than Nikita Khrushchev (p. 113).

Despite earning a reputation as one of the best assassins in the KGB, Stashinsky begins to have doubts about his life as a KGB assassin. Upon seeing video recordings of the Bandera crime scene in East Berlin, Stashinsky confided to his handler, Sergei Damon, that he perceived himself to be a murderer (p. 105). Stashinsky's reservations were cemented when he meets Inge Pohl, an East German woman whom Stashinsky

marries against the wishes of his Soviet boss, General Aleksei Krokhin. Pohl was stridently anti-Communist and hated the confined life she had to live in Moscow as Stashinsky's spouse and KGB sympathizer. Pohl plays a formative role in convincing Stashinsky to defect to the West. The KGB subsequently harangues Stashinsky to abandon Inge in favor of a Soviet woman in the KGB so that he would not be tempted to defect. Stashinsky's reluctance to part with Inge raised alarm bells inside the KGB. Subsequently, Stashinsky's apartment is bugged, his movements surveilled, and his mail opened before delivery. His life becomes miserable as he falls out of favor with his overlords in the KGB. Stashinsky's disdain for life in the USSR, and his personal realization that "the communist police were no better than the Nazi secret police they despised" (p. 158), leads Stashinsky and Inge to carry out a daring escape through Communist-occupied East Berlin (while under KGB surveillance) at the very moment the city was being partitioned by the newly rising Berlin Wall.

Upon arrival in West Germany, Stashinsky surrenders himself to the CIA. Counterintelligence officers in the CIA are initially skeptical of Stashinsky's revelations, and he is handed over to the West German authorities for trial. Stashinsky's defection turned out to be a major propaganda coup for the West and a strategic defeat for the Soviet Union as their most vaunted assassin revealed the seedy nature of the KGB's political assassination program to the world. Dr. Ploky effectively substantiates this argument by providing evidence that Khrushchev was personally embarrassed and allegedly "tore papers and threw things" upon learning that Stashinsky had defected (p. 201).

During his debriefing and subsequent trial, Stashinsky explicitly detailed each and every aspect of the two assassinations down to the smallest details of how he handled the lethal poison gun that murdered his victims. Stashinsky's defense team argued that he had been blackmailed into becoming a KGB hitman and that he had undergone an ideological transformation prior to his defection. In this sequence, Dr. Ploky effectively describes how Stashinsky's trial became a political battlefield within Ukrainian nationalist politics and the broader context of the Cold War, simultaneously. Ukrainian nationalists loyal to Lev Rebet's faction used the trial as an opportunity to paint Stashinsky as model exemplar of Soviet brutality in the flesh, whereas supporters of Bandera used the proceedings to paint Stashinsky as an unrepentant cold-blooded murderer that sold out his fellow Ukrainian brethren for personal gain.

Ploky goes to great lengths to detail the involvement of former U.S. Congressman Robert Kasten in Stashinsky's trial. Kasten, an opportunistic and ambitious anti-Communist crusader, attempts to use Stashinsky's trial as a cudgel to bash the Kremlin before an international audience. He meets with Bobby Kennedy's staff in the Department of Justice in an effort to persuade the Kennedy administration to use the trial as a means to raise awareness about the illegal political assassination program that had been authorized by the highest ranking officials in the Soviet Union (pp. 227–229). Sadly, President Kennedy is assassinated before American support for Kersten's effort to expose the Soviets to the world comes to fruition.

Subsequently, Kersten enrolls the support of Senator Thomas Dodd of Connecticut. Dodd interviews Stashinsky in jail in hopes of one day using him as an expert witness at a Senate hearing on Soviet political assassinations. Kersten gives a roaring speech at the trial and condemns the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union as agents guilty of perpetrating first degree murder (p. 274). Stashinsky is effectively absolved of being the agent responsible for perpetrating the murders by the jury and is sentenced to a mere eight years in prison for the two assassinations. However, Kersten and Dodd's dream of

using Stashinsky to testify before a live audience in the United States never comes to fruition, as Dodd's clout in the Senate dissipates after a major scandal.

The Man with the Poison Gun is an important piece of intelligence studies scholarship because it sheds light on the psychological struggles faced by a consequential KGB assassin at the peak of the Cold War. Plokhy effectively sheds light on the KGB's most secretive tactics while cementing Stashinsky's legacy as a consequential figure in the context of the Cold War. However, the author's inability to definitively determine Stashinsky's plight in the aftermath of his prison sentence is a weakness in an overall excellent piece of scholarship. Two competing narratives pertaining to his fate emerge in the last few chapters of the book, but neither brings historical closure to Stashinsky's enigmatic life story. Both narratives have convincing aspects to them but neither narrative confirms Stashinsky's post-prison whereabouts. The cliffhanger ending is but one flaw in an otherwise exceptionally well-researched piece of intelligence studies scholarship.

Lee Lukoff

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