

Stalin's Romeo Spy

Emil Draitser (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 420 pp., end notes, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by John Ehrman

Writing the biography of a spy must be frustrating work. To be interesting, the subject needs to have been involved in the types of daring operations that are the stuff of fiction. But separating truth from exaggeration, or outright falsehood, without complete records or interviews with others is almost impossible. The result can be a book that is interesting, even fascinating in places, but of uncertain reliability. So it is with Emil Draitser's biography of the great Soviet spy Dmitri Bystrylyotov, *Stalin's Romeo Spy*. It is a book that is captivating and, although flawed, worthwhile.

Few have heard of Bystrylyotov, even though he was one of the most important Soviet illegals active between the First and Second World Wars. Born out of wedlock in 1901 to a socially rebellious mother, Bystrylyotov came of age during the chaos of the Russian Revolution and civil war, as well as the post-WW I upheavals in Eastern and Central Europe. His education was spotty, but Bystrylyotov was blessed with the ability to learn languages and to think on his feet. After a series of adventures on the margins of society, Bystrylyotov became a communist and, winding up in Prague in the mid-1920s, began working for Soviet intelligence. Although he was never formally trained or appointed, Bystrylyotov became one of Moscow's premier illegals. He crisscrossed Europe, often posing as an East European aristocrat, recruiting and running French, British, German, and Italian spies. Bystrylyotov specialized in obtaining codes from West European embassies, thus giving Moscow access to diplomatic traffic. One of his assets was Ernest Oldham, the British cipher clerk who sold him London's diplomatic codes. Bystrylyotov also often used his extraordinary good looks and charm to seduce embassy secretaries and lonely female officials who could help him gain access to codes and other information.

After more than a decade of frenetic work in Europe, Bystrylyotov was recalled to Moscow. Soon after, in 1938, he was swept up in Stalin's Terror. Arrested on trumped-up charges and brutally beaten until he confessed to espionage, terrorism, and various counterrevolutionary activities, Bystrylyotov was sent to the Gulag. He did not emerge until 1954, after years of barbaric conditions and treatment had ruined his health. He spent the remainder of his life working as a translator, seeking recognition of his service from the KGB, and writing memoirs of his years abroad and in the camps. After his death in 1975, the KGB (subsequently the SVR) memorialized him as one of its heroes, although it publicized only a whitewashed version of his life.

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Stalin's Romeo Spy is a good book about espionage and life at the working level in Stalin's intelligence services. A journalist as well as an academic and the writer of a large number of fiction and nonfiction works, Draitser tells a good story, knows how to bring characters and situations to life, and moves the tale along quickly enough to keep readers interested. Unlike in many other biographies of spies, there is little padding. Draitser assumes his readers are familiar with the politics and history of interwar Europe and the Soviet Union and does not go into long explanations of events. He also avoids excusing Bystrylyotov's amoral behavior, which at times, Draitser rightly says, descended into the sociopathic.

Draitser is uniquely qualified to write this biography. Draitser was born in the USSR, where he met Bystrylyotov as an old man and where he interviewed him and was given access to his papers. After immigrating to the United States in 1974, Draitser earned a PhD from UCLA in Slavic Languages and Literatures. In his years in the United States, he has produced an impressive collection of published works, fiction and non-fiction. He now teaches at Hunter College in New York City. Draitser's work on this biography—and indeed his collection of published material—reveal him to be a conscientious scholar and researcher. For this book, he seems to have mined the available sources—including declassified KGB files—thoroughly. But, as Draitser acknowledges, the Russian files are incomplete, and he often has to rely on either his interviews with Bystrylyotov or the retired spy's memoirs to tell his story.

As an example of historical and intelligence scholarship, therefore, *Stalin's Romeo Spy* needs to be read with a careful, critical eye. First, it is not clear that Bystrylyotov's versions of events are reliable. One wonders if the old illegal charmed Draitser into believing some improbable stories. For example, Bystrylyotov told of his work in the Gulag as a camp medic, a position he claimed to have obtained he had attended medical school in Zurich. Nowhere in the 150 pages Draitser devoted to Bystrylyotov's time in Europe does he mention such schooling. Moreover, there is the question of how a spy as busy as Bystrylyotov would have had the time to go to medical school. In another instance, Draitser describes how Bystrylyotov carried out sophisticated medical research in a makeshift camp laboratory—an implausible story told without supporting source notes.

Draitser also has an unfortunate tendency to fall into psychological speculation. Bystrylyotov, to be sure, is a good subject for this—his mother was neglectful, he spun fantasies about his father's identity, and he seems to have had few qualms about how he treated the women he bedded in his espionage work. Bystrylyotov's personal love life also was bizarre. In Europe, Bystrylyotov said he fell in love with a woman who turned out to be a lesbian, eventually married her lover, may have later murdered his original love and then, to top it all off, sent his wife to become the lover of a French intelligence officer so he could gain access to the Frenchman's papers. But Draitser's explanations of Bystrylyotov's makeup sound forced, such as when he attributes the spy's actions to "bottled-up, suppressed hostility...[and the] result of the absence of a consistent value-conveying figure" that led him to develop the "elements of a sociopathic personality free of guilt" (24–25). It is as if Draitser felt a need to explain Bystrylyotov's personality but just could not quite get a grip on the man. Psychological analysis of a sub-

ject so far removed in time and distance is chancy, even for a professional analyst, let alone someone unschooled in the field, and Draitser might have done better to avoid the attempt.

The analysis is doubly unfortunate because, in looking for what made Bystrylyotov unique, Draitser missed the opportunity to compare him to other illegals and draw out their commonalities. It would seem, in fact, that there is something about illegals that leads them to unusual behavior. Perhaps a personality that is willing and able to live for long periods under a completely false identity is one that will conclude there are no bounds on their behavior; or, perhaps, illegals conclude that having a disposable identity permits them to indulge in otherwise forbidden behaviors. In this context, it is worth noting, Bystrylyotov's sexual escapades seem not be too unusual among illegals. Wolfgang Lutz, the Israeli illegal active in Egypt in the 1960s, related in his memoirs the charming story of how he met a woman on a train in Europe and, after a whirlwind romance, married her and brought her to Cairo to be his partner in espionage; however, he neglected to tell her that he already had a wife and son living in Paris. A decade later in the United States, the Koechers—a husband-and-wife pair of Czech illegals—also had many sexual adventures in the course of their work. More recently, apparently, so did Anna Chapman, one of the 10 Russian illegals arrested in the United States in June 2010.

Draitser also overlooks another way in which Bystrylyotov was similar to many other spies of his era. Like Whittaker Chambers, he emerged from a troubled personal background and then reacted to the uncertainties of the post-WW I era by turning to communism and espionage. Teodor Maly, who recruited Kim Philby, also remained a loyal communist, to the point that he accepted a summons back to Moscow, fully expecting to be executed. Indeed, while Bystrylyotov's experiences gradually made him doubt the Soviet system, he never quite broke with it. It may be indicative of Bystrylyotov's ability to project his version of events that Draitser did not venture to ask why such a clever and educated man remained loyal to the system that used and then tortured him.

Despite its weaknesses, *Stalin's Romeo Spy* deserves the attention of anyone interested in the history of the Soviet intelligence services or the history of intelligence in general. Draitser's account reminds us of the feats of espionage the Soviet services were able to accomplish when they set aside all scruples. Given that human nature is changeless and that ruthless regimes still remain in the world—not to mention that we now know conclusively that Moscow continues to use illegals against us—the book is a reminder of what we need to watch for.

