

Serhii Plokyh. The Man with the Poison Gun: A Cold War Spy Story

Randall E. Newnham

Volume 10, numéro 1, 2023

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1099100ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.21226/ewjus792>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies University of Alberta

ISSN

2292-7956 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Newnham, R. (2023). Compte rendu de [Serhii Plokyh. The Man with the Poison Gun: A Cold War Spy Story]. *East/West*, 10(1), 175–177.
<https://doi.org/10.21226/ewjus792>



Serhii Plokyh. *The Man with the Poison Gun: A Cold War Spy Story.* Oneworld Publications, 2016. xiv, 370 pp. Maps. Notes. Index. £10.99, cloth.

If one were to look for a truly rare category of books, *Spy Thrillers by Noted Ukrainian Historians* would certainly fill the bill. Yet as it turns out, the work under review fits precisely into that category. Few, if any, spy stories contain an extensive section of references. And even fewer show evidence of detailed historical research based on primary and secondary sources from Ukraine, Russia, Germany, the United States, and elsewhere in various languages. The question is, Does such an unusual monograph deserve the attention of readers interested in Ukraine? In the case of this work, the answer is clearly positive. Here, Serhii Plokyh tells the story of Bohdan Stashyns'kyi (Bogdan Stashinskii), the KGB agent who killed Stepan Bandera in Munich in 1959. It is a gripping, action-packed narrative. At the same time, the book sheds light on important historical topics and issues, some of which have great resonance still today.

In contrast to many historical works, *The Man with the Poison Gun: A Cold War Spy Story* presents a very involving account—worthy, in fact, of a John le Carré novel. It begins with Stashyns'kyi's recruitment by the KGB (Komitet gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti) in 1950, when he was a college student in Lviv. His family and their entire village were deeply occupied in supporting Ukrainian guerilla forces fighting against the Soviet occupation. However, KGB personnel were able to turn Stashyns'kyi to their side. They began by accusing him of the trivial offence of riding a train without a ticket. The agency offered to spare his family from arrest in exchange for his help in penetrating the resistance group that was operating near his village. After he had agreed, he was led ever deeper into collaboration with the Chekists. Stashyns'kyi was eventually trained as an assassin and directed to attack Ukrainian exiles living in Munich. In 1957 and 1959, respectively, he killed two émigré leaders—Lev Rebet and Bandera. In the end, however, he broke with his controllers and defected to the West in 1961. Plokyh recounts in detail Stashyns'kyi's sensational trial in West Germany for the Munich murders, his imprisonment for several years, and his eventual disappearance following his release in 1967, when he may have been resettled in South Africa.

So, what can historians and other specialists on Ukraine learn from this spy story? Plokyh convincingly demonstrates the various ways in which the Stashyns'kyi case had genuine political importance in its own time and how it retains its significance still today. At the time, the Stashyns'kyi experience influenced Soviet leaders, the KGB, and even global politics. As Plokyh shows, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev—himself partially of Ukrainian background—was heavily affected by the nationalist revolt in Western

Ukraine. When Khrushchev was Party leader in Ukraine, under Iosif (Joseph) Stalin, his prestige (and indeed his survival in the snakepit of Kremlin politics) depended on his ability to crush that rebellion. Thus, after having taken over the country, he closely monitored Stashyns'kyi's operations against leaders of the Ukrainian resistance. The assassin's decision to defect and reveal the Kremlin's plots was deeply embarrassing for Khrushchev. The Stashyns'kyi events also touched the career of then KGB leader Aleksandr Shelepin. Plokhy argues (299–302) that Shelepin was eventually dropped from the Kremlin leadership—under Leonid Brezhnev in the mid-1970s—owing to his “tarnished reputation” on the world stage, which was unsuitable in an era of détente. This reputation was predominantly based on the revelations arising from the Stashyns'kyi affair. Plokhy illustrates that in addition, the KGB, in the aftermath of the Stashyns'kyi debacle, eventually decided to largely cease overseas assassinations. This change, the author believes, had an impact on the agency's image, helping make it possible for Iurii Andropov to become the first KGB leader to ascend to the rank of general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Finally, as noted, the episode even affected the broader global scene. This was true both in popular culture (the plot of the James Bond movie *The Man with the Golden Gun* was based largely on Stashyns'kyi's exploits) and in the world of high politics. For example, the Stashyns'kyi case led many Americans to believe that Lee Harvey Oswald, the killer of President John F. Kennedy, must also have been trained as an assassin by the KGB (287).

The Stashyns'kyi saga unfortunately has relevance still today. Another former secret-police leader, Vladimir Putin, seems to have injected the brutal KGB methods of the 1940s and 1950s into the current procedure of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB). Stashyns'kyi's innovative “poison gun,” which killed victims with a puff of cyanide gas, fits right in with FSB operational strategies. In recent years, the world has seen Russia's spies assassinate the former leader of Chechnya in Qatar (Zelimkhan Iandarbiev, 2004); poison a Ukrainian leader with dioxin (Viktor Iushchenko, 2004); and kill a defector with radioactive polonium in London (Aleksandr Litvinenko, 2006). And, of course, Putin has also actively resurrected the brutal policy of Stalin and Khrushchev with his suppression of Ukraine's efforts to remain free. This was already clear in 2016, when this book was published, and it has since become extremely blatant.

The Kremlin's tactics in occupied Ukraine in 2022–23, such as mass detentions and deportations, the blackmail and recruitment of local collaborators, and a myriad of other things, seem depressingly similar to the abuses inflicted on the Lviv area in the late 1940s, in Stashyns'kyi's youth. As Plokhy prophetically notes at the end of his work, “[T]he Stashinsky story is

more than a piece of history. It is also an insight into the present and a forewarning for the future” (323).

Randall E. Newnham
Penn State University

Work Cited

The Man with the Golden Gun. Directed by Guy Hamilton, Eon Productions, 1974.