

Tower of Secrets: A Real Life Spy Thriller, by Victor Sheymov. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1993. Pp. 420. \$24.95 (Hardcover).

Victor Sheymov was the highest ranking KGB officer ever to defect to the west when he contacted the CIA and arranged for his own disappearance. *Tower of Secrets* is his personal tale of intrigue, power, and gradual self-awareness before his final decision to risk everything in an escape. Sheymov has written his story in the third person, and has billed the story as a spy novel. In this respect it is a good read, full of suspense and intrigue. But the real value of the book may lie not in the story itself, but in the mind of the man who wrote it. This is a spy novel written by a spy, and the inner workings of that spy's consciousness, encrypted in the persona of the autobiographical Victor, raise some very interesting questions about truth. What is it? And how do we know when we have found it? Layer upon layer of mask must be removed to find the answers in this book.

The story begins flashback fashion, as the successful Major Victor Sheymov muses on his own life and his rise to prominence in the KGB—his childhood, his family, his wife and daughter are all recalled and reflected on. Victor's family, in particular, is important to his own career opportunities, for his father is one of the founders of the Soviet ICBM program and his mother is a respected Moscow surgeon. These connections enable him to attend the selective Moscow State Technical University where he earns an engineering degree in missiles and spacecraft.

After a brief stint as a research scientist within the Ministry of Defense, where his work includes guidance systems for anti-satellite missiles (in the early 1970s), he is hired by the KGB, who, alert to his potential, immediately begin grooming him for future leadership responsibilities. To his surprise, Victor finds himself indoctrinated not only in the operations of his own field, but also the operations of all the other directorates and sub-directorates, knowledge of which is often carefully guarded even from the directorate heads themselves. Victor discovers that, though the KGB consists of an intricate web of secret

departments and responsibilities, his access to information bypasses the normal habits of compartmentalization, allowing him almost unprecedented movement within the organization bureaucracy.

He is assigned to the Eighth Directorate—Encryption—at least in part due to his engineering background. Cryptography is the coded transmittal of information. This is the real heart of any intelligence gathering (or subversive) organization, and from the vantage point of this insider status, Victor can feel the hum of the entire KGB operation around him. In Soviet Russia, and particularly within the KGB, knowledge is power. Access to knowledge is access to power. And Victor holds that access, the decoding key which unlocks amazing resources of raw power. Encryption is what Sheymov's book is really about, a metaphor for Victor's life as well as our own experience in reading his story.

This idea of insiders and outsiders permeates Soviet life, from the most humble of citizens to the most elite. Outsiders struggle to acquire knowledge, and therefore power, while insiders control both. Knowledge is an invaluable commodity because even the most innocuous ignorance can prove fatal. The grim humor of the Muscovites bears witness to this in a joke Victor recalls:

A new prison inmate is asked why he is in jail.

"For not reading the morning paper," comes the response.

"What?"

"All I did was walk into my office one morning. The Party Organization Secretary came in, looked at the Politburo portraits on the wall, and asked sternly why I had not removed the picture of the stupid one. I asked, 'Which one is that?' I hadn't read the paper yet. And here I am."

Reading the paper is itself an act of decoding information, since all its information is carefully constructed, hidden, planted, and disguised. Victor explains:

While many of those in any position of power considered *Pravda* as boring, for anyone connected to the realm of power it was a must. It actually contained a great deal of information—if one knew how to read between the lines. Although articles were written in the officialese developed during the post-Revolution period, in every article there lurked a subtle Aesopian guide to the Party's latest position on the issues of the day. The paper provided clues for the correct trimming of one's political weather vane, to align it safely with the treacherous winds of the Party line.

The KGB is deliberately constructed along lines meant to confuse, separating the insider from the outsider by withholding information. Paranoia drives the system, for the fewer insiders, the fewer potential leaks and the less power sharing. This paranoia is taken to such an extreme, that even insiders are often unaware of their sometimes nebulous status, according to Victor:

A classic example was the common mixing up of the Sixteenth Directorate of the KGB, involved in SIGINT (signal intelligence) operations, with the Sixteenth Department of the First Chief Directorate, strictly a HUMINT (human intelligence) unit . . . Both were called the Sixteenth in the jargon. When somebody referred to the Sixteenth, only those who really knew the organization would understand which unit was intended. And even most officers in the First Chief Directorate did not.

If reading the paper or understanding his own organization is an act of decoding encrypted messages, being able to accurately read people is at least as important in the games of personal power Victor plays. He is proud of his ability to read situations, ulterior motives, and childish acts of hostility for what they are, and is able to bluff his way through several encounters by faking

an access to knowledge he does not actually have. This reading ability is critical to his own survival in the KGB, for he is the official scapegoat, the troubleshooter sent into impossible situations to resolve them—usually through out-muscling or bullying the opposition into submission. This ability to bully is a direct result of knowing more than anyone else and using it to his advantage. A typical example is his encounter with the Soviet Ambassador to Poland, when Victor is sent to commandeer more space in the Embassy for the KGB's new encryption machinery, despite the already cramped quarters. The confrontation begins with a message that the Ambassador is too busy to see him, and ends with Victor threatening to call Andropov personally if he doesn't get any cooperation. If Victor hadn't been able to read the Ambassador's own bluff to call Andropov as just that, his power play would not have worked. Likewise, his success relies upon the inability of the Ambassador to read Victor's own motives. Suddenly unsure of whether Victor is really *that* much of an insider, the Ambassador capitulates. Mission completed, through encryption.

Perhaps it is because Victor has been an insider for so long, that he has become blinded by his own confidence that he is an insider who can *read the truth*. It is when he realizes what he *doesn't* know that Victor's faith in the KGB becomes shaken. This epiphany begins on the trip to Poland during a conversation with his driver, Valery, a KGB agent who explains how he ended up in such a backwater assignment as Warsaw. Assigned to escort a delegation of scientists to an international meeting in Switzerland, Valery had been outsmarted by a scientist planning a defection. In the center of Geneva, the scientist stepped out of the car and told Valery he was going to the Swiss police to defect, unaware that his friend was a KGB agent. Valery explains his reaction:

“I said good-bye, wished him well, and hit him in the head as hard as I could with the only thing I had in my hand—my camera.”

“With people all around?”

“Sure. I knocked him out and shoved him in the car.

I shouted, ' This man is sick! He needs a doctor!' Then I jumped in the car and raced to the Soviet mission. The rest was easy."

"What happened to the scientist?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary. That bastard's doing his fifteen years' hard labor. But look what happened to me."

This conversation shakes Victor up—"it horrified him that a seemingly decent guy like Valery felt no remorse whatsoever for his brutality." Against his will, Victor begins to wonder if he has misread the system he represents and the people it creates. In a moment of outsider awareness he hears himself thinking "there's only a small step from an act like that to shooting women and children for ideological purposes." True to his insider training, Victor views his own thoughts as dangerous, but the rift within him widens the next day when he becomes privy to a request from Central Headquarters for all the information available on the Pope—"anything that could get us close to him. Physically." Sheymov explains that "all knew perfectly well that in KGB jargon the phrase 'getting physically close' meant only one thing: assassination." Catching a glimpse of the cable, Victor is able to read the signature—"Andropov." As he leaves the meeting, he reflects that "this was the second time in two days that the acts of his organization had morally outraged him."

Victor is not the only person he knows with such feelings. Back home, his friend Valentin goes so far as to voice his disillusionment with the KGB and the Party system. This is reckless behavior, even coming from the son of a Central Committee member. Family privilege has its limits, even in the Soviet Union. In spite of his friends' warnings, Valentin eventually confronts his father, castigating his father's role in the corruption he has witnessed and which he passionately despises. Two days later he is found strangled in his apartment, apparently on his father's orders. The deliberately sloppy cover-up sends a clear message to those who can read it.

Victor's growing realization that things are not as they seem eventually coalesces into secretive conversations with his wife,

out of range of the bugs in his apartment, of course. Their mutual misgivings turn first to fear and then into a resolve to escape while their daughter is still too young to be thoroughly indoctrinated into the Party. Victor confirms his skills as a master gamesman as he plots his first, critical, contact with an unknown CIA agent. The last portion of the book is devoted almost exclusively to this intricate series of random and chance meetings with a person he has never seen and only assumes exists. Suddenly Victor is using insider knowledge to become the quintessential outsider, and he will use the same knowledge to destroy his own organization from without. It's a delicious turn of events and truly suspenseful.

If Victor the character is a brilliant plotter, Sheymov the author is no less adroit in plotting his memoirs, carefully selecting his events and incidents for their dramatic impact. He teases us with information, drawing us along like a surveillance team on a hot lead. We want to be insiders, too. We want to know what Sheymov knows, share the power of that knowledge.

But he keeps us firmly at a distance. The deliberate detachment he creates between himself and the reader is a subtle shield, a personal encryption which keeps Sheymov safely anonymous in the middle of his own autobiography. The narrative technique is only one example of this game Sheymov plays with his reader. The entire structure of the book relies heavily upon flashbacks which keep the reader confused as to the order of events. The entire book is, of course, a flashback in the sense that it is a personal memory retold. But the linear history of Sheymov's tale must be deciphered by the reader, and the reader may share the Soviet Ambassador's unease with the authenticity of the reading. Because in a sense, Sheymov has discreetly plotted the development of his own character, and has encrypted the messages along the way. Victor is not what he appears.

In the sense of literary genre, for instance, Victor is not the fictional character that Sheymov's third person narrative seems to create. This illusion is intended to add suspense to the novel by playing up our expectations of the form. It is also, no doubt, intended to broaden the target audience in the bookstores. This

fabrication is, of course, obviously a ruse, a code we are assumed to understand. Sheymov justifies this narrative perspective by explaining that, to an intelligence officer, a third person account seems a natural form of expression, because

one of the characteristics of intelligence is that one develops the habit of viewing oneself from aside, to ensure objectivity of judgment. That habit becomes second nature, and I believe *events are seen* more clearly from this angle. (my emphasis)

The effect of this third person account reveals a great deal about the mind of the spy who constructs it because the technique forces a discussion of the difference between truth and fact, reality and fiction. This narrative voice highlights the tensions which run in deep strains throughout this book. Is the book an autobiography or a novel? Sheymov encourages us to view his book as fiction by writing it in the third person, but at the same time he clearly expects us to accept the “facts” of his account as “real” events. The tension between these two objectives creates emotional confusion in the reader. Ironically, the fictional voice of the author allows enough detachment from him for the reader to *forget* the events are “real” so that the most bizarre and fantastic scenes roll past with less of the emotional impact that a clearly autobiographical style would force. At the same time, the “fiction” is truly suspenseful, and as it builds to a climax the ubiquitous James Bond chase scene seems inevitable during the final moments of escape. Reality intrudes upon this fantasy somewhat abruptly when the defection occurs without the chase, and Victor’s explanation to his wife that this is the mark of a good intelligence operation does not quite satisfy the reader’s desire for a big finish.

These conflicting reactions—an emotional detachment from Victor himself coupled with an eagerness to “know” what will happen to him—may be deliberately cultivated, as Sheymov’s earlier statement seems to suggest, by using the distancing of passive voice to discuss the events taking place. When he writes that “events are seen more clearly from this angle,” Sheymov has

removed the agent from the action in his language, reinforcing the cryptic nature of the character he has created. Where is the agent? Who is the agent? Victor is himself encrypted.

Just one example of this personal encryption is the inherent contradiction between Victor's growing "self-knowledge" and the person he appears to be. Victor's father is a famous military figure, his mother a well-known surgeon, his relatives influential and privileged. He is among the most educated in his society, holding nearly a Ph.D. in advanced missile systems. He is an important member of the Communist Party. His friends include subversive dissidents, artists, writers, and even underworld figures. Yet Victor is completely ignorant of the tenets of Communism. He is not only ignorant, he is acutely aware that any attempt to gain such knowledge will be extremely dangerous, and is forced to research the topic in the greatest secrecy. In the Soviet Union, Marxist-Stalinist writings are inaccessible, even to "insiders" like Victor.

Indeed, Victor knows less about his own political system than "outsiders" in the West. Because of this, Victor's "self-revelations" about Communism sometimes sound like the "insights" of a naive student. Towards the end of the book, for instance, he treats us to long, dry soliloquies on the inconsistencies of the Communist philosophy and the Soviet system it spawned. Sometimes constructed as one-sided conversations with his wife, these sections remind us that anti-Communist rhetoric can be as dull as its counterpart to those already familiar with it. All of this contributes to undermining the dramatic effect of his conversion and subsequent proselytizing.

Perhaps the most troublesome aspect of Victor's "self-discovery" is the lengths to which he must be pushed before he realizes that all is not decent and honorable in the KGB. It is not until Valentin is ordered assassinated by his own father that Victor begins to doubt the system that has adopted him as its own.

Yet Victor does not enter the KGB completely ignorant and untutored. He enters the service over the objections of his family, who have their own stories to relate about the KGB and feel no tenderness toward it. And the building in which Victor

works—KGB Headquarters in Moscow—has its own gruesome history. For instance, it is well known that prisoners who entered the building in the past were never seen again. Nobody ever came out. Where did they go? Well, the first step in their disposal was to execute them by firing squad in the courtyard (the same courtyard Victor passes each day), and then their bodies were taken to the basement where they were pulverized by a rock smasher until the gooey mass could be poured into the sewer. All this Victor knows. When did the KGB reform itself? We are left to wonder.

The paranoia Victor lives with every day can also be traced back through KGB history, this time to Beria, the first Chief, who was so afraid of being assassinated from within that office doors were built to be locked on the outside. As he walked through the hallways, bodyguards locked up everyone in his path. One unfortunate secretary who forgot to leave the key outside stumbled into the hallway at exactly the wrong moment and was shot down on the spot. These are the stories, the lore, that Victor and his friends exchange *before* he begins to question the morality of KGB operations. Is Victor *really* an outsider to the KGB's sense of right and wrong? Does knowledge of KGB operations make him an insider to it?

Perhaps Victor's "self-discovery" is ultimately problematic because we as readers simply don't expect an insider with so much access to information to be so blind to the obvious around him. Victor can "read" the nervous twitch of an eyelid when confronting a superior, but he can't "read" the society in which he lives. He wakes up one day surprised and dismayed to learn that the KGB has dirty secrets, that power can corrupt those who wield it, that moral indignation among the Soviet leadership has long been blunted by the realities of political survival and economic privilege. Has his insider status distorted his perspective of the world, or has it allowed him the crucial means by which he can finally "read" it at all?

Or is Victor a reliable narrator? Does he really see events in such black and white terms? Victor begins as a loyal Party member and KGB agent and ends as a passionate defector determined to destroy everything for which the Party and the

KGB stands. The reversal is quick and clean, no regrets, no ambiguities. Is this the mind of a spy? The mind of a man who could spend weeks planning an “accidental” encounter with another agent? Or is Victor perhaps a front for the author, another layer of encryption created to re-shape the events of the past? Can the spy who wrote this book really be the newly converted crusader we see in Victor? Sheymov creates a contradiction. Victor is intelligent, street-smart, and arrogant. I met Sheymov once many years ago, and this general description rings of authenticity. But there is a hidden person, another quiet voice speaking behind Victor in this book. When we decode *him* we may find the key we need to break the code of who Victor, and Sheymov, really is.

In the final analysis, this book may not be judged on its literary merits at all because, like its character, it really isn't what it appears to be. For it is not so much a novel, or even a memoir, so much as it is a report on a society which *we* view from the outside, and our knowledge of which seems always to be suspect. Sheymov knows his book will find its way into professional circles where “intelligence officers may find some of the information in it useful, particularly where it complements their own knowledge and experience.” Numerous students of international power politics, espionage, and Communism will certainly find valuable information in this book. But, in literature as in the intelligence world, the most valuable information may be the most carefully encrypted information, that subtle, disguised, and carefully constructed story which reveals the spy who wrote it. □

—Lori Davis Perry
The United States Air Force Academy