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David Horner, *The Spy Catchers: The Official History of ASIO 1949-1963. Volume I.*  
(Allen Unwin; Sydney, 2014; 710 pp.)  
ISBN 978 1 74331 966 6; \$59,99

Recently the first volume of the official history of the domestic security service of Australia, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), was published. This volume, authored by David Horner, covers the period 1949-1963 and aptly carries the main title *The Spy Catchers*, since that is what domestic security services in many cases do: catch spies. Two more volumes on the history of ASIO are to be published soon which will cover later periods.

### **Venona and the founding of ASIO**

ASIO's name may seem a little confusing to outsiders since it suggests a combination of a foreign intelligence and a domestic security service, the two well-known British services, the Security Service (commonly called MI5) and the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, also known as MI6) rolled into one, so to speak. In fact, ASIO is a domestic security service only. Australia's foreign intelligence service is the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS).

*The Spy Catchers* makes many interesting points and offers details of a large number of operations. The author discusses, for instance, that one of the main reasons ASIO was founded as a professional service in 1949 had to do with the fact that the US services threatened to cut off the intelligence exchange with the Australian government and in some cases already did so, as they found that the security setup in the country showed very serious shortcomings. It was already known at the time to the FBI and the CIA from the top secret American Venona project that there was a Soviet spy ring operating inside the Australian government, which made the establishment of a professional security service all the more urgent.<sup>1</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Venona was the code name of a US project which started in 1943 and tried to break the codes of messages mainly sent in 1942-1945 by stations of the Soviet NKVD, a precursor organization of the KGB, and the military intelligence service

code names of Soviet agents from Venona and the possible identities of the real persons behind them would keep ASIO busy intermittently for a very long time, without much success in terms of numbers of arrests. It is fascinating to read about the important advisory role the British Security Service played in the founding of ASIO, in the person of none other than Roger Hollis, who was later suspected by some inside and outside his own service of being a Soviet agent himself.<sup>2</sup> The important role of Sir Charles Spry, Australia's second Director-General of Security and longest-serving head of ASIO in 1950-70, is also discussed extensively throughout the book.

### The Petrov case

Horner spends two chapters discussing ASIO's greatest triumph of the early Cold War period: the defection in April 1954 of the KGB *rezident* in Canberra, Vladimir Petrov and his wife Evdokia.<sup>3</sup> Their names repeatedly come up in other chapters as well. The author adds interesting details to the story of the ASIO agent Michael Bialoguski, who played a key role in persuading Petrov to defect to the Australians. The outlines of Bialoguski's story have been well known – he told one version of it in very flattering

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GRU, mostly from the US and Great Britain, to their headquarters in Moscow. Venona was officially closed down only in 1980. Practically all big American and British spy cases in the early Cold War period were the result of decrypted Venona messages. See J. E. Haynes and H. Klehr, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Spying in America* (New Haven, CT and London 1999); N. West, *Venona: The Greatest Secret of the Cold War* (London 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Roger Hollis (1905-1973) was Director General of the British Security Service (MI5) from 1956 to 1965. For two books that try to make the case against Hollis see P. Wright, *Spycatcher: The Candid Autobiography of a Senior Intelligence Officer* (New York, NY 1987); C. Pincher, *Treachery: Betrayals, Blunders, and Cover-ups: Six Decades of Espionage Against America and Great Britain* (New York, NY 2009).

<sup>3</sup> The *rezident*, in KGB parlance, is the head of a station of the service in a particular foreign country. He is the equivalent of a chief of station in the CIA. The *rezident* is well-acquainted with the intelligence operations of the KGB in the country in which he is stationed, hence an important part of the value of Vladimir Petrov (1907-1991) for ASIO. (His wife) Evdokia (1914-2002) had many details to add of her own.

terms for himself shortly after the event - but it turns out that ASIO for a fairly long period was internally very doubtful if he could be trusted as an agent (pp. 324-7). Questions regarding the trustworthiness and reliability of agents are a recurring topic in the operations of any intelligence and security service. The information the Petrovs gave to ASIO in elaborate debriefings played an important part in the work of the Royal Commission on Espionage which was set up in Australia after their defection and in front of which the Petrovs themselves also appeared as witnesses. Apart from the information the couple gave to the Royal Commission, their debriefings by ASIO resulted in 52 reports in total on various aspects of Soviet intelligence operations. Many of those reports were shared by ASIO with allied services, those of the US and Britain in particular, and this obviously gave a big boost to the prestige of the Australian service among its Western colleagues. Because the Petrovs had in an earlier phase of their career both been stationed in Sweden, they could also give many details about Soviet intelligence operations there, which were in due course shared by ASIO with their Swedish counterparts.

Strangely enough, the triumph of the service in the case of the Petrovs led in an important sense to a weakening of the position of the Organisation, as ASIO was commonly called, in internal Australian politics. This had to do with the position the main leader of the opposition, Herbert Evatt of the Labour Party, took with respect to the defection of the Petrovs. He had been a minister in a previous government and, together with his supporters, saw the whole case mainly as an attempt by the conservative government of Robert Menzies at undermining the Labour Party. This was largely because one or two people close to Evatt were identified publicly as Soviet agents as a consequence of the Petrov defection. Evatt and his party therefore dismissed in front of the Royal Commission the material the couple provided, including authentic KGB documents, as forgeries for which ASIO in particular bore responsibility. In subsequent years, they clung to their conspiratorial views and used every opportunity to discredit ASIO in the eyes of large sections of the Australian non-communist left. The situation got so bad that on the eve of national elections in late 1958, which Menzies was afraid he would lose to Evatt, the Prime Minister arranged for two complete copies of the Petrov material to be given to the two British services each and also one to the Americans, fearing what Evatt would do in case he took over the government (pp. 470-471). In the end, Menzies won.

### A textbook double agent operation

Large sections of the book discuss the way ASIO dealt with the threat of domestic subversion, largely in the shape of the Australian Communist Party. Apart from counterintelligence, i.e. countering operations of foreign intelligence services, countersubversion was an important task for Western security services during the Cold War as well, the most important target being local communist parties.<sup>4</sup> The volume ends with the expulsion in 1963 of the KGB officer Ivan Skripov who had turned up in Australia in 1959 to reopen the Soviet embassy in Canberra, which had been closed down temporarily after the defection of the Petrovs and the ensuing diplomatic fracas. The expulsion was the result of a classic and very successful double agent operation by ASIO with a very capable female agent by the name of Kay Marshall. Skripov believed her to be working for him but her loyalty was in reality with ASIO to which she reported everything she got to know about the Russian. The Australian service planned the operation elaborately and executed it with an eye to the smallest detail. The double agent operation with Kay Marshall offers a textbook example of how every Western service tried to run that kind of operation against the KGB and other communist services during the Cold War. It is for that reason very illuminating.

One of many interesting issues in *The Spy Catchers* is the extent to which ASIO was embedded in an international coalition of Western services working closely together in the struggle against communism, of both the Soviet and domestic variety. Indeed, the beginnings of ASIO were partly the result of American pressure while the British Security Service also played its part therein, as we have seen. As a reader, one would like to know more about ASIO's relations with other Western services like the CIA and MI5. For some time in the 1950s one or two ASIO officers were even stationed in The Hague and other Western European countries to assist the Australian Department of Immigration in keeping 'undesirables' out of

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<sup>4</sup> How important local communist parties were as targets for Western security services also becomes clear from the official histories published on MI5 and on the Dutch Domestic Security Service Binnenlandse Veiligheidsdienst [Domestic Security Service, Dutch acronym BVD]. See C. Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5* (London 2010), *passim*; D. Engelen, *Geschiedenis van de Binnenlandse Veiligheidsdienst* [History of the Domestic Security Service] (s-Gravenhage 1995), *passim*.

Australia. The officers in The Hague undoubtedly were in touch with the Dutch Domestic Security Service (BVD) and it would be interesting to know more about these and similar contacts which are now treated fairly superficially. Hopefully, more of this issue will be discussed in the two forthcoming volumes. All in all, however, *The Spy Catchers* is a very important book, which is well written and makes for very pleasant reading.

*Ben de Jong*