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## Vladimir Petrov: A Reappraisal

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During the Cold War, defectors from the Russian Intelligence Services to the West were of critical importance. They exposed and neutralised hundreds of Soviet agents who had penetrated government departments and democratic institutions. Stretching from Anatoli Granovsky in 1946 to Oleg Gordievsky in 1985, these Soviet defectors were highly prized for the intelligence they provided to security services. Ranked amongst the most valuable at the time was Vladimir Mikhailovich Petrov, who defected in Sydney in 1954. Yet he, almost alone, has overwhelmingly been cast by commentators and historians as lazy, inefficient, and incompetent. This article will offer an alternative interpretation of Petrov. My argument has three prongs. First, Petrov's contact with Russian individuals and pro-Soviet political organisations in Australia was far more extensive than generally assumed. Second, contrary to the historiographical consensus, he withheld intelligence about his contacts and informants from his security service debriefers. Third, rather than Petrov seeing espionage as too dangerous, as suggested, he was a committed and active Soviet intelligence cadre. By reappraising Petrov, the article seeks to provide a fresh understanding of this key episode, the Petrov Affair, in Australia's Cold War history.

The defection of Vladimir Mikhailovich Petrov on 4 April 1954, followed dramatically seventeen days later by his wife, Evdokia, captured international headlines, dominated Australian politics, and reverberated for another forty years. Officially the consul and third secretary of the Russian Embassy in Canberra, Petrov was also a colonel in the Ministry of State Security (MGB).<sup>1</sup> He brought with him bundles of Soviet documents — later dubbed the Petrov Papers<sup>2</sup> — that underpinned both his interrogation by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and his testimony before the Royal Commission on Espionage (RCE).

Petrov was one of the nearly three hundred Russians who defected from East to West in the decade after the Second World War.<sup>3</sup> Only rarely has their new-found commitment to the anti-communist cause been questioned by government agencies

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<sup>1</sup> The MGB and MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs), established in 1946, were separate ministries until merged in March 1953. In March 1954, the MGB was replaced by the KGB (Committee for State Security). Consistent with contemporary usage by ASIO and MI5, the acronym MVD will be used.

<sup>2</sup> These documents were described and explained by Petrov; see National Archives of Australia (NAA): A6283, 2, folios 143–48, 106–30.

<sup>3</sup> Vladislav Krasnov, *Soviet Defectors: The KGB Wanted List* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1986), pp. 183, 189; David L. Jones, "Communist Defection," *Military Review*, Vol 46, 3 (1966), pp. 22–3.

then or historians since.<sup>4</sup> Generally, their reputations as Soviet intelligence officers who brought with them valuable information has remained untarnished. Their status was reinforced by their popular, if sometimes self-serving, memoirs.<sup>5</sup> One defector was even credited with triggering the Cold War.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, history has not been kind to Petrov. This was despite his defection providing ASIO with new-found recognition and status within the Western intelligence community.<sup>7</sup> He has been poorly regarded by historians and commentators in terms of both personal flaws and as an effective intelligence officer. Peter Crockett judged Petrov as a “weak character”: “timid and ineffective” who was “undistinguished as a spy” due to his “passive nature” and “lack of interest in espionage”, which he regarded as “too dangerous”.<sup>8</sup> Frank Cain, who argued, erroneously, that Petrov was “planted” by the Soviets as a false defector, referred to his “drunkenness and inefficiency in conducting his duties”.<sup>9</sup> David McKnight considered him as “not a very good spy”, afflicted by professional failure and an egregious private life.<sup>10</sup> Bill Guy simply saw him as a “grubby mediocrity”,<sup>11</sup> while the highly jaundiced W.J. Brown judged him as “degenerate in living habits, obtuse and incompetent” as well as being a “traitor, informer [and] criminal”.<sup>12</sup> Harry Gelber assessed Petrov in these terms: “His lack of professional initiative, his financial and administrative dishonesties, as well as his sleazy personal habits, marked him as a man promoted well beyond his true competence”.<sup>13</sup> Wilhelm Agrell agreed:

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<sup>4</sup> For exceptions, see Benjamin Tromly, “Ambivalent Heroes: Russian Defectors and American Power in the Early Cold War,” *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol 33, 5 (2018), pp. 642–58; Huw Dylan, “SIS, Grigori Tokaev, and the London Controlling Section: New Perspectives on a Cold War Defector and Cold War Deception,” *War in History*, Vol 26, 4 (2019), pp. 517–38.

<sup>5</sup> These memoirs include Victor Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom: The Personal and Political Life of a Soviet Official* (New York: Robert Hale, 1946); Igor Gouzenko, *This Was My Choice* (London: Eyre & Spottiswood, 1948); Peter Pirogov, *Why I Escaped: The Story of Peter Pirogov* (London: Harville, 1950); Grigory Tokaev, *Betrayal of an Ideal* (London: Harville, 1955); Peter Deriabin and Frank Gibney *The Secret World* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1959); Anatoli Granovski, *I Was an NKVD Agent: A Top Soviet Spy Tells His Story* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1962); Oleg Kalugin, *Spymaster: My 32 Years in Intelligence and Espionage Against the West* (London: Smith Gryphon, 1994); Rupert Sigl, *In the Claws of the KGB: Memoirs of a Double Agent* (London: Dorrance, 1978); Stanislav Levchenko, *On the Wrong Side: My Life in the KGB* (New York: Pergamon-Brassey, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> Amy Knight, *How the Cold War Began: The Igor Gouzenko Affair and the Hunt for Soviet Spies* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> For example, after ASIO’s Director-General, Charles Spry, met with a “personal representative” of J. Edgar Hoover in Canberra, it was evident that “there has certainly been a marked change in the F.B.I. attitude to A.S.I.O. since the Petrov affair.” Correspondence, High Commissioner, UK [Sir Stephen Holmes], to Head Office, 12 August 1954, The National Archives, UK (TNA): KV/2, 3445, folio 341b.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Crockett, *Evatt: A Life* (Melbourne: OUP, 1993), pp. 246, 266, 271, 273.

<sup>9</sup> Frank Cain, *A.S.I.O. An Unofficial History* (London: Frank Cass, 1994), p. 131.

<sup>10</sup> David McKnight, *Australia’s Spies and Their Secrets* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994), p. 64. Similarly, Hogan commented that “Petrov was not a very good spy.” Sandra Hogan, *With My Little Eye* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2021), p. 124.

<sup>11</sup> Bill Guy, *A Life on the Left: A Biography of Clyde Cameron* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 1999), p. 135.

<sup>12</sup> W.J. Brown, *The Petrov Conspiracy Unmasked* (Sydney: Current Book Distributors, 1956 [reprinted 1973]), pp. 19, 220.

<sup>13</sup> Harry Gelber, “The Petrov Affair: Politics and Intelligence in Australia,” *Quadrant* (August 1987), p. 19.

The sad truth was Colonel Vladimir Petrov was simply not up to the job [...] He had only been acquainted with intelligence work in a foreign and hostile environment. But it was not just about his inexperience. He was also no linguist; his English was clumsy and shaky.<sup>14</sup>

The value of the intelligence he provided to the security services has similarly been questioned. Sheila Fitzpatrick noted that Petrov had cultivated “few, if any”, contacts amongst anti-communist Russian migrants, despite Moscow’s instructions to create agent networks within the émigré anti-Soviet “White” Russian community.<sup>15</sup> Consistent with this, Robert Manne mentioned that in early 1953, Moscow Centre (located in the Lubyanka building in Moscow’s Dzerzhinsky Square, and which coordinated espionage operations of the foreign intelligence services) issued Petrov with “a strong reprimand concerning the indifferent quality of his work in Australia”.<sup>16</sup> According to Frank Cain, Petrov “achieved no intelligence gains”,<sup>17</sup> while Harvey Barnett judged Petrov’s intelligence gathering in Australia as “slight”.<sup>18</sup> Buckley, Dale and Reynolds suggested that much of the material provided to the RCE by Petrov was “dubious or tainted”.<sup>19</sup> Gregory Pemberton and Cain argued that Petrov could not have provided valuable intelligence: Pemberton maintained that documents in the Petrov Papers did not emanate from Moscow but were written and planted by ASIO;<sup>20</sup> Cain dismissed the Petrov Papers as forgeries.<sup>21</sup>

Even contemporary commentators were unimpressed. Michael Bialoguski, the double-agent who cultivated Petrov as a defector, believed “it would have been better [for ASIO] if Petrov had never defected”, such was his limited intelligence worth.<sup>22</sup> John Burton, the head of the Department of External Affairs (1947–51), said that Petrov was “too stupid” to be of value and was unlikely to have had access to any significant information; his defection, therefore, was of little concern to the Russians.<sup>23</sup> Bill Brown claimed that Petrov’s information was “baseless”.<sup>24</sup> And, of course, there was Dr H.V. Evatt, formerly Deputy Prime Minister, Attorney-General, and Minister for External Affairs and now (1954), Labor leader of the Federal Opposition. He

<sup>14</sup> Wilhelm Agrell, *Mrs Petrov’s Shoe: The True Story of a KGB defection* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), p. 111.

<sup>15</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *White Russians, Red Peril: A Cold War History of Migration to Australia* (Melbourne: La Trobe University Press, 2021), pp. 241, 255.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Manne *The Petrov Affair: Politics and Espionage* (Sydney: Pergamon, 1987), p. 28. Such reprimands were not uncommon; even Nikolai Mikhailovich Lifanov, the Soviet Ambassador to Australia (1948–53), received one. NAA: A6283, 9, folio 30. There was no love lost between Lifanov and Petrov; according to his son, “My father spoke of Petrov as a bad worker and repeatedly demanded that Moscow recall him from Australia.” Personal correspondence with Mikhail Livanov, 4 October 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Cain, *A.S.I.O. An Unofficial History*, p. 131.

<sup>18</sup> Harvey Barnett, *Tale of the Scorpion* (Sydney: Sun Books, 1989), p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> Ken Buckley, Barbara Dale, and Wayne Reynolds, *Doc Evatt* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1994), p. 373.

<sup>20</sup> Gregory Pemberton, “Petrov: History Rewritten,” *Weekend Australian*, 6–7 November 1993, p. 19.

<sup>21</sup> Frank Cain, “The Petrov Affair and Fake Documents: Another Look,” *Honest History*, 15 March 2017, [honesthistory.net.au/wp/cain-frank-the-petrov-affair-and-fake-documents-another-look-2/](http://honesthistory.net.au/wp/cain-frank-the-petrov-affair-and-fake-documents-another-look-2/)

<sup>22</sup> Michael Bialoguski, *The Petrov Story* (Melbourne: William Heinemann, 1955), p. 125. Bialoguski was born in Kiev, lived in Poland and arrived in Australia in 1941. For further biographical details see NAA: A6119, 1, folios 30–1.

<sup>23</sup> Pamela Burton with Meredith Edwards, *Persons of Interest: An Intimate Account of Cecily and John Burton* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2022), p. 214.

<sup>24</sup> Brown, *Petrov Conspiracy Unmasked*, p. 18. A communist leaflet was entitled “Menziess Concocted ‘Spy’ Plot” (Sydney [1954], in author’s possession).

believed that Petrov's documents were fake, a belief reinforced by the Soviet Foreign Ministry's reply to Evatt's controversial letter to Vyacheslav Molotov that "confirmed" their fabrication.<sup>25</sup>

This article will question these interpretations about Vladimir Petrov. It will focus not on the well-documented deficiencies of character — his alcoholism, his bootlegging, his abusive and boorish behaviour, or his penchant for young prostitutes — but on his intelligence activities before defection and intelligence production after defection. Through a close examination of the security files of MI5 and ASIO and the transcripts of the RCE, the article will argue for an alternative understanding of Petrov. It will suggest that Petrov's contact with Russian individuals and pro-Soviet political organisations in Australia was far more extensive than generally assumed; that, contrary to the conclusions of the royal commissioners and the historiographical consensus, he withheld intelligence about his contacts and informants from his security service debriefers and the RCE; and that rather than adopting an indolent attitude towards espionage, Petrov was in fact a committed and active Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) cadre.

## Background

But first, who was Vladimir Petrov?<sup>26</sup> He was born Afanasii Mikhailovich Shorokhov on 15 February 1907 into an illiterate peasant family in Larikha in central Siberia. He and his two brothers became fatherless when he was seven. After attending a local school (1915–17), from the age of fourteen he helped to support his mother as a blacksmith's apprentice. His ascent in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union began in 1923 when he established a local Komsomol (All-Union Leninist Young Communist League) cell. He became a fulltime Komsomol organiser and Communist Party member in 1927. Later he qualified as a cipher specialist in the Soviet Navy. In November 1929, he changed his surname to Proletarskii to emphasise his background and ideology and four years later was recruited by the OGPU (Joint State Political Directorate). He survived Stalin's purges in the 1930s and served in China (1938–39) as chief of a cipher unit, for which he was awarded a Red Star. In July 1940, he married Evdokia Alekseevna Kartseva, whose first husband had been arrested in 1937.

In June 1942, Proletarskii, now a major in the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs), was, without his knowledge, renamed Petrov; this was regarded as a more suitable name for a foreign posting. In July, he and Evdokia were sent to the Soviet embassy in Stockholm under diplomatic cover. He was given responsibility for both cipher duties and the internal security of SK (Sovetskaya Koloniya/Soviet Colony), which involved surveillance of embassy personnel. They returned to Moscow in 1947, and he was promoted to lieutenant-colonel in the MGB. Between October 1947 and January 1951, his name reverted to Proletarskii and then back to Petrov. After they received their second foreign posting, Petrov, now a full colonel, arrived at the Soviet embassy in Canberra on 5 February 1951. That year he was awarded the prestigious Order of the Red Banner. He had no family, his brother having died in

<sup>25</sup> Manne, *Petrov Affair*, pp. 245–46; John Murphy, *Evatt: A Life* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2016), pp. 314–15.

<sup>26</sup> The following biographical information is drawn from NAA: A6283, 2, folios 59–67 and A6283, 78, folios 75–82; Royal Commission on Espionage, *Official Transcript of Proceedings* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1954–55, hereafter *RCE Transcript of Proceedings*), 30 June 1954, pp. 65–71; Vladimir and Evdokia Petrov, *Empire of Fear* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1956), Chapters 1–8.

1927 and his mother in 1949. There was one estranged child from his first marriage to (in Evdokia's words) "a very beautiful woman who had the virtues of a prostitute".<sup>27</sup>

### Intelligence Provided by Petrov

There can now be no doubt that the documents Petrov brought with him in April 1954 were genuine, not ASIO forgeries as Evatt and many of his Labor supporters assumed then and some historians have argued since. The documents were taken by Petrov from the MVD safe in the Russian embassy on 2 April 1954 and handed to G.R. (Ron) Richards (ASIO Deputy Director-General, Operations) on 3 April. As was customary, these documents were to be burnt but Petrov, defying official instructions, saved them from destruction. The Moscow documents arrived in diplomatic mail, conveyed by couriers, delivered in the form of film negatives, and then developed by Petrov. The majority of them, most in Russian, a few in English, were from 1952. Three documents were from 1953; none was from 1954. Fear of his own exposure and the danger to Evdokia, who was aware of their existence but not of the plan to steal them, deterred him from taking more of the recent documents.<sup>28</sup> It was not the coded instructions or the letters from Moscow Centre to Petrov, translated and retained in now-declassified ASIO files,<sup>29</sup> that caused most controversy during the RCE proceedings, but Document H, written by Evatt's press secretary, Fergan O'Sullivan (codenamed ZEMLIAK or "compatriot"), and Document J, written by communist journalist, Rupert Lockwood (WARREN).<sup>30</sup> Neither was concocted by ASIO.

The claim that Petrov was "not up to the job" and "not a very good spy" must be set against the valuable intelligence that he did furnish to ASIO, MI5, MI6, and the British Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ). As a minute of a Joint Intelligence Committee meeting, attended by MI5's Deputy Director-General Roger Hollis, recorded, Petrov was "a man of very considerable importance from our point of view".<sup>31</sup> MI5 and GCHQ sent officers (George Leggatt and John Christie, respectively) to interview Petrov, as did the Swedish intelligence service, SÄPO, which sent two officers. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was also keen to interview but had to be content with abridged reports that ASIO and MI5 were prepared to share. Both the British and the Americans sought, unsuccessfully, to bring the Petrovs to the United Kingdom for interrogation and to the United States as witnesses before a Congressional committee.

Much of Petrov's information remained classified at the time, but his startling revelation concerning the whereabouts (in Russia) of the "missing diplomats", Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean (Soviet spies who defected in 1951), attracted widespread publicity and questions in the House of Commons.<sup>32</sup> Of particular interest to GCHQ

<sup>27</sup> NAA: A6122, 96, folio 78.

<sup>28</sup> "Interview with Petrov at safe house, 6 April 1954," NAA: A6283, 1, folios 25–7. The locations of the safe houses were protected by a "D" Notice: Spry to Secretary of the Department of Defence, 28 June 1954, NAA: A6283, 2, folio 274.

<sup>29</sup> See NAA: A6283, 1, folios 1–23; A6283, 18, folios 40–80.

<sup>30</sup> Petrov told ASIO that "I in fact introduced ANTONOV to ZEMLIAK [O'Sullivan]." NAA: A6283, 2, folio 212.

<sup>31</sup> Minutes of JIC (54), 34th Meeting (Directors), 14 April 1954, TNA: KV/2, 3440, folio 110a.

<sup>32</sup> See Petrov's three-page sworn affidavit on Burgess and Maclean, 29 March 1956, TNA: KV 2/3470 at folio 917b. Petrov also detailed the role of Philip Kislitsyn, a MGB officer stationed in London, in helping organise their escape. Kislitsyn, a close friend of Petrov in whom he confided his role, was second secretary of the Russian Embassy in Canberra in 1952–4. See also *Empire of Fear*, pp. 271–3.

was the intelligence both Petrovs provided on Soviet cipher systems: “cipher clerks, of whatever service, are a top priority” and both Petrovs had considerable cipher expertise and would produce “code books and cipher pads”.<sup>33</sup> ASIO was given “external assistance” in the interrogation of the Petrovs on Soviet cipher clerks. The upshot was two ASIO papers: the six-page “Report on Soviet Cipher Clerks”, and the twelve-page “The Organisation of Soviet Cipher Services”, which were sent to MI5, MI6, and GCHQ.<sup>34</sup> The latter included sections on the Soviet overseas cipher communications service, Soviet military intelligence cipher service, and cryptanalysis. A third paper detailed the personal particulars of all the cipher clerks whom the Petrovs knew enabling both their ready identification and counter-intelligence action.<sup>35</sup>

The significance of the Petrovs’ cryptographic information was linked to the Venona project, an ultra-secret Anglo-American programme (codenamed “Bride” in the United Kingdom), which decrypted cable traffic between Moscow Centre and Russian embassies and consulates. This code-breaking effort enabled the identification and neutralisation of Soviet espionage networks operating in the West, including Australia, from 1944. According to a still-classified ASIO memorandum, the Petrovs were able “to comment with first-hand knowledge on the Venona traffic which was being broken in the Stockholm/Moscow lane”.<sup>36</sup>

Petrov also provided scientific intelligence. Indicative of the detail sought was the long list of questions posed to Petrov on Soviet methods of collecting and processing scientific and technical information. Question 23, for example, asked how such information was procured: whether by specialist MVD officers working under diplomatic cover, by general intelligence officers, or by illegal residents.<sup>37</sup> EM work (monitoring émigrés abroad) was also addressed, culminating in the report “EM Operations of the State Security Service”.<sup>38</sup> Curiously Petrov was sent questions on “Red Army – Political Role” and “Red Air Force” on which, understandably, he had little knowledge. More extensive, and intimate, was his knowledge of the structure, functions, and techniques of the Russian Intelligence Service (RIS) apparatus; this resulted in yet another report, a summary of which ASIO forwarded to a wide range of countries in Europe and the Americas.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, there were reports on “R.I.S. [Russian Intelligence Services] Penetration of Foreign Security Services”, “E.M. Operations of the State Security Service”, “‘Illegal’ Operations of the Soviet Intelligence Services”, “Internal Organisations and Functions of a Soviet Embassy”, and the presumably invaluable eighteen-page “Soviet State Security Service: Foreign Intelligence Operational Techniques (‘Legal’ Residency System)”.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>33</sup> TNA: KV 2/3470, folios 909b and 924a.

<sup>34</sup> TNA: KV 2/3470, folio 988; SLO [Security Liaison Officer] to MI5, 10 September 1956, TNA: KV 2/3472, folio 1019a. They were also distributed to the FBI, the CIA, the National Security Agency and the Canadian RCMP.

<sup>35</sup> Correspondence, 31 August 1956, TNA: KV 2/3471, folio 1002a.

<sup>36</sup> Memo, “Reasons for the Continued Protection of the Venona Material,” n.d., cited in David Horner, *The Spy Catchers: The Official History of ASIO 1949–1963*, Volume 1 (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2014), p. 378.

<sup>37</sup> GR Mitchell (MI5) to HS Young (Ministry of Defence), 14 November 1956, TNA: KV 2/3472, folio 1058a. For Petrov’s answers and the resultant report, “Soviet Collection and Processing of Scientific Intelligence,” see TNA: KV 2/3472, folios 1048a and 1068a.

<sup>38</sup> TNA: KV 2/3460, folios 67–72.

<sup>39</sup> TNA: KV 2/3470, folio 909a.

<sup>40</sup> NAA: A6283, 9, folios 150–51, 129–49; A6283, 17, folios 42–54; A6283, 149, folios 1–20.

In tandem with the vast number of ASIO reports — fifty-two in total — derived from the Petrov interrogations was the preoccupation with what MI5 called “the rogues gallery”. The Petrovs identified from photographs and lists 522 Soviet intelligence officers — their names, histories, personal characteristics and precise roles and responsibilities within the command structure of the RIS. This included, significantly, MVD cadres who had served overseas and MVD diplomatic couriers, and possible recruits for cultivation and defection.<sup>41</sup> These identifications were circulated to Western intelligence agencies and inflicted immediate and significant damage to the espionage operations of the RIS.<sup>42</sup> Petrov furnished a vast amount of intelligence on Sweden, his previous posting.<sup>43</sup> The value of the Petrovs’ contributions was not underestimated by Western counterintelligence. According to MI5, the interrogation of the Petrovs provided “a far more detailed insight into the workings of the RIS than was the case previously, or than has been acquired from the defectors in American hands”.<sup>44</sup> But there was an exception. “Only in Australia”, Robert Manne comments, “has the genuine importance of the Petrovs been persistently misunderstood”.<sup>45</sup>

### Underestimating Petrov

Part of the explanation for such persistent misunderstanding in Australia lay in the apparent irrelevance of Petrov’s knowledge of overseas Soviet espionage to the RCE, evidenced in this exchange:

MR. WINDEYER: Mr. Petrov has been able to give a great deal of information very interesting and important to the United Kingdom, and very important in some ways, I think, to the free world.

THE CHAIRMAN: But not relevant to this Inquiry?

MR. WINDEYER: That is so.<sup>46</sup>

Also contributing to this misunderstanding, and to the general view amongst Australian commentators that Petrov was merely a bumbling and ineffective MVD officer, was the vagueness of Petrov’s intelligence about Soviet spies in Australia. Unlike the “rogues gallery” of RIS officers, he was unable to identify those involved in espionage. Instead,

Between 1945 and 1948 there was a very serious situation in Australia in the Dept. of External Affairs. The Communist Party here had a group of External Affairs officers who were giving them official information. The members of the group were transmitting copies of official documents, which they then gave to a Communist Party member. This Party man gave the documents to Mr

<sup>41</sup> See “MGB Personnel Abroad,” National Archives of Australia (NAA): A6383, 2; “Identification of Soviet Personnel Stationed in Great Britain,” NAA: A6283, 7, folios 185–94; “Reports of Interrogations of Petrovs,” NAA: A6383, 82. The head of the First Directorate Secretariat of the MGB, Vasili Kulakov, for instance, was described as “a man who would be attracted by life abroad and by material possessions”: “PF 137, 694 Vol. 19 Link A,” TNA: KV 2/3473. The Petrovs, often begrudgingly, continued analysing photos until 1959: see M.T.E. Clayton (MI5) to SLO Australia, 24 September 1959, TNA KV/23474, folio 1162a.

<sup>42</sup> However, we do not know how quickly or effectively Moscow Centre counteracted this damage once it became aware of the reports based on the Petrovs’ interrogations, thanks to its agent in MI6, George Blake.

<sup>43</sup> See TNA: KV2/3458.

<sup>44</sup> Memo, “Reasons for the Continued Protection of the Venona Material,” n.d., cited in Horner, *Spy Catchers*, p. 379. One double agent in a position to know recalled that Petrov provided “valuable information about Soviet agents and code systems.” Kim Philby, *My Silent War* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968), No 84, p. 186.

<sup>45</sup> Manne, *Petrov Affair*, pp. 226–27.

<sup>46</sup> *RCE Transcript of Proceedings*, 11 June 1954, p. 54.



Makarov at the Soviet Embassy [...] I do not know the name of the Party man who at that time reported to Makarov — but his codename was Clode.<sup>47</sup>

Although this statement was far more important to ASIO and MI5 than many others realised at the time — for it corroborated the Venona decrypts that identified by codename a small group in External Affairs (Ian Milner, Frances Bernie, Jim Hill, and obliquely Ric Throssell) led by the “spymaster” Clode/Klod (Wally Clayton) — the fact that none of the so-called Klod group was charged or prosecuted in a court of law was apparent evidence of the Petrov’s deficiencies as a MVD agent.<sup>48</sup>

Another instance of Petrov’s vagueness was when he was questioned about the sole reference to FERRO (Throssell) in the Petrov Papers. This was in Document G.14, Item 14: “Charli— REX Claude, Ferro — transmitted oral information Comm. and then they to us”.<sup>49</sup> But it was part of an aide-mémoire in connection to documents dealing with the Seventh Session of the United Nations General Assembly. ASIO approached Petrov twice to explain this but he could give no satisfactory answer; “the last information I heard from [redacted] was that Petrov was ‘thinking about it’”.<sup>50</sup> Petrov’s comment, “thinking about it”, may simply suggest an issue of faulty memory and recall; more probably it points to his deliberate decision to withhold information from ASIO. If we can accept this, a quite different perspective on Vladimir Petrov emerges.

### Withholding Information?

The evidence that Petrov was unwilling to share fully information with his debriefers is scattered. The most authoritative study of the Petrov affair suggests the author harboured doubts that Petrov gave full and honest details. Regarding the conclusion that Petrov’s EM achievements amongst Russian émigrés were desultory, Robert Manne comments: “if Petrov was to be believed”. Regarding MVD penetration of External Affairs and ASIO itself, on which Petrov had only a “small repertoire”, Manne again writes “if Petrov was to be believed”. And regarding Petrov’s relationship with a local communist, Bert Chandler, Manne concludes that Petrov was “concealing” information, “was not telling the whole truth”, and that there was a “dimension” to Petrov’s relationship with Chandler that Petrov was “anxious to conceal”. Thus, asks Manne, “was Petrov telling ASIO considerably less than the whole truth about his activities in Australia?”<sup>51</sup>

Manne’s unresolved doubts about Petrov’s reliability were, of course, not shared by the royal commissioners, who concluded that “the Petrovs are witnesses of truth” and, in their subsequent confidential “Lessons arising” report, were “impressive and truthful witnesses”.<sup>52</sup> A close reading of the transcripts of the RCE does confirm the veracity or plausibility of much (but certainly not all) of Petrov’s testimony. However, it is what was *not* asked and *not* said that is equally revealing.

Notwithstanding Petrov’s admissions about Andrei Andreyevich Fridenbergs at the RCE and the aforementioned intelligence production on overseas RIS activity, during

<sup>47</sup> “Statement by V. Petrov,” 3 April 1954, NAA: A6213, RCE/N/6, folios 9–10.

<sup>48</sup> Only Frances Bernie admitted to passing documents from Evatt’s office to Clayton. Transcript of statement, 8 September 1954, NAA: A6283, 18, n.f.

<sup>49</sup> For Document G.14, see *Report of the Royal Commission on Espionage* (Sydney: Commonwealth of Australia, 1955), Appendix No. 1, 414 (hereafter *RCE Report*).

<sup>50</sup> Memorandum for Director-General, 11 October 1954, NAA: A6119, 97, folio 86; memorandum for Deputy Director-General (Operations), 5 January 1955, NAA: A6119, 365, folio 58.

<sup>51</sup> Manne, *Petrov Affair*, pp. 198–99, 203, 212.

<sup>52</sup> *RCE Report*, 65; NAA: A6122, 96, folio 99; A6122, 96, folio 74.

his interrogations by ASIO and MI5 security officers, he was often reticent and “need [ed] to be pumped by a process of question and answer”.<sup>53</sup> According to Derek Hamblen, MI5’s Senior Liaison Officer (SLO) in Australia, “I consider PETROV has been deliberately careful in his selection of documents and that he is playing down his own role and success”.<sup>54</sup> Later, he telegraphed that Petrov “still holds out” on his answers regarding MVD instructions sent to him.<sup>55</sup> Hamblen’s replacement from mid-1955, George Leggett, maintained there was “ample evidence” that Petrov was withholding information and that “Spry and his senior officers are convinced that these defectors know a great deal more about successful Soviet espionage in Australia than they have so far divulged”. He added that it was “increasingly more difficult” to extract this information from him.<sup>56</sup> It was surmised that Petrov’s unwillingness to answer questions about current Russian espionage activity was due to his “fear that he might himself be prosecuted for the part he had played”.<sup>57</sup> Leggett’s regular reports to MI5 thereafter are punctuated with frustration over the Petrovs’ stalling, prevarication, and sometimes outright refusal to cooperate. In 1955 he cabled London that “A.S.I.O. and I are still convinced that [Petrov] was holding back on certain information on R.I.S. activities and particularly on successful espionage operations – in Australia”.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, an ASIO report on the lessons arising from the RCE noted, Petrov “purposely withheld information which was of vital security value. He objected to questioning and made the task as difficult as possible”.<sup>59</sup>

This withholding of information was paralleled by an insistence that particular individuals be neither pursued nor identified. Evdokia, for instance, “particularly” requested that the name of the director of the Second Directorate of the KI (Komitet Infomatsyi or Committee of Information, which dealt with foreign political intelligence), I.I. Agayanz, be not mentioned at the RCE. Similarly, she made a “special request” that no mention be made of her other superiors in the KI Department to which she had been attached due to “her friendship with them”.<sup>60</sup> Generally, the Petrovs were tight-lipped about who their friends were but Evdokia did state, in regard to the Wassilieffs (mentioned earlier), “I would prefer not to give evidence concerning Mr. and Mrs. VASILIEFF [*sic*] whom I consider to be good friends of mine”.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>53</sup> TNA: KV 2/3444, folio 287a.

<sup>54</sup> Telegram SLO to MI5, 24 April 1954, TNA: KV 2/3440, folio 147a.

<sup>55</sup> Telegram SLO to MI5, 10 June 1954, TNA: KV 2/3442, folio 272b.

<sup>56</sup> TNA: KV 2/3444, folios 467a and 490b.

<sup>57</sup> “Aide Memoir for Director-General’s Statement on the Petrov Case,” Joint Intelligence Committee Meeting, TNA: KV 2/3442, folio 249a. Astonishingly, he denied there had been any contact between L.L. (Lance) Sharkey (general secretary of the CPA) and members of the Soviet Embassy, when ASIO’s surveillance of Sharkey made clear that he had, especially with MVD’s Victor Antonov. NAA: A6283, 72, folio 185; NAA: A6119, 1, folio 110. In 1953, Petrov received from Moscow \$25,000 USD that was delivered to Sharkey at a “pre-arranged conspiratorial house”; Sharkey signed a receipt for “25,000 lists,” which was then forwarded to Moscow. Statement by E. Petrov, 12 September 1954, NAA: A6283, 3, folios 140–45.

<sup>58</sup> “Extract from Monthly Report for February 1955 from SLO Australia,” para. 4, 28 February 1955, TNA: KV 2/3444, folio 475c.

<sup>59</sup> NAA: A6122, 96, folio 73.

<sup>60</sup> Telegrams, UK High Commissioner to Head Office MI5, 12 July 1954, 15 July 1954, TNA: KV 2/3444, folios 301d, 306b. However, Petrov was questioned about Agayanz; see *RCE Transcript of Proceedings*, 30 June 1954, p. 75.

<sup>61</sup> Signed statement, E. Petrov, 18 November 1954, NAA: A6119, 1, folio 102. My thanks to Ebony Nilsson for alerting me to this reference. Similarly, Petrov had a “very high” opinion of Wassilieff: *RCE Transcript of Proceedings*, 21 January 1955, 1890.

## Contact with Russians in Australia

During 1951–53, based on ASIO surveillance, Petrov made at least three visits to the home of Iva Anderson (née Mikailovska).<sup>62</sup> The second visit was with his wife, Evdokia, and they left Russian recordings that, perhaps suspiciously, she destroyed when she learnt of his defection. On the third visit, for reasons unknown, he was accompanied by Michael Bialoguski.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, Petrov and Bialoguski visited a Russian-born widower, Barbara Kazanova, in November 1952 “unexpectedly” and without prior arrangement. They were also accompanied by Ellen Briemle who had already met MVD’s Viktor Antonov and Ivan Pakhomov and, curiously, was there to translate despite all present being fluent in Russian.<sup>64</sup> A subsequent ASIO interview with Kazanov revealed that it was suggested to her by Petrov that a MVD cadre might be sent from the Soviet Union for illegal duties in Australia to “pose as one of her relatives”.<sup>65</sup> Petrov was not questioned about either of these Russian-born women, or the purpose of his visits, by the RCE. Nor was the fact that he drove his wife to all her meetings with an anti-communist Latvian, Regina Meinhold, whom, arguably, Evdokia was cultivating. This was a joint operation and consistent with EM work.<sup>66</sup>

Better known are Petrov’s frequent meetings throughout 1952 with Arkadie Yalovlevitch Wassilieff, a manufacturer of uniquely hard-wearing aviation bearings. These meetings may have been innocuous but, equally, they may not. At one meeting, Petrov obtained samples of the ball bearings that he despatched, along with data on the technology of their manufacture, to Moscow via courier, as instructed by Moscow Centre.<sup>67</sup> Wassilieff volunteered the samples and received no payment for them.<sup>68</sup> He founded the Russian Club in Melbourne, was well known in Communist Party circles, had regular contact with Soviet officials under diplomatic cover and, according to ASIO, was the “leader of the pro-communist element in the Russian community”.<sup>69</sup> Moscow assigned him the codename KUSTER. Petrov met him at his Canberra home (twice), at a Sydney restaurant, at Wassilieff’s Melbourne home (four occasions) and stayed overnight with him (twice).<sup>70</sup> He was the subject of a Victorian police Special Branch investigation and was reported to “be on very friendly terms with PETROV”, and was judged to be “the most important of all the contacts yet made”.<sup>71</sup> In a letter in the Petrov Papers, dated 25 November 1952, Moscow Centre noted, accurately, that

<sup>62</sup> NAA: A6283, 2, folio 189. For the intense surveillance of Petrov over two months in 1953, see A6283, 76, folios 315–27 and A9626, 334; for ASIO surveillance from 1951 to 1954, see A6283, 2, folios 40–7 and A6283, 3, folios 104–10.

<sup>63</sup> NAA: AC123, 13448; NAA: A6283, 1, folio 141.

<sup>64</sup> NAA: A6119, 1, folios 91, 98; “Statutory Declaration of Barbara (Varvara Ilyinichna) Kazanova,” 12 October 1954, NAA: A6283, 10, folios 2–4.

<sup>65</sup> NAA: A6283, 1, folio 130. Moscow had recommended to Petrov (Letter No. 6, November 1952) sending “our cadre worker illegally under the pretext that he is one of her relatives,” to which Petrov agreed. A6283, 23, n.f. This was confirmed by Petrov in *Empire of Fear*, p. 268. See also NAA: A6119, 1, folios 39–40 for Petrov’s description of “illegal workers” in relation to Mrs Kazanova’s son.

<sup>66</sup> See Phillip Deery and Julie Kimber, “Beyond the Red Shoe: Searching for Mrs Petrov,” *Australian Journal of History and Biography*, No 8 (2024), pp. 49–67.

<sup>67</sup> Moscow Letter No. 6 to Petrov, 25 November 1952, in *RCE Report*, 215–16. See also Bialoguski, *The Petrov Story*, p. 104.

<sup>68</sup> NAA: A6119, 1, folio 102.

<sup>69</sup> NAA: A6119, 6988, folios 41–2, 44.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*; NAA: A6119, 7, folio 220; Surveillance report, A6283, 11, Part A, folio 9; A6283, 18, folios 140–42.

<sup>71</sup> NAA: A6122, 2739, folios 17–8.

Wassilieff was “evidently under the surveillance of counter-intelligence”.<sup>72</sup> Petrov insisted their meetings were purely social. This may have been disingenuous. Wassilieff was called before the RCE but persuaded the commissioners of his good character and was cleared of involvement in any espionage. The two thick security files on him suggest that ASIO was not similarly persuaded.<sup>73</sup> As a newspaper cutting in MI5’s files commented, “Someone is fibbing”.<sup>74</sup>

One of the many Russians whom Petrov denied knowing was Anthony Gordon-Gorsky and his wife. Both were “enthusiastic” members of the Russian Social Club in Sydney — regarded as “a natural base for operations”<sup>75</sup> — and both were on the club’s committee; she a foundation member of the club in 1948 and a member of the Australia–Russia Society.<sup>76</sup> Given the frequency with which Petrov visited the club; arranged and paid for social gatherings (often supplying the vodka despite the club having no liquor licence); gave at least one lecture there; knew other committee members;<sup>77</sup> and encouraged Russians to come to the club,<sup>78</sup> it seems astonishing that Petrov was ignorant of the Gorskys, and one has to ask if he was protecting them, as contacts. There were undoubtedly others, too. As Fitzpatrick pointedly wrote, his consistent statements that “none of these Red Russians were [*sic*] serving as agents or even regular informers of Soviet intelligence is so odd that one might suspect Petrov of protecting his friends”.<sup>79</sup>

Petrov certainly fulfilled his MVD responsibility in EM work (the briefing to monitor émigré groups) by reactivating Andrei Andreyevich Fridenbergs, a former MVD agent in Europe, codenamed SIGMA, who came to Australia in 1949. Three months after his arrival in Canberra, “as laid down by the M.V.D. authorities in Moscow”, Petrov made contact with Fridenbergs.<sup>80</sup> They rendezvoused six times, all in Melbourne, often employing the tradecraft used by intelligence agents meeting clandestinely. According to Petrov, Fridenbergs, “a most reliable man”, supplied him with reports on the political activities of the Latvian community, which he sent to Moscow by diplomatic mail marked “secret”. These reports included the current addresses of two anti-Soviet Latvian émigrés of special interest to the MVD.<sup>81</sup> Until Janis Plaitkais — a MVD cadre

<sup>72</sup> *RCE Report*, Appendix No. 1, F9, 388.

<sup>73</sup> See NAA: A6119, 6998, 6999.

<sup>74</sup> Ronald McKie, “The Petrov Inquiry,” *A.M.*, 27 July 1954, in TNA: KV2/3445.

<sup>75</sup> Petrovs, *Empire of Fear*, 261. An ASIO source noted that Petrov was “endeavouring to influence New Australians who visit the Russian Social Club.” NAA: A6119, 7, folio 41.

<sup>76</sup> NAA: A6283, 10, folios 67–8; A6283, 11, folio 54.

<sup>77</sup> For example, he knew that Mr Bernstein was the club’s treasurer; NAA: A6119, 7, folio 152.

<sup>78</sup> Petrov was reported (probably by Bialoguski) to have said to Boris Binetsky in late 1951: “If I cannot get you a visa you will always be useful to us in Australia. Come often to the Club [...] and work for Russia.” NAA: A6119, 1, folio 42. On Binetsky, who did not appear before the RCE, see NAA: A6126, 1414.

<sup>79</sup> Fitzpatrick, *White Russians, Red Peril*, p. 257. For example, one Russian living in Sydney, whom Petrov described as “a good Soviet agent” previously but denied making contact with him, was Vintsovich Divischek (codenamed PECHEK). NAA: A6283, 2, folio 50. Another, whom Petrov did meet at the Russian Social Club “on several occasions” and in Canberra but denied studying him, was Alexander (“Sasha”) Dukin. NAA: A6122, 2800, folios 31–2.

<sup>80</sup> On the MVD’s methods of allocating codenames, see NAA: A6283, 2, folios 172–4; A6283, 14, folios 83–4. Part of it reads: “the code name is allocated only after personal acquaintance with the subject has been made by the M.V.D. Officer abroad.”

<sup>81</sup> One woman’s name was given by Petrov to the RCE as “a traitor to the Soviet, whom he had been instructed to locate by MOSCOW”; Fridenbergs then discovered her address, gave it to Petrov who then transmitted it to Moscow Centre. NAA: A6283, 72, folio 52.; NAA: A6122, 56, folio 97.

officer (DVINSKI) since 1941 and Petrov's EM successor — arrived in January 1953, Petrov was Fridenbergs' handler until mid-1953.<sup>82</sup> Fridenbergs strenuously denied all allegations, but the RCE judged him to be a low-level but useful Soviet agent.<sup>83</sup>

There was also, of course, Petrov's attempted cultivation over a long period of Rose-Marie Ollier, a French diplomat (OLGA),<sup>84</sup> and what he believed was his successful recruitment of the mercurial Michael Bialoguski, codenamed GRIGORII by Petrov ("Yes, I considered him reliable"<sup>85</sup>) and variously DIABLO, J. BAKER, and CRANE by ASIO. Both have been the subject of extensive discussion and will not be revisited here.<sup>86</sup> Generally overlooked was Petrov's attempt to co-opt Sergei Kharkovetz, a "favourably appraised" press attaché, into MVD intelligence work and to establish "contacts in circles of interest to us". He contacted Kharkovetz (OLIA), and "instructed him in his work [...] to keep the Soviet Colony under surveillance".<sup>87</sup> Petrov complied with two sets of instructions from Moscow Centre (dated 12 March 1952 and 27 September 1952) but Kharkovetz, according to Petrov, showed "no initiative" and was of "very little use".<sup>88</sup> He was also instructed by Moscow in early 1951 to recruit several other Russians. One was Nickolai Daghian (MONK), whom Petrov met at the Russian Social Club and whose Sydney photographic studio "could be utilised by the M.V.D. for conspiratorial purposes".<sup>89</sup> Another was Nikolai Nicolaevich Novikov (MEFODY), who also ran a photography studio and whose flat, Moscow instructed, was also to be used for conspiratorial purposes — that is, a meeting place for MVD workers and agents. He knew several MVD officers (Nosov, Makarov, Sadonikov, Pakhomov and Petrov). Novikov expressed (to the RCE) his "surprise" when Petrov "came personally" to deliver a passport.<sup>90</sup> Both Daghian and Novikov were "studied" but neither, according to Petrov, was recruited.

Petrov was instructed by Moscow (in January 1952) to contact "our agent", a Melbourne furrier and fur trader, Solomon Kosky, only with its permission since Nicolai Kovaliev, Petrov's co-opted collaborator, was to "study KOSKY with a view to

<sup>82</sup> "Petrov's Written Statement," 15 May 1954, TNA: KV 2/3444, folio 287a; *RCE Transcript of Proceedings*, 21 July 1954, pp. 326–29. Fridenbergs' name and address was in Petrov's diary, copied by Bialoguski on 19 June 1953, when a drunk Petrov was asleep in his Piper Point apartment. NAA: A6283, 72, folio 49. ASIO noted that Petrov's EM operations presented "much material" from which to draw "deductions and observations": NAA: A6122, 56, folio 95.

<sup>83</sup> *RCE Transcript of Proceedings*, 21 July 1954, pp. 330–34; 22 July 1954, pp. 341–47; *RCE Report*, pp. 244–45.

<sup>84</sup> See NAA: A6283, 2, folios 204–08, 214–15, 245–39. For Petrov's RCE testimony on Mme Ollier, see *RCE Transcript of Proceedings*, 20 July 1954, B-M.

<sup>85</sup> *RCE Transcript of Proceedings*, 9 March 1955, p. 2899. Petrov initially denied Bialoguski had a codename (that, he, Petrov, had assigned in 1951) but admitted it after Evdokia's statement on 8 September 1954. NAA: A6119, 1, folio 75; *RCE Transcript of Proceedings*, 20 September 1954, p. 1006; 21 September 1954, p. 1011.

<sup>86</sup> See index references to both in Manne, *Petrov Affair*; Horner, *Spy Catchers*, Michael Thwaites, *Truth Will Out: ASIO and the Petrovs* (Sydney: William Collins, 1980), especially pp. 76–86; Agrell, *Mrs Petrova's Shoe*; Nicholas Whitlam and John Stubbs, *Nest of Traitors: The Petrov Affair* (Brisbane, Jacaranda, 1974).

<sup>87</sup> NAA: A6283, 2, folio 179.

<sup>88</sup> *RCE Transcript of Proceedings*, 6 July 1954, pp. 149–50; 9 March 1955, p. 2899.

<sup>89</sup> NAA: A6119, 1, folio 77; "Interview with Petrov at safe house," 6 April 1954, A6283, 1, folio 54.

<sup>90</sup> NAA: A6283, 7, folio 91; *RCE Transcript of Proceedings*, 13 December 1954, pp. 1700–01; 14 December 1954, pp. 1718–29.

re-establishing agent control over him”.<sup>91</sup> Moscow had assigned Kosky with the codename, PRIYATEL (or “friend”). According to Petrov, Kosky was an NKVD agent for “many years” before he came to Australia and had been recruited in Moscow when visiting the Soviet Union.<sup>92</sup> One writer has claimed — improbably because the evidence is so flimsy — that Kosky was a GRU (Soviet military intelligence service) operative in a small, secret, Melbourne-based cell and that, equally implausibly, Kovaliev was “most definitely the boss” of the GRU cell.<sup>93</sup>

On the other hand, Nikolai Vassilievich Yalinicheff (codenamed NEVIDIMKA or “invisible person”), was a more likely GRU agent. Petrov knew of him when still in Moscow. A Russian seaman, he deserted from a Soviet ship in Egypt after arguing with an officer over “the political behaviour of the crew”.<sup>94</sup> He arrived in Australia in April 1950 after the MVD failed to locate him. Petrov met Yalinicheff twice in 1952 to discuss, ostensibly or actually, his application for repatriation to the Soviet Union. He was formerly a member of the Komsomol, stated he was “loyal to the Soviet Union” and in Melbourne was “in constant touch” with Abraham Frankel. According to ASIO interrogators, he was most likely “a Soviet agent infiltrated into Australia under the guise of a political refugee” and of potential use to Petrov “along E.M. lines and counter-intelligence”.<sup>95</sup> Petrov stated that Yalinicheff “did not carry out any assignments in Australia” on behalf of the MVD.<sup>96</sup> But if he *were* GRU, Petrov may have been unaware: the MVD and GRU apparatuses were quite distinct and often mutually antagonistic.<sup>97</sup> According to Petrov, it was “strictly forbidden” for the GRU to inform him of its agents (and vice versa).<sup>98</sup> However, after confirming there was definitely a GRU organisation in Australia “at the present time”, Petrov stated that GRU agents were “connected through sailors” (as indeed Yalinicheff had been).<sup>99</sup>

Finally, the Russian-born Abraham Frankel, who was extremely active in the Australia–Soviet Friendship Society, was assessed by ASIO — which interviewed him on 29 November 1954 — as having conducted “subversive activity” and “in close and personal contact with Soviet Intelligence and other personnel of the Soviet Embassy in

<sup>91</sup> “Solomon Kosky. BRIEF,” 20 May 1954, NAA: A6119, 925, folio 126; *RCE Transcript of Proceedings*, 10 March 1955, pp. 2912–13. The royal commissioners concluded that Kosky was clearly regarded by Moscow Centre “as an agent”: *RCE Report*, p. 209.

<sup>92</sup> NAA: A6283, 2, folio 97; A6283, 48, folio 46.

<sup>93</sup> John Fahey, *Traitors and Spies: Espionage and Corruption in High Places in Australia, 1901–50* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2020), pp. 282–84. Fahey’s assertion that Kovaliev was “the case officer of the Melbourne cell” (285) is at variance with ASIO’s interrogation of Petrov: “Mr. Richards: Did he [Kovaliev] collaborate with you? Mr. Petrov: Yes, but he was a bad man, stupid. He was always scared.” “Interview with Petrov at Safe House,” 6 April 1954, NAA: A6283, 1, folio 29.

<sup>94</sup> “Statement of V.M. Petrov,” 29 September 1954, NAA: A6122, 56, folio 78. On his application for registration he listed his occupation as “Mechanic.” NAA: B78, RUSSIAN/YALINICHEFF NIKOLAI NASILIEVIC.

<sup>95</sup> NAA: A6283, 3, folio 91; A6119, 7533, folio 162.

<sup>96</sup> “Statement of V.M. Petrov,” 29 September 1954, NAA: A6122, 56, folio 77.

<sup>97</sup> Petrov did, however, know that a GRU illegal apparatus was operating in Australia in the early 1950s and identified Lieutenant-Colonel A.A. Gordeev as the GRU *resident* along with Colonel Dimitri Egorovich Pavlov, ostensibly repatriation officers. NAA: A6283, 23, folio 170; *RCE Report*, 70–2; Petrov, *Empire of Fear*, p. 262. ASIO also knew of Gordeev and Pavlov: NAA: A6283, 10, folio 19. MI5 believed there were several other “undetermined cases” of GRU operatives in Australia “arising out of Petrov information.” SLO to MI5, 13 October 1955, TNA: KV 2/3451 (n.f., p. 5).

<sup>98</sup> NAA: A1102, 13, p. 9532A.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9533.

Canberra until its closure in 1954”.<sup>100</sup> Petrov visited his Melbourne home three times.<sup>101</sup> According to an ASIO interviewer (Alex Sheback), Frankel was “often in [Petrov’s] company” but according to Petrov, although a “useful person” to the Embassy, Frankel was “not considered for MVD work”.<sup>102</sup> Post-defection, ASIO found Frankel “extremely hostile” towards Petrov labelling him a “rat”: “He is a traitor to his own country [...] He came to my home. We extended him hospitality [...] the bastard, he sat at that table and got drunk. He abused this country; now he has abused his own.”<sup>103</sup>

### Contact with Local Communists

The nature of Petrov’s connections with Australian communists is necessarily shrouded. However, in ASIO files we can find strong circumstantial evidence of Petrov’s undisclosed but active involvement in the cultivation of contacts in the three years prior to defection. These files must sometimes be read “against the grain” in order to see that he was not, as alleged, a slothful operative.

ASIO surveillance confirmed that he met frequently with John Rodgers, director of the Australia-Soviet Friendship Society in Melbourne (previously Australia-Soviet House) and a covert (“non-legal”) member of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). ASIO assessed him as “the party link with the Embassy”, and Moscow Centre assigned him the codename LOVKY (or “cunning”).<sup>104</sup> He, Petrov and Wassilieff dined together at a Melbourne restaurant.<sup>105</sup> In his official role as a VOKS representative, Petrov could travel freely; this “was a great help to us in carrying out conspiratorial work undetected”.<sup>106</sup> Petrov assisted him with his many visits to the Soviet Union but insisted that his meetings were concerned only with cultural events and denied he had any instructions from Moscow to cultivate Rodgers; “I did not approach him in my M.V.D. capacity for espionage purposes”.<sup>107</sup> However, at one interview with ASIO, he answered that Rodgers had “a lot of information”, which he would “give to me and it would be sent to Moscow in the name of ‘Lovky’”.<sup>108</sup> Called before the RCE, Rodgers

<sup>100</sup> ASIO Report, 22 July 1952, NAA: A6119, 7, folio 158; Memorandum, CCF Spry to Secretary of the Department of Immigration, 11 April 1958, A6980, S201205, folio 3; GR Richards (Acting Director-General, ASIO) to Secretary of the Department of Immigration, 3 July 1959, *Ibid.*, folio 91; “Report of Interview, 3 December 1954,” A6283, 7, folios 140–9. We should, of course, remain circumspect about ASIO’s slippery definition of “subversive,” when membership of the CPA was conflated with actual or potential subversion.

<sup>101</sup> NAA: A 6283, 7, folio 145.

<sup>102</sup> NAA: A6119, 7533, folio 159.

<sup>103</sup> Transcript of interview, 29 November 1954, *Ibid.*, folio 146; A6119, 7535, folio 83. In 1956, Frankel repatriated his Russian-born wife and three Australian-born children to the Soviet Union; after a protracted battle, they were readmitted to Australia in 1960 but due to security concerns his return was prohibited until 1963. NAA: A6980, S201206, S201206.

<sup>104</sup> NAA: A6283, 2, folio 185; A6119, 1, folios 108–09; A6119, 1024, folios 188, 191–92, 203. Rodgers appeared to act clandestinely with Witalis Barski; see A6119, 1024, folio 193.

<sup>105</sup> *RCE Transcript of Proceedings*, 21 January 1955, 1890. Rodgers confirmed that he met Petrov on at least four or five occasions. *RCE Transcript of Proceedings*, 21 February 1955, p. 2355. Rodgers also met Solomon Kosky (see below) on 8 June 1954. NAA: A8703, 1051848.

<sup>106</sup> Petrovs, *Empire of Fear*, p. 269. VOKS was the acronym for All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260.

<sup>108</sup> “Interview with Petrov at Safe House,” 6 April 1954, NAA: A6283, 1, folio 35. See NAA: A6119, 1, folio 108 for Petrov’s itemisation of their meetings.

was judged to be a “most unsatisfactory witness” but he was exonerated from espionage involvement due to lack of evidence and Petrov’s denial.<sup>109</sup>

A CPA leader with whom Rodgers stayed in Sydney was H.B. (Bert) Chandler, a member of the CPA Central Committee and its all-important Control Commission, responsible for the party’s discipline, security, and illegal apparatus. Chandler had long been under close ASIO surveillance and his home had been raided in July 1953 resulting in the seizure of a vast haul of approximately 700 documents.<sup>110</sup> They appeared to reveal that he had sources inside both the Department of External Affairs (DEA) and ASIO itself.<sup>111</sup> At an ASIO debriefing, Petrov initially denied contact with Chandler (“I don’t know him”), which he later retracted with a statement that “I have not met Chandler in a conspiratorial way”.<sup>112</sup> Called before the RCE, Chandler admitted he had met with Petrov on at least three or four occasions, mainly in 1952.<sup>113</sup> According to Manne, one of Bialoguski’s reports on Petrov indicated the “strong possibility that Petrov had met Chandler under conspiratorial conditions”, contact that an ASIO officer believed Petrov was “concealing”.<sup>114</sup> Manne deduced that it was “doubtful that ASIO ever really believed Petrov’s Chandler story” but failed to push Petrov to discover the relationship between the two.<sup>115</sup> Here is another instance, arguably, of Petrov’s disingenuousness and his MVD work being more extensive than customarily believed.

Consistent with Petrov’s brief to establish an illegal apparatus, he befriended, quite closely, an officer in the political intelligence section of the DEA, G.W. (George) Legge, codenamed RIBAK (or “fisherman”).<sup>116</sup> Petrov frequently met Legge, but maintained it was a social acquaintance; “he was not really an agent”, stated Petrov, but he was “suitable” and “reliable” even if unwilling to be recruited.<sup>117</sup> However, Legge apparently encouraged an officer in a government department other than DEA to pass information to a MVD officer, Georgei Kharkovets, and introduced another DEA officer, June Barnett, to Wally Clayton through Fred Rose.<sup>118</sup>

Another Australian communist with whom Petrov had several contact meetings was Rex Chiplin (CHARLI) who was “always prepared to assist”.<sup>119</sup> Petrov supplied

<sup>109</sup> *RCE Report*, pp. 278, 404. An ASIO report noted that Petrov’s CPA contacts included Gerald Horne and Alan Morton-Clarke. NAA: A6119, 8, folio 45.

<sup>110</sup> NAA: A6119, 77, folios 33–9, 107–16; *RCE Transcript of Proceedings*, 6 December 1954, pp. 2871–72.

<sup>111</sup> *RCE Report*, pp. 231–32.

<sup>112</sup> “Interview with Petrov at Safe House,” 6 May 1954, NAA: A6283, 1, 48; NAA: A6283, 18, folio 22; NAA: A6119, 77, folios 48, 52.

<sup>113</sup> For the excruciating cross-examination of an uncooperative Chandler at the RCE, see *RCE Transcript of Proceedings*, 3 December 1954, pp. 2835–63.

<sup>114</sup> For Bialoguski’s account of another of Petrov’s apparently clandestine meetings (on 13 February 1953), see NAA: A6283, 72, folios 132–33.

<sup>115</sup> Manne, *Petrov Affair*, pp. 200–01.

<sup>116</sup> Telegram, SLO to MI5, 2 June 1954, TNA: KV 2/3455.

<sup>117</sup> *RCE Transcript of Proceedings*, 10 March 1955, p. 2914. Legge had previously confirmed that he had met Petrov “twelve or fifteen times” over a period of six or seven months in 1952. *RCE Transcript of Proceedings*, 26 October 1954, p. 1398.

<sup>118</sup> Horner, *Spy Catchers*, p. 306. The source, Bruce Campbell, “History of ASIO,” is still classified. According to G.R. Richards (ASIO), the MVD had “studied” Barnett considerably and was “of great interest to them.” NAA: A6119, 733, folio 165. On Rose at the RCE (“one of the most unsatisfactory witnesses called before us”: *RCE Report*, p. 156), see Peter Monteath and Valerie Munt, *Red Professor: The Cold War Life of Fred Rose* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2015), pp. 144–53.

<sup>119</sup> NAA: A6119, 1, folio 77.



Moscow Centre with a personality report on Chiplin and mentioned to him the name Ian Milner (BUR). Chiplin in turn recommended that Fergan O'Sullivan (ZEMLIAK) be "studied".<sup>120</sup> Chiplin certainly received unauthorised documents from the Department of National Development, one of which (on a proposed treaty with the United States) was published in an amended form by Chiplin in the communist newspaper, *Tribune*, in November 1951. The following year ASIO raided his home in a vain attempt to find the identity of his informant. He was also given "every few weeks" confidential documents by Mercia Masson, then employed in the Department of Defence and a secret member of the Communist Party. They sometimes met at private gatherings at the Russian Social Club. Chiplin told her that her work was "highly regarded in circles that would surprise you" and immediately after announced, "I want you to meet Ivan [Petrov's covername] at the [Russian] Embassy. I will arrange it for you. I have always told you you had so much to give in more ways than you realize".<sup>121</sup> Presumably, it was via Masson that Chiplin informed Petrov of the method of communication (cipher telegram) between the Australian and American governments.<sup>122</sup> She and Chiplin formed a close relationship but she was also an ASIO undercover agent, a fact revealed, against the express wishes of ASIO, when she testified before the RCE.<sup>123</sup>

Petrov was also supplied with information of an undisclosed nature by Jean Ferguson (RAPHAEL), a communist since 1942 who was Lance Sharkey's secretary, active in the Australia–Soviet Friendship Society and a conduit between CPA and Soviet officials. Petrov and Ferguson met regularly, at her Sydney flat, at the Russian Social Club and at the Embassy. He stated she was "prepared to carry out tasks for me" and later referred to "the services she rendered to me".<sup>124</sup> Other contacts included Geoffrey Anderson (YEGER), a union official referred to the Moscow Letter No. 1 of 2 January 1952 as one who should be cultivated and about whom Pakhomov told Petrov that he was "a valuable man with wide contacts" who "imparted information",<sup>125</sup> J.R. (Jack) Hughes (BASK), a Central Committee and Control

<sup>120</sup> *RCE Transcript of Proceedings*, 14 July 1954, pp. 208, 273; 23 February 1955, p. 2392; 24 February 1955, p. 2398. Petrov met with O'Sullivan, whose cultivation was regarded by Moscow as "very full of promise," on five occasions in 1952–53: *RCE Report*, p. 357; NAA: A6283, 2, folio 197. At the end of 1953, Petrov was instructed by Moscow to "take over the handling of O'SULLIVAN himself." NAA: A6283, 3, folio 129. On Milner, see Desmond Ball and David Horner, *Breaking the Codes: Australia's KGB Network, 1944–1950* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), pp. 254–62, 326–28.

<sup>121</sup> Statement of Mrs. Mercia Masson, n.d., NAA: M1507, 59, pp. 7, 12. Chiplin told Masson that her "activities had been discussed at a high level" (p. 8); this could have referred to either KLOD (Clayton, whom she met) or Petrov; the party's general secretary, Lance Sharkey, was not informed by Chiplin of her activities. On ASIO's objection to her being called, see memorandum, G.R. Richards, 15 February 1955, NAA: A62383, 72, folio 307.

<sup>122</sup> NAA: A6213, RCE/N/6, Petrov's answer to Question No. 25, p. 7 (nf).

<sup>123</sup> On the Masson-Chiplin relationship – including her emotionally-charged first RCE appearance as "Mrs. A" (with Chiplin in the courtroom!), which left her "distressed" and "very distraught" (p. 2679) — see *RCE Transcript of Proceedings*, 28 February 1955, pp. 2677–9; 1 March 1955, 2683–99; Rhys Crawley, "Protecting the Identity of ASIO Agents: The Case of Mercia Masson," Appendix, in Horner, *Spy Catchers*, pp. 563–80; Cindy Dobbin and Freda Marnie Nicholls, *My Mother, The Spy* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2023).

<sup>124</sup> A6283, 18, folios 163–64. After the Petrovs' defections, she bitterly commented, "the greatest punishment that the PETROVs could suffer was being forced to live together," NAA: A6122, 2800, folio 101.

<sup>125</sup> NAA: A6119, 1, folio 77.

Commission member and “the contact man in Sydney” whom Petrov met clandestinely<sup>126</sup>; and Albert Keesing, co-owner of the CPA’s Current Book Distributors and manager of *Tribune*, assessed as an “official contact”, who “may have [...] handed me [Petrov] a document”.<sup>127</sup> An ASIO senior field officer, Ernest Redford, observed Keesing delivering “a folded document” to Petrov at 9.55 AM in the Hotel Canberra on 8 November 1953.<sup>128</sup> A report later noted that “the circumstances surrounding the handing over of the document were most unusual”.<sup>129</sup>

Furthermore, a Moscow Letter of 6 June 1952 (No. 3) directed that Petrov should recruit Alfred Herbert Body, a DEA officer (codenamed GOST or “guest”): “I should undertake the study of BODY and recruit him as an agent”.<sup>130</sup> Petrov proceeded with the cultivation of Body, if only to acquire information “in the dark” but, apparently, nothing came of it and the royal commissioners concluded that “Petrov never obtained any information from Body”.<sup>131</sup> Another Moscow Letter of 25 November 1952 (No. 6) instructed Sergei Kharkovetz, whom Petrov now oversaw, to report on Bruce Yuill, a Department of Immigration employee during 1950–54 and who lived with Fergan O’Sullivan in Canberra. He was a person not only of interest to ASIO, but one “with whom they [the MVD] could work successfully” since he was pro-Soviet, willing to meet Soviet officials and critical of the Australian government. Petrov recommended that Kharkovetz “continue meeting with Yuill and to study him”, which he did on three occasions. Petrov met Yuill in September or October 1953 at the Canberra Hotel.<sup>132</sup> Even if neither was recruited nor involved in espionage, it is clear that Petrov was not inactive.

## Conclusion

On the basis of the actual evidence given by Petrov to ASIO and the RCE, it would appear that his recruitment of targeted individuals to enable the establishment of an “illegal apparatus” in Australia was limited.<sup>133</sup> This is apparently confirmed by Philip Kislitsyn’s admonishment: “He told me [Petrov] that my work was not considered to be of standard expected and was low grade”.<sup>134</sup> This judgement, that he was “not a very good spy” and demonstrated a “lack of interest in espionage”, has been accepted by historians. The one exception, as we saw, is Robert Manne, who referred to Petrov’s desire to conceal information. This is confirmed by ASIO and MI5 reports that he was deliberately withholding intelligence. We need to read between the lines of the silences,

<sup>126</sup> NAA: A6283, 3, folios 219–20. The meeting was in late March 1952 at 8 PM in a park near Rushcutters Bay and resulted in Petrov sending a cyphered cable about it to Moscow Centre. Another meeting was in a car, alone together, for “about forty minutes”: A6283, 7, folio 160. He met Hughes on numerous occasions: A6283, 18, folio 25.

<sup>127</sup> NAA: A6119, K/1/72, folio 72. See also A6119, 1815, 1816 for ASIO’s suspicions of Keesing.

<sup>128</sup> NAA: A6119, K/1/72, folio 67.

<sup>129</sup> NAA: A6119, 1816, folio 53.

<sup>130</sup> *RCE Transcript of Proceedings*, 8 November 1954, pp. 1552–55; 9 March 1955, p. 2914. According to Bialoguski, Petrov said he had “great respect” for Stan Moran and Rupert Lockwood, both leading Australian communists. NAA: A6119, 7, folio 96. Based on an ASIO debriefing of 10 June 1954, “Mr. Petrov knows LOCKWOOD personally.” NAA: A6283, 2, folio 193.

<sup>131</sup> NAA: A6283, 48, folios 67–8; *RCE Report*, p. 162.

<sup>132</sup> J.M. Gilmour (RCE Section) to Principal Section Officer B2, 6 December 1954, NAA: A6283, 7, folios 152, 176; *RCE Report*, p. 285.

<sup>133</sup> For Petrov’s discussion of “illegal” work, see *Empire of Fear*, p. 265.

<sup>134</sup> “Statement by V.M. Petrov,” 12 September 1954, NAA: A6283, 6, folio 4.

of what is left unsaid, and assess the evidence, sometimes circumstantial, to see Petrov's MVD activity in a different light from the received wisdom.

The fact that Petrov incriminated none of his many contacts at the Russian Social Club, such as Gorsky, is highly suggestive.<sup>135</sup> So, too, are the many connections he made with both pro-Soviet Russians — Wassilieff, Fridenbergs, Kharkovetz, Daghan, Novikov, Kosky, Frankel, Yalinicheff, and several others not mentioned in this article — and pro-Soviet Australians, including Rodgers, Legge, Hughes, Chandler, Chiplin, and Anderson. After being reminded by Moscow Centre that MVD intelligence work throughout 1951 was “at a standstill”, it is arguable that, thereafter, he followed rather than ignored the Centre's “approved plan of work [...] compiled with due regard for your [Petrov's] proposals” for the period July 1952 to July 1953. The plan was to “acquire agents capable of performing our most important tasks”.<sup>136</sup> Although there is no definitive evidence, no “beyond reasonable doubt”, that the above individuals were recruited as informants or cadre workers for the MVD, the possibility must exist that Petrov was, indeed, “playing down his own role and success”, as MI5 believed, and protecting his friends by withholding information, as Fitzpatrick surmised.<sup>137</sup>

If so, an alternative understanding of Vladimir Mikhailovich Petrov becomes possible. To the extent that his recruitment achievements fell below Moscow's expectations, we need to remember the constraints and impediments that afflicted all espionage activity in a foreign country: the time it took, the willingness of the target, the resources available, the political climate and counter-espionage actions of the security services.<sup>138</sup> Certainly, Petrov succumbed frequently to the lure of alcohol, but — as this article has sought to demonstrate — the intelligence he provided on overseas espionage was extensive and invaluable. Nor was he especially inefficient or inactive. His evaluation of a colleague's agent activity is indicative: Viktor Antonov, he said dismissively, was “timid and afraid to make contacts”.<sup>139</sup> This did not apply to Petrov. As a recent study of the Five Eyes alliance noted, “Petrov was a skilled spymaster, capable of operating in the shadows, obtaining and concealing secrets”.<sup>140</sup> This is not the customary view of Petrov, a view that this article has sought to challenge.

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<sup>135</sup> On these contacts, see Ebony Nilsson, *Displaced Comrades: Politics and Surveillance in the Lives of Soviet Refugees in the West* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), pp. 25–6, 36, 55–7, 61–2.

<sup>136</sup> Letter No. 3, 6 June 1952, *RCE Transcript of Proceedings*, 10 March 1955, p. 2914; *RCE Report*, pp. 334–5.

<sup>137</sup> Telegram SLO to MI5, 24 April 1954, TNA: KV 2/3440, folio 147a; Fitzpatrick, *White Russians, Red Peril*, p. 257.

<sup>138</sup> Petrov himself identified the changed Cold War climate as a major factor in thwarting Soviet espionage: “No longer were we able to exploit the friendly, unsuspecting attitude which the wartime alliance [with the Soviet Union] had created.” Petrovs, *Empire of Fear*, p. 269.

<sup>139</sup> “Statement by V. Petrov, 19.8.54,” NAA: M1507, 59 [n.f., p. 74].

<sup>140</sup> Richard Kerbaj, *The Secret History of the Five Eyes: The Untold Story of the International Spy Network* (London: Blink Publishing, 2022), pp. 104–05.