

Book Review: Tradecraft, Tactics and Dirty Tricks: Russian Intelligence and Putin's Secret War by Sean Wiswesser

On July 1, 2026, Wiswesser was a guest of [Jonathan Fink](#) of Silicon Curtain. His discussion of Russian intelligence in Ukraine prompted me to buy the book.

His TLDR account of the war – his final, meatiest chapter – is as follows

- Russia has always celebrated secrecy, deception and spying. Putin's fictional heroes in childhood were spies.
- Tsars and communist dictators all depended on their spy agencies for their power. Putin rose to power through Russia's biggest spy organization, the FSB (Federal Security Service). In his presidency that service had more influence than other government organs.
- The FSB successfully orchestrated the invasion of Georgia in 2008 and the "little green men" takeover of Crimea in 2014. It strengthened their credibility with Putin, who had already favored them.
- General Gerasimov – still the head of the Russian Army – aligned himself with the spies by authoring and promoting a plan of "contactless war," conducted using spy organization tactics such as disinformation and dirty tricks. The Army was reorganized accordingly, more heavily dependent on the GRU, or military intelligence., less on force of arms.
- The approach worked well enough in 2014. Russia was able to take over Crimea and the Donbas. They successfully bribed and cajoled Ukrainian officials into supporting or at least not opposing the Russian invasion.
- The tactics continued during the 2014-2022 lull, with the intelligence agencies constantly bombarding Ukraine with propaganda and provocations that did not rise to the level of acts of war. The intelligence organs retained and gained credibility.
- In 2022, the intelligence agencies projected that they could overwhelm all of Ukraine more or less the same way they had overrun Georgia, Crimea and the Donbas. However-
- Ukraine had changed. The ongoing strife in Donbas had made the citizenry wary. There was little sympathy for Russia among the Ukrainian people. Despite being heavily infiltrated by spies, the Ukrainian government resisted the attack.
- The atrocities in the beginning of the war solidified Ukrainian opposition to the Russians. What was supposed to be a "contactless war" became very much of a real war. The intelligence agencies were slow to get out of the way. The military was unprepared for a long slog.

This the one-page version does not come close to doing justice to Wiswesser's Chapter ten, which covers in about twenty pages material that in turn deserves a full library of books yet to be written. My hope as a reviewer is that it prompts you to buy the book.

Wiswesser's own story is interesting. He studied Russian in college and made it his project to get good enough to pass for a native. In two decades in Ukraine, I have met only a couple of Ukrainians whose English made me wonder if they were truly Ukrainian. I am in awe of Wiswesser's accomplishment.

His appreciation of Russian culture is sincere. They are warm, especially when stoked by enough spirits. They generally despise, or at least have no respect for their government. This goes way back. Read Zinoviev's [Homo Sovieticus](#) from Soviet times and the Marquis de Custine's [Letters from Russia](#) two centuries ago.

The chapters are:

1. Sluzhbi – services: the main Russian intelligence services
2. Obucheniye i Podgotovka/ RIS (Russian Intelligence Service) Training and Personnel
3. Nelegali/Illegals: The Pride of Russian Intelligence
4. Naruzhka/Surveillance
5. Tainiki/RIS Street Tradecraft: Dead Drops, Agent Signals, and other Sticks and Bricks
6. Dirty Tricks: Double agents, Useful Idiots, and Swallows
7. Operativnaya Tekhnika/Operational Technology
8. RIS Special Operations, Sabotage and Wet Work
9. Aktivniye Meropriyatiye/ Active Measures
10. A Case Study: the RIS in the Ukraine War

Here are a few notes on the chapters.

1. The main services are the SVR – foreign intelligence service, FSB – internal, like the FBI and CIA combined, and GRU, military intelligence. They are separate, competing, and very well staffed. Hundreds of thousands of people. They are known not to be constrained by law or conventions and to act more ruthlessly than their counterparts in the west.
2. Training and personnel. Corruption reigns from top to bottom. Most people are on the take. Promotion and favorable assignments are based on personal connections. People have little respect for their superiors or organizations.
3. "Illegals" are agents working under false identities. The classic spy. They may be trained to be spies: foreign language, culture, counterfeit credentials and the whole thing. They are the most celebrated of spies. Wiswesser writes that many of them turn out not to be worth the investment. They are lazy, content to let Mother Russia support their lives in the much more comfortable west without producing much. They have characteristic Russian weaknesses: bragging, drinking, sloth and corruption, that render many ineffective.

4. Russia, like every other nation, watches its citizens. “The walls have ears.” Informers are vastly more numerous in repressive countries. On the other hand, the west has a strong advantage in technology.
5. Aldrich Ames, Walker and Hanssen, Americans successfully recruited as Russian spies used the classic spy tradecraft, described here in some detail.
6. The Russians use swallows, or honeypots, as sexual bait to get compromising material on Americans. Kompromat. The kind of stuff that Epstein got on Bill Gates. Americans don’t use it so much. First, it is immoral. But also, it doesn’t work. Russians expect one another to steal, have mistresses and such. Useful idiots used to be people who believed in communism. Not very many today believe in Russia. There is no mention of the Russophiles supporting Russia’s current war – Col. Macgregor, Gonzalo Lira and others. Do they believe, or are they on Moscow’s payroll?
7. All spies need communications technology. This discussion describes the ingenious tricks used before the Internet went worldwide. It has changed now that everything is encrypted.
8. Russia uses assassination and other such devices. Once again, harder to do now that everybody leaves a digital trail via surveillance cameras, cell phone locations, bank transactions and so on. The cases discussed, such as Skripal and Navalny, are few and dated.
9. The Russians actively interfere in elections. It has been painfully obvious in the recent elections in Georgia, Moldova, Hungary, Slovakia and elsewhere. Their meddling worked in Ukraine in 2008, but has become less effective since. Wiswesser says that Russia will often have agents advocating both sides, in an attempt to discredit democratic systems in general. Your reviewer is a victim. I believe that there was extensive fraud via mail-in ballots and such in US presidential elections, noticeable since “hanging chad” in 2000.

Wiswesser seems willing to believe that democracy is alive and well in modern Europe and that the Russians’ meddling in supporting Brexit and nationalist organizations such as UKIP, Rally Nationale and AfD is the source of Europe’s problems. Others would claim that Europe has developed its own unassailable nomenclatura in the form of the long-dominant political parties and the EU bureaucracy.

10. The Ukraine war, reported above

Wiswesser believes that American democracy is basically sound and worth defending. He believes in the integrity of the intelligence services, especially his own CIA. He recounts his pleasure working with many cadres of loyal and highly effective agents.

There is no doubt a lot of truth to his account, but also accounts that take a different view as described in [Deadly deceptions](#), [Legacy of ashes](#) and [No place to hide](#). He is no doubt right that, whatever its faults, the United States’ system is better than that of the Russians. All of the west needs to defend itself against the Russians, starting with their intelligence apparatus.

In conclusion, this book gives this American, living in Kyiv through four and a half years of war, the best account he has read about why Russia started this mess, and why it is turning out so badly for them.