

THE REAL 'RUSSIA HOUSE'

Review of Jeremy Duns. 2013. *Dead Drop: The True Story of Oleg Penkovsky and the Cold War's Most Dangerous Operation*, London: Simon & Schuster.

**Dr. Augustine Meaher
Baltic Defence College**

Oleg Penkovsky was arguably the most valuable intelligence source the West had in the Soviet Union. He was certainly its most famous or infamous and one of the most controversial. Jeremy Duns has attempted to resolve the controversies swirling around Penkovsky by making use of many recently declassified documents. Duns reveals little new about Penkovsky the man, but he does reveal a great deal about the operation and he clears up the lingering questions about the value and authenticity of the secrets Penkovsky gave to the West.

Oleg Penkovsky was a Soviet Colonel, a frustrated Colonel passed over for promotion and fearing his career was over because his superiors had discovered that his father had fought for the Whites in the Russian Civil War. Penkovsky thus decided to change sides and became an intelligent asset for the Anglo-Americans. Duns' evidence supporting Penkovsky's reasons for turning traitor are conclusive and he puts to rest older theories that Penkovsky turned traitor for ideological reasons or out of fear that the Soviets were risking a nuclear war. Although, most of the secrets Penkovsky turned over did relate to nuclear war that reflected the era, the early 1960s, not any fear he had of a nuclear exchange.

Penkovsky's story is inherently tied to the risk of nuclear war as his service coincided with the Cuban Missile Crisis when the risk of nuclear war was at its height. Indeed one of the great services done by Duns is to divorce the Penkovsky story from the Cuban Missile Crisis historiography and treat Penkovsky as a story in its own right. Penkovsky is no longer the great man in history who single handedly saved the world from nuclear holocaust. His intelligence was a source of information

considered by American policy makers during the crisis, but it was one of many.

One of the reasons why Penkovsky's story is so controversial is ironically because his intelligence was so valuable and coincided with the Cuban Missile Crisis. Suspicion is an essential element of any intelligence agency and once Penkovsky was captured the CIA, which was being ripped apart by Jesus James Angleton as he searched for Soviet Moles that we know did not exist, began to question the accuracy of Penkovsky's intelligence. Angleton assumed that such valuable information could only have been released if Penkovsky was a KGB plant. Thus for decades debate raged over whether Penkovsky was a great Western or Soviet success.

Duns conclusively demonstrates that Penkovsky was a Western success, albeit one aided and abetted by Soviet mistakes. Those intimate with the Penkovsky story would still find the last chapter 'Beneath the Smoke' valuable. Duns goes through the various arguments about Penkovsky's legitimacy as an intelligence asset and uses recently declassified documents and interviews of key Soviet figures to conclusively demonstrate that Angleton was on another wild goose chase.

While Duns has written an engaging work that reveals how valuable Penkovsky was to the West, his book is not without its flaws or oversights. Duns never puts his research into the wider historiography of Cold War intelligence operations. Furthermore, at times Duns seems to forget that he is writing a historical monograph rather than a thriller which leads to repetitions and at times unnecessary information. *Dead Drop* is nevertheless an excellent addition to the historiography.