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'Untold' Story Warns of Russia's Spy Capability

By Matthew Brown

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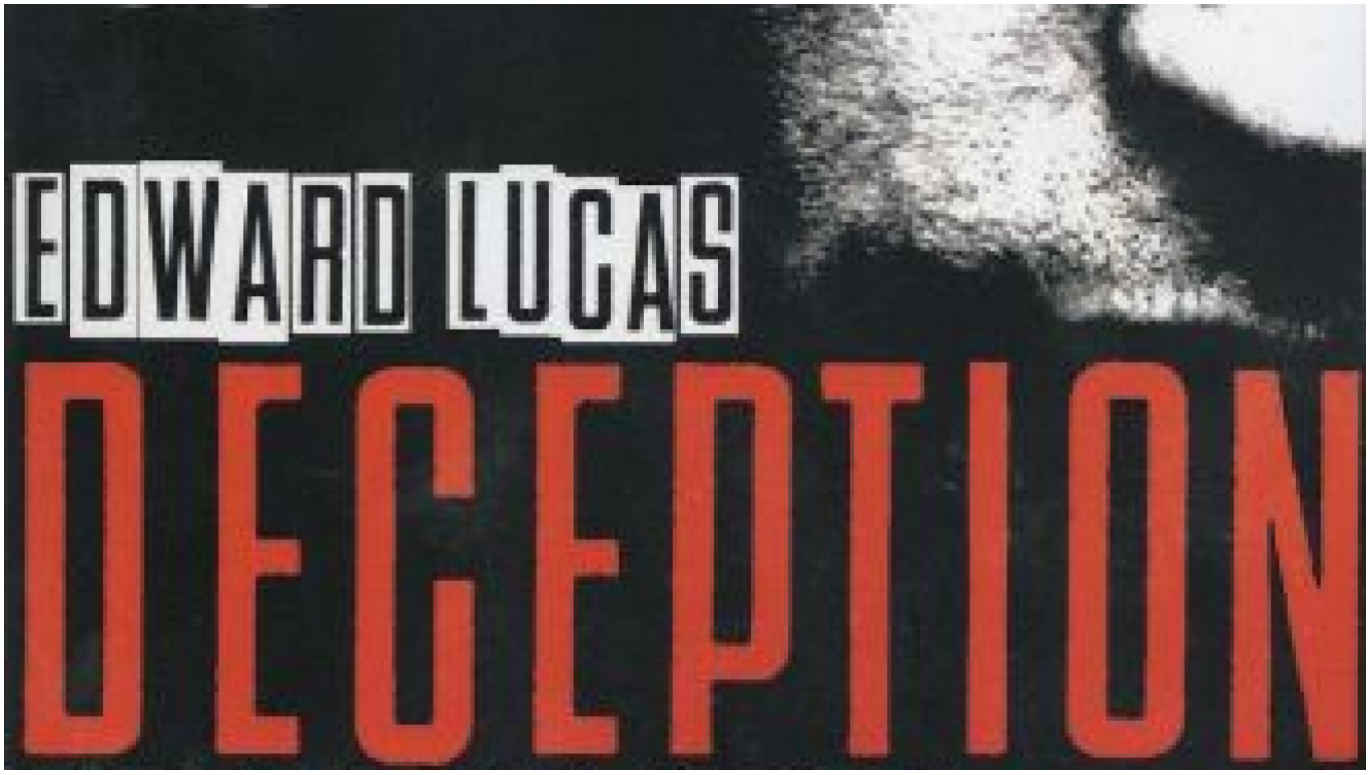

The cover of Lucas' new spy book.

The shapely figure of Anna Chapman isn't at first glance the likely subject of scrutiny by one of the world's weightier analysts of international affairs.

But in a new book, Edward Lucas has looked beyond Chapman's image as a cartoon Bond girl for the reality TV age to identify a yet more grubby and sinister phenomenon.

In "Deception," Chapman and the nine other Russian spies working undercover in the United States who were sensationally flushed out in June 2010 are shown to be emblematic of nothing less than a deepening existential threat to the West and its entire way of life.

At first glance, the claim seems overblown, but with the explosive thoroughness and persuasiveness he brought to "The New Cold War" (2008), a previous book-length warning about the intents and discontents of Russia's rulers, Lucas convincingly builds a case.

The one-word, above-the-fold title of the book, and its racy tagline ("Spies, Lies and How Russia Dupes the West"), together with the film poster look of its cover, is unnecessarily Hitchcockian.

The stark polemic within needs no Hollywood touches.

While an unrecognizable photo of Chapman lurks in the corner, the larger image is of the unmistakably demonic eye of Vladimir Putin.

This again belies the content within. Far from delivering an easy pop-psychological screed against Russia's accidental president and his kleptocracy, "Deception" reveals the cogs and wheels of a deeper and more troubling malady: that of how Russia's ruling class hungers for, needs and maintains the machinery of espionage for its very survival.

To supply context, Lucas turns to the convoluted tragedy of Sergei Magnitsky. The sorry story of the demise in custody in 2009 of a lawyer who had attempted to show how Russian government officials were colluding in corporate wrongdoing, explained here with refreshing clarity, ostensibly has little to do with the picture of post-Cold War spy games that the book purports to deliver.

But Lucas chooses the planks of his platform carefully. As his argument develops, it becomes clearer why Magnitsky matters.

Magnitsky matters, Lucas argues, because the normal functions in a nation state vis-a-vis its citizenry of such entities as the government, business and the judiciary have in Russia been perverted into instruments of thievery, chicanery and, in Magnitsky's case, all that plus death.

In this picture, the organs of the Russian state, including its intelligence apparatus, operate solely as an extra-judicial racket aimed at the enrichment of its members — but not only for the domestic monetary enrichment that those familiar with Russian corruption would expect from rigged auctions, dubious expropriations and everyday bribery.

Rather, Lucas argues that Russia's intelligence services are in the business of enriching themselves by stealing foreign secrets in a deep-rooted and chauvinistic attack. The argument is at times densely articulated, but ultimately plausible.

In later parts of the book, Lucas delineates the history of spying between Russia and the West before, during and after its Soviet-era heyday to show how intractable the grudge match is.

In this analysis, the West nearly always comes off worse.

Indeed, Lucas aims his sharpest barbs at the West's inability, through naivety, incompetence and wishful thinking, to effectively counter the threat that the Russian state has posed and poses.

Such complacency, he argues, created the possibility of Chapman and her ilk. With well-paced outrage, Lucas never fails to question this complacency.

The frontline of the struggle takes place in the Baltic nations, which Lucas calls the "cockpit of Europe." After an occasionally confusing summary of the 20th-century history of East-

West spying in the Baltics, intrinsically tied to the shifting priorities of that complex era, we arrive at the key story of the Estonian traitor Herman Simm. With it, Lucas is able to demonstrate why the problem of Russia's ability to deceive the West is an emergency.

Simm was a top-ranking policeman during the Soviet occupation who, not exceptionally, was recruited in 1985 as a low-level spy by the Soviet KGB.

After Estonia's independence, Simm, still being managed by handlers in the KGB's successor agency in Russia, rose spotlessly through the ranks of Estonia's defense establishment to land a plum role at NATO headquarters in Brussels after Estonia joined the Western military alliance in 2004.

Lucas shows that inadequate checks and a trusting, starry-eyed "post-collapse" attitude on the part of NATO officials — as well as nonchalant flat-out lies on the part of the man himself — failed to flag Simm's KGB link. With Russia's special antipathy toward NATO reaching obsessive, hysterical proportions in the legions of Putin's siloviki in the 2000s, the placement in its heart of an asset such as Simm, and possibly not only Simm, showed how lax the West had — or has — become. For pay, Simm was passing secrets to Moscow until the CIA sniffed a mole and assisted in his arrest. The Estonian authorities subsequently tried Simm, and, in an exclusive, Lucas was able to interview the now-incarcerated spy for this book.

Deep-cover operatives, Simm, Chapman and other spies hint at a deep imbalance between the capability of contemporary Russia to at least undermine the West with the deployment of such agents, as opposed to the other way around, Lucas writes.

It is a thought likely to disturb anybody from the West who ever fell in love with a Russian, like the hapless Alex Chapman.

The whirlwind, short-lived marriage of the young Englishman to the daughter of a top KGB general enabled Anna to easily obtain British citizenship in her early 20s (since revoked), and move to the U.S., all the while working in semi-sensitive roles in banks and hedge funds.

At the time she was also involved in shadowy entities in Zimbabwe and Ireland, all along as part of a seeming international criminal scam that not only encompassed the trading of secrets but also the looting of money.

These are new strands to the story that Lucas diligently unpicks. Anna, the failed spy, has since become a celebrity in Russia.

Like a legendary litigator in a courtroom drama, the author skillfully sketches context, identifies the accused, mines admissible evidence, brings alive forgotten victims, espouses expert historical critique and eventually delivers a withering verdict that it would be remiss of anybody living through this entangled story to ignore. That means all of us. An important and urgent book.

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