The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Why a Young American Wants to Be a Russian Spy

By Andrei Soldatov

August 07, 2012

The notion that several children of the sleeper spies arrested in 2010 in the United States were groomed by Russian authorities to become foreign spies as adults is more evidence of the absurdity of the whole operation.

Tim Foley, 20, is the eldest son of Donald Heathfield and Tracey Foley, whose real names are Andrei Bezrukov and Yelena Vavilova. Tim became a problem for U.S. authorities from the outset of the spy scandal. He had already finished his sophomore year at George Washington University when his parents were arrested by U.S. authorities. Following the deportation of the Russian agents from the United States, Foley informed the university that he still planned to continue his studies there. But since Foley reportedly knew sensitive details about his parents' activities, Russian authorities have not allowed him to return to the United States.

On July 31, The Wall Street Journal reported that the FBI had determined Tim Foley's desire to serve Russia's intelligence services after bugging the Foleys' home. According to FBI officials, Tim's parents told their son they wanted him to follow in their footsteps, after which

Tim stood up and swore allegiance to "Mother Russia," the Journal said.

As a result of this article, many journalists concluded that the Russian spies could have posed a greater threat to U.S. national security than was thought two years ago because their children grew up in that country and could better integrate into American life and one day infiltrate U.S. government agencies.

In 2010, the United States and Russia interpreted the spy scandal differently. Washington saw it as proof of the failure and backwardness of Russian intelligence, while Moscow claimed it was a proud achievement that it could infiltrate U.S. society. Russian leaders believed the Foreign Intelligence Service had finally restored the prestigious status that it lost after the end of the Cold War.

At the time, I explained to U.S. journalists that Russia's secret operation was a complete failure. After all, the spies had been working undercover for years and had failed to obtain a single government secret. What's more, the Russian side considered the operation a success only because the agents had managed to initially fool U.S. authorities with fake passports. But the agents did absolutely nothing of importance while in the United States, so their accomplishment of securing fake passports was negligible at best.

This notion that a spy operation is successful by simply establishing a physical presence in a foreign country was inherited by the Foreign Intelligence Service from its predecessor, the KGB. It is worth noting that the Foreign Intelligence Service is the only intelligence agency in Russia that was not subjected to post-Soviet reforms. It was simply spun off into a separate agency after the Soviet collapse. As a result, the agency kept all of the outdated traditions and practices of the KGB without understanding that they have no relevance to today's environment.

One of the largest anachronisms of this Soviet legacy was the practice of sending Russian citizens to live in the West undercover. This emerged in the late 1940s when new secret agents were needed to replace a decreasing supply of Communist sympathizers in the West. In reality, the practice of using Communist sympathizers was never really successful anyway because they did not have professional intelligence backgrounds, nor did they have the social connections needed to secure sensitive government posts. Faced with a shortage of foreign agents, Russian intelligence came up with the idea of sending sleeper agents that Moscow hoped would be able to strike from within Western society at the needed moment — that is, if the Cold War turned hot.

Why has this outdated practice continued in Russia when almost every other country gave it up many years ago?

One of the biggest problems is that the Foreign Intelligence Service answers directly to President Vladimir Putin, not to the parliament or the public. It was therefore a relatively easy task to convince Putin of the wisdom of continuing the old tradition of supporting sleeper agents in foreign countries. What's more, the opportunity to plant Russian agents in the United States appealed to Putin's ongoing desire to outdo Russia's former Cold War enemy any way he could. Still stuck in the past, Putin views this superpower rivalry much in the same way he wants Russian athletes to get more medals than the Americans at the Olympic Games.

Judging by The Wall Street Journal article, the United States has finally understood and accepted Russia's logic. Only that logic could explain why U.S. authorities are wondering what the naturalized children of the spies could have accomplished in five or six years had they graduated from U.S. universities and their parents' true identity remained undetected. In fact, the renewed U.S. concern over the spy incident is the best possible gift that the Foreign Intelligence Service, with its wounded pride, could have received.

But there is another, more mundane explanation why Tim Foley wanted to continue his studies at George Washington University: When the young man learned that his parents earned so much money for simply living in the United States and doing absolutely nothing, he could not resist the temptation to follow in their footsteps and get the cushiest job on Earth.

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