THE ILLEGALS

ALSO BY SHAUN WALKER

The Long Hangover:
Putin's New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past

THE ILLEGALS

RUSSIA'S MOST AUDACIOUS SPIES AND THE PLOT TO INFILTRATE THE WEST

SHAUN WALKER

Profile Books

First published in Great Britain in 2025 by
Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ
www.profilebooks.com

First published in the United States by Alfred A. Knopf,
a division of Penguin Random House LLC.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78816 7772
eISBN 978 1 78283 8364

Contents

THE ILLEGALS

Introduction

It was a muggy, overcast afternoon in June 2010 when Ann Foley's life unravelled. The day had got off to a pleasant enough start; Ann and her husband, Don, took their two sons, Tim and Alex, for a celebratory lunch at an Indian restaurant not far from the family home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was Tim's twentieth birthday, and he was back from DC for the summer after finishing his sophomore year at George Washington University. After the meal, the four walked back to the house that Don and Ann had purchased near Harvard Square just a few weeks before. With three storeys and a portico over the front door, it was by far the grandest place they had ever lived, reflecting the family's improving fortunes. Don's consultancy start-up was doing well, while Ann had recently taken a job in real estate. In the living room, Don opened a bottle of champagne, to prolong the festivities. After a toast, Tim went upstairs to his bedroom. A bit later, there was a loud knocking at the door. Ann thought it must be friends of Tim's, coming to wish him a happy birthday. 'A surprise visit,' she called out to Alex, who was on his way up the stairs to check on his older brother. She opened the door to a group of men dressed in black. 'FBI,' they shouted, pushing their way in. Two pairs of agents hustled Don and Ann into separate corners of the open-plan living room and snapped cuffs on their wrists. Later, Alex watched through the windows as his parents were marched out of the front door, down the red-brick path, and into waiting black cars. The officers declined to tell the two brothers what was going on, but Alex assumed there

must have been a terrible mistake. He couldn't imagine what his rather boring parents could have done to warrant this kind of dramatic raid.

Nine years after the arrests, on a warm Moscow afternoon in the summer of 2019, I made my way to meet the woman who had once been known as Ann Foley. She had suggested a lively French-themed café, not far from Gorky Park. Most of the faux-rustic tables were occupied by young, well-dressed Muscovites, part of a nascent middle class that had appeared during the long years of Vladimir Putin's rule. I found a free seat, and after a few minutes she arrived. In her mid-fifties, with a bob of blond hair, she was dressed in a sky-blue blouse and wore a chunky necklace. She smiled warmly, shook my hand, and took a seat. The waiter came, and she ordered a cappuccino in Russian before switching back to English. She spoke both languages flawlessly, but somewhere in the cadences of her English speech I could hear a faint Russian twang. I wondered whether I would have picked up on the accent if I had met her a decade earlier in the United States. And would I have thought, as I did now, that there was something distinctly Slavic about her facial features? Almost certainly not. Back then, nobody had any suspicions about Ann Foley, the friendly part-time real estate agent from Canada.

In reality, Ann Foley was neither friendly nor working in real estate. She was dead. The real Ann Foley was born in September 1962 at Montreal General Hospital and died seven weeks later, of viral meningitis. Her parents, the newly-weds Edward and Pauline, were left with just two small photographs to remind them of the daughter who came into their lives so briefly. More than two decades later, Canadian authorities received a request for a duplicate birth certificate, apparently from Ann Foley herself. No one questioned or cross-checked the request; records were not yet digitised and centralised. The authorities issued a birth certificate and later a passport. Ann Foley came back to life.[1]

The woman sitting opposite me in the café had spent more than twenty years living as Ann Foley from Montreal, right until the day the FBI came knocking, fooling her neighbours, her friends and even her own children. In fact, she was Elena Vavilova, born and raised in Soviet Siberia. Elena was an illegal, a deep-cover spy trained by the

KGB. Her husband, Don, was also a KGB illegal; his birth name was Andrei Bezrukov.

Elena and Andrei met in the early 1980s as history students in the Siberian city of Tomsk. KGB spotters selected them for preliminary vetting. Later, they progressed to an arduous training programme lasting several years, moulding their language, mannerisms and identities into those of an ordinary Canadian couple. They left the Soviet Union separately in 1987, staged a meeting in Canada, and began a relationship as if they had just met. They wed a second time, as Don and Ann, and settled in Toronto, where Elena gave birth to their two sons, Tim and Alex. In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed, and for a few years the two illegals were left to fend for themselves. But by the end of the decade, the former KGB officer Vladimir Putin had come to power in Moscow. Andrei and Elena began spying again in earnest, now for the SVR, the foreign intelligence agency of the new Russia. As Don Heathfield, Andrei won a place at Harvard's Kennedy School, which enabled the couple to move to Cambridge, with their two children, and establish operations in the United States. While Andrei networked at Harvard, Elena played the role of a self-described 'soccer mom', raising their two sons and taking care of the housework. But once the kids were tucked away in bed, she crept into a back room and decrypted radio messages from Moscow.

Elena and Andrei never spoke a word of Russian to each other and never mentioned Russia to Tim and Alex. Occasionally, Elena took a clandestine trip to South America or Canada to meet with handlers from the SVR away from potential FBI eyes, switching passports en route to cover her tracks. For her sons, she invented stories about mundane errands to explain why she had been away. Nobody Elena interacted with knew anything about her real talents and achievements. She was a trained KGB officer forced to play the role of a run-of-the-mill housewife. When we met in Moscow, I asked her if it had been hard to cope with this disconnect. She sipped her coffee and smiled faintly. People who crave external validation would never make the cut as illegals, she said. 'A spy is an actor, but an actor that doesn't need a public or a stage.'

Elena insisted that she and Andrei would never have told their two sons the truth if the FBI had not come knocking. 'We were responsible

for our own security and safety, and it creates a vulnerability if we tell anyone,' she said firmly. She did admit that before the FBI raid the couple had been making tentative plans to retire from espionage and, perhaps one day, move back to Russia. Surely then they would have needed to say something to their sons? 'Well, yes, but another story,' she said, with a jarring matter-of-factness. 'We had so many stories. There was a story for our parents, a story for friends here in Russia. Stories and stories and stories. One more story, that's not a problem for us. Unfortunately, that's just a rule of the game.'

The fundamental role of intelligence agencies is to obtain information about other countries not available through open channels. Much of this work is done in the shadows, and most intelligence agencies use undercover operatives. The simplest way to do so is to disguise spies as diplomats. If caught, they can simply return home, claiming diplomatic immunity. But this also makes it easy for a host nation's counterintelligence services to monitor the operatives. Diplomats are known entities and are tracked carefully. Some intelligence agencies will therefore use a riskier but harder-to-detect option. A spy is dispatched abroad posing as a business executive or other innocent-seeming professional, perhaps carving out a long and successful career in the cover role while all the time secretly developing useful sources and sending back intelligence. The CIA calls this 'non-official cover'.

Moscow's illegals programme took this concept several steps further. The KGB put ordinary Soviet citizens like Elena and Andrei through years of training to transform them into Westerners. They would then spend decades living abroad, blending into their host societies. Anyone who met a Russian diplomat asking lots of questions would certainly wonder if their new contact was a spy. They might also be suspicious of a sociable Russian trade official or an overly friendly Russian journalist. But who would suspect a Canadian real estate agent of being a deep-cover KGB operative?

I first heard about the illegals programme in 2010, when Elena, Andrei and eight others were arrested in the United States and eventually deported to Russia. Back then, I was working as Moscow correspondent for the *Independent* and spent some weeks trying to

track down the returned spies. Editors were particularly interested in twenty-eight-year-old Anna Chapman, who had used a cover job as a New York real estate broker to spy for the SVR. A glamorous socialite, she had flirted with the rich and powerful, supposedly with the Kremlin's interests in mind. She seemed to be a character straight from the pages of an airport spy novel, with her flame-red hair, her suggestive photo shoots, and the salacious stories her British ex-husband fed to the tabloids about their sex life. A year after the spies returned to Russia, I finally managed to persuade Anna to meet with me in Moscow. She was a charming and vivacious lunch date, but refused to say anything about her espionage work. Instead, she wanted to talk about her plans for a new fashion line.[2]

In any case, I was more interested in the older illegals and the contortions it must have required to spend decades living in a foreign skin. The SVR kept them well away from the media, but in 2016, I tracked down Elena and Andrei's two sons, Tim and Alex, and interviewed them for a *Guardian* magazine story. The brothers had been stripped of their citizenship by the Canadian government and were suing to have it reinstated. They insisted they had known nothing about their parents' espionage work. Even in the weeks after the FBI round-up back in 2010, Alex told me, he refused to believe the news reports. It was only when he arrived in Moscow and was shown old photographs of his parents wearing KGB uniforms that it finally sank in that his whole upbringing had been a lie. Now he was expected to start a new life in a country he had never previously set foot in. He received a Russian passport identifying him as Alexander Vavilov, a name he could not even pronounce properly. 'Typical high school identity crisis, right?' he said to me, with a wry smile but a noticeable undertone of bitterness.

Fascinated by this twisted family story, I began reading about the illegals programme over the years, and soon realised that there was nothing quite like it in the history of espionage. At times, various intelligence services have disguised operatives as foreign nationals, but never with the scope or scale of the KGB programme. The illegals were something uniquely Russian, rooted in the country's historical experience. The more I read about the programme, the more I felt it offered a fascinating way to tell a much bigger story, of the whole

Soviet experiment and its ultimate failure, a century of dramatic and bloody history.

The tale begins in 1917, when Vladimir Lenin's Bolsheviks seized power in the October Revolution. The new Soviet regime had few friends in foreign governments, but could call on a wealth of cosmopolitan, well-travelled Communists, who improvised and ad-libbed their way around the world in various disguises, to help defend the revolution and spread its ideology. These virtuosic, devoted spies became known as the Great Illegals in Soviet intelligence lore. Posing as European aristocrats, Persian merchants or Turkish students, they used cunning, charm and sex to gather intelligence. Many of them evaded detection in the West but were arrested and executed by their own regime in the late 1930s, during Joseph Stalin's Great Terror.

Later, during the Cold War, KGB officers who worked under diplomatic cover found themselves under round-the-clock surveillance from Western counterintelligence agencies and limited in their ability to gather secret information. Illegals, who had no discernible links to either Moscow or Communism, could live and travel free from suspicion. The KGB drew up ambitious plans to plant large numbers of illegals inside the United States. But the Soviets no longer had a recruitment pool of well-travelled polyglots. Instead, the KGB was forced to recruit ordinary Soviet citizens, giving them years of training to mould them into convincing Westerners.

Many Cold War illegals living in the West were told simply to lie low and wait. If tension escalated to the point that diplomatic relations with Moscow were severed, illegal sleeper cells could activate and continue the KGB's work behind enemy lines. But these long-term missions, which forced illegals to spend years isolated from their families, friends and homeland, took a major psychological toll. Many cracked under the pressure: some had breakdowns; others defected or were caught. Few had happy personal lives.

Most espionage using human sources requires deception, but illegals deceived in a particularly intimate way. In KGB lore, this psychological burden was something to be proud of and spoke to the ideological mission of the Soviet state. 'Only an intelligence service which works for a great cause can ask for such a sacrifice from its

officers,' enthused the British KGB agent George Blake, explaining why none of the Western services used illegals.[3]

For all the lofty rhetoric, by the 1980s the revolutionary fervour of the early Soviet Union had given way to a plodding bureaucracy. Widespread discontent, combined with a worsening economic situation, eventually led to the Soviet collapse, ushering in a new era in which Russia and the United States were now meant to be partners. In one of his first acts as president of newly independent Russia, Boris Yeltsin disbanded the KGB. The instructions that illegals received in weekly radio messages simply stopped coming. Some returned home; others, like Andrei and Elena, had become comfortable in their cover identities and decided to remain living in them.

A decade later, Vladimir Putin became president and began gradually restoring Russia's spying capabilities. Putin had spent his own years in the KGB working as an illegals support officer, and he retained a fondness for the programme. Illegals who had stayed in the field began receiving their coded instructions once more, and in Moscow, a fresh batch of operatives underwent training.

When the FBI rounded up Elena, Andrei and others in 2010, in the United States there was a sense of wonder at the audaciousness of the illegals programme, but also an amused confusion: it felt as if the Kremlin were stuck in the Cold War, using outdated and pointlessly time-consuming methods of espionage that had little relevance in the twenty-first century. Yet behind the scenes, Russia's intelligence operations were growing more nimble and more brazen. 'Flying illegals' based in Moscow flew out on short-term missions to assassinate enemies of the Kremlin abroad. A new army of 'virtual illegals' impersonated Westerners on social media and were a key part of Russia's attempts to meddle in foreign elections. Even if the era of long-term illegals seemed to be over, the concepts underpinning their work remained at the heart of Russian intelligence operations.

In February 2022, Putin ordered the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a decision that would result in horrific bloodshed and destroy any lingering goodwill in Moscow's relations with the West, which became more perilous than at any time since the height of the Cold War. In June, four months after the invasion, Putin travelled to the SVR

headquarters outside Moscow to mark the centenary of the official launch of the first Soviet illegals department. He paid tribute to the illegals of the past, who had spent decades far from home serving the motherland, and to the illegals who 'right now are carrying out unique operations' across the globe. By this point, Western countries had expelled hundreds of Russian diplomats from embassies and consulates in response to the invasion of Ukraine. The majority were spies working under diplomatic cover, and their expulsion dramatically reduced Russia's espionage capabilities just as relations with the West were at an all-time low. Moscow's spy agencies had to shift some of the burden onto its illegal networks, which in turn made them more vulnerable to exposure. Over the following year, numerous illegals were unmasked. They included a Peruvian jewellery designer living in Italy, an Argentinian art gallery owner based in Slovenia, and an Austrian Brazilian who ran a 3-D printing business in Rio de Janeiro. Under their exotic cover identities, all of them were as Russian as vodka and herring.

There is little doubt that these captured spies will be replaced with new ones. At numerous points during the century of history covered in this book, the era of the illegals seemed to be over. Each time, Russia's spymasters resurrected the programme. Now, in a network of nondescript SVR apartments scattered around Moscow, a new generation of operatives are almost certainly undergoing preparation for their missions – methodically honing the pronunciation of target languages, studying archives of foreign newspapers and magazines to take note of salient cultural and social context, and memorising the granular detail of their cover stories. Before long, these new illegals will be dispatched to live ostensibly mundane lives, in various locations across the globe, while secretly working to advance Moscow's agenda.

A Note on Sources and Terminology

The illegals directorate of the KGB was the most secret part of one of the world's most secretive organisations. The KGB archive in Moscow is firmly closed, and the SVR press service ignored my requests. Luckily, many people were more forthcoming. I conducted hundreds of interviews, including with former illegals, their descendants, counter-intelligence professionals, and people with whom illegals crossed paths in one or another of their identities. Most of these people had never spoken publicly about their experiences.

I made extensive use of the work of the former KGB archivist Vasily Mitrokhin, who secretly copied files in the archive, day after day for many years, until he retired from the service in 1984. Thousands of pages of notes, typed up by Mitrokhin at his dacha outside Moscow, are now available to view at an archive in Cambridge, and many of them cover illegals.

To help tease out the life stories of illegals over the years, I used declassified FBI and MI5 files, as well as archives in more than a dozen countries. I have also drawn on many brilliant books about spies, the KGB and the broader historical context. These are credited in the endnotes and bibliography. It was not always possible to find corroborating sources for the stories told by various illegals. I have tried to avoid speculation, and to note moments that may be based on unreliable memories. As with any book on intelligence, some gaps remain. These will only be filled when the Russian archives open fully, something that is unlikely to happen anytime soon.

The KGB specialised in lengthy acronyms and confusing terminology. The service itself changed names frequently, and regularly revised its complex organisational structure and the names of departments that dealt with illegals. I have tried to keep the book free from this organisational clutter where possible. Readers can find a guide to the chronology of the KGB's various iterations and its structure at the back of the book, as well as a glossary of relevant terminology.

PART ONE

The First Illegals

1

Roots:

The Bolshevik Underground

In the predawn gloom of a damp autumn morning in October 1902, a hansom cab drew up outside 30 Holford Street, one of a terrace of three-storey houses not far from London's St Pancras Station. A man in his early twenties, his wiry frame wrapped in a dark cloak, sprang from the passenger compartment. In halting English, he told the driver to wait: he had no money. The man had reached the final destination of a long journey that had started in the isolated settlement of Verkholensk in deepest Siberia. He had travelled by sleigh, boat and train, assuming several different identities at various points during the epic voyage via St Petersburg, Munich and Vienna. He found the door he was looking for and rapped out three loud knocks.

The lodgings, which comprised two shabby and sparsely furnished rooms, were rented from a widowed dressmaker by a German couple who had arrived in London a few months earlier. Dr Jacob Richter was an intense man in his early thirties, prematurely bald and with a neatly clipped moustache and goatee beard. Richter noted the triple knock, code for a visitor on secret business, and his bleary-eyed wife jumped out of bed to answer the door. Faced with an evidently just-roused Mrs Richter, the man on the doorstep apologised for not waiting until a more civilised hour. He explained, in excited bursts of quick-fire Russian, that he was still charged with energy due to his recent escape from Siberia and that he hoped the couple had been warned about his arrival. He also mentioned, rather sheepishly, that they would need to pay for his cab.

Dr Richter, peering over his wife's shoulder, quickly guessed the identity of the visitor.

'Aha!' he exclaimed with enthusiasm. 'The Pen has arrived!'[1]

Dr Richter's real name was Vladimir Ulyanov. He was a political theorist from the Social Democrats, a fringe party fighting the tsarist regime in Russia. 'Richter' was just one of more than a hundred aliases he used during his long years in the underground. He later became known to the world under the assumed name with which he made his reputation as a Marxist theorist – Lenin.

Lev Bronstein, Lenin's visitor that morning in October 1902, also went through dozens of aliases in the years leading up to the Russian Revolution. Lenin knew him as the Pen because of the young firebrand's ability to write impassioned, coruscating prose. Bronstein would become famous under the name he had used on some papers forged hastily for this most recent Siberian escape: Trotsky. It was the first meeting of two men who, fifteen years later, would dramatically alter the course of global history.

The Bolsheviks, Lenin's wing of the Social Democrats, were a small but ruthlessly well-organised group. The tsar's secret police, the Okhrana, invested huge resources into tracking and infiltrating revolutionary movements. To keep the Okhrana off their scent, the Bolsheviks employed a code known as *konspiratsiya*, the meaning of which was closer to 'subterfuge' than to the English 'conspiracy'. A set of complex rules, a rigid behavioural code, and a way of life, the overarching aim of *konspiratsiya* was to keep party operatives undercover and undetected, and it was used by many groups of anti-tsarist revolutionaries.

By the time Trotsky met Lenin in London, both men were already well versed in the tenets of *konspiratsiya*. Over the next decade, false papers and pseudonyms became a matter of course among party operatives, and in sensitive correspondence they used code names or numbers to hide the real identities of comrades. Sometimes, letters containing secret plans were written in lemon juice or chlorine, transposed over a letter written in ink on an innocuous theme, and addressed to an invented recipient. The invisible writing could later

be 'developed' by treating the pages with chemicals to reveal the hidden text.[2]

Lenin's wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya ('Mrs Richter'), oversaw day-to-day contact between those in the underground inside Russia and 'the Centre', as Lenin and the party leadership in exile were known. She deciphered secret letters, developed new codes to stay ahead of the Okhrana, and briefed comrades who arrived in London.[3]

Outside Russia, Lenin and Krupskaya could afford to relax the rules of *konspiratsiya* a little. His flimsy charade as Dr Richter did not stand up to much scrutiny: he often addressed gatherings of workers in London in Russian, and meetings with comrades arriving from elsewhere in Europe were held under thin pretext – in one case disguised as a conference of foreign barbers in the upstairs room of a London pub. Police in most European countries largely left Russian émigrés alone.[4]

Surviving undercover inside Russia was a different matter entirely, with the Okhrana an ever-present danger. In 1905, Lenin decided he should return to the country after a massacre by the tsar's troops in St Petersburg stirred revolutionary sentiment. He travelled back to his homeland using false British papers in the name of William Frey. Krupskaya joined him a few days later, trailed on the train into Russia by an Okhrana spy. In St Petersburg, the couple tried to lie low in an apartment belonging to friends of Lenin's sister, but they soon realised the Okhrana had the place under close surveillance. They slipped out of the apartment, evaded the watchers, and spent the next few days moving between a succession of Bolshevik safe houses. Fearful of being arrested and sent back to Siberia, Lenin only occasionally ventured outside.

One day in March 1906, Lenin noticed he was being followed, so he slipped his tail and scurried to the railway station. He jumped on a train to Finland, where he hid for a while. He returned in May, this time using Russian documents with the surname Chkheidze; Krupskaya had acquired a passport that identified her as Praskoviya Onegina. Despite their disguises and false papers, the couple soon had to flee again for the relative safety of Finland. There, Lenin assumed yet another identity – that of Professor Müller, a German geologist studying Finnish limestone deposits. From Finland, he sent couriers

back into Russia with instructions and texts for dissemination. Toward the end of 1907, the Okhrana began to close in on his Finnish hideout, forcing him to make a dramatic escape: he jumped off a moving train, then sped across a barely frozen strip of water by sledge. Finally, he made it to the safety of Geneva.[5] Although he was still a marginal figure on the Russian political scene, Lenin was already too well known to stay at liberty inside the Russian Empire, even in disguise. He would not return to Russia until 1917, the year of the revolution.

Back in the safety of Western Europe, Lenin set about defining Bolshevik strategy in the new political environment. He divided activities into two different categories: 'legal' and 'illegal' party work. Legal work included everything the Bolsheviks could do openly, such as agitation among workers, taking part in public debates, or pushing to create labour unions and cooperatives. 'Illegal' work included the distribution of radical literature and the coordination of the party underground. Not all 'illegal' work was necessarily outside the law, just as not all 'legal' work was fully compliant. A better rendering of the meaning of the Russian word *nelegalnaya* in this context is 'clandestine' or 'underground'. Legal party activists operated in the open, using their own name, while illegals disguised their real purpose and often their identities too. They employed the rules of *konspiratsiya* in their contacts with the party's organisational headquarters, the Centre.

Lenin believed that to be successful, the Bolsheviks had to combine both legal and illegal work, seizing on concessions the regime made but also working underground to exploit its weaknesses.[6] Crossovers between the two networks were kept to a minimum, and among the illegals compartmentalisation was practised wherever possible. Each illegal maintained direct contact with the Centre, but none with other illegals. That way, if one should be caught, the others were not compromised.

Across the Russian Empire, Bolshevik activists led these clandestine existences to drum up support and raise money for the cause. In the southern city of Baku, the empire's oil capital, Iosif Dzhugashvili, who later became known as Stalin, plotted bank robberies, kidnappings and extortion schemes to raise funds for party coffers. He was

known to most of those he encountered only by his code name, Koba, and frequently changed address to throw the Okhrana off his scent. Stalin devised virtuosic embellishments to the standard rules of *konspiratsiya:* On one occasion, he told a girlfriend to put some secret documents in a coffin, then bury it in a graveyard while acting out the role of a grieving sister bidding farewell to her younger brother. Once a few days had passed, another agent exhumed the 'body'.

Later, in St Petersburg, Stalin became skilled in the art of evading his Okhrana tails, slipping in and out of back entrances and darting into courtyards as he paced the city's avenues and canal embankments. He was arrested many times and made numerous escapes from Siberian exile using forged papers. He fled one settlement by steamboat, disguised as a woman in a long dress. For travel outside the Russian Empire, Stalin used an array of different documents, and in the space of a few months he could surface across Europe posing as a Russian, a Persian or an Armenian merchant.[7]

Other Bolsheviks lived extended illegal lives right under the noses of the Okhrana, by adhering carefully to the codes of *konspiratsiya.* As the writer Victor Serge put it, 'The revolutionaries were able to live illegally in the main cities of Russia for months or years at a time. They were able to turn themselves, as the case required, into pedlars, coachmen, "rich foreigners" or servants.'[8]

Many of the skills and concepts that underpinned the Bolshevik struggle against the tsarist regime would prove remarkably durable. One hundred years later, Russian foreign intelligence was still divided into legal and illegal operatives, and its headquarters was still widely referred to as the Centre. An apartment used for secret meetings was still known as a *konskvartira.* The intervening century had seen innumerable technological advances, but much of the basic terminology and structure used in Lenin's fight against the tsarist regime would have been familiar to Elena and the other illegals who were rounded up in the United States in 2010.

In February 1917, as Russia's armies were bogged down fighting in World War I and economic strife and food shortages increased at home, popular discontent reached a tipping point and the tsar was

forced to abdicate. A temporary government took charge. In October, Lenin and the Bolsheviks mounted a coup, which through the later lens of Soviet propaganda became known as the Great October Socialist Revolution. On the night of the coup, an exhausted but exhilarated Lenin arrived at the Smolny Institute, a former girls' school that now served as Bolshevik headquarters, disguised in a wig and thick glasses. 'From persecution and a life underground, to come so quickly into power,' he exclaimed to Trotsky in disbelief, waving his hands in the air and looking for the right words. He finally found them, in German. '*Es schwindelt.*' It makes you dizzy.

Lenin and his band of revolutionaries had won formal power, but they still faced the colossal task of implementing and retaining it across the vast Russian landmass. Lenin was sure that state institutions would eventually wither away, the evolving workers' paradise rendering them meaningless. However, to achieve this happy end point, he believed an interim period of ruthless state violence was required.

Lenin set up a security service, the Cheka, to organise the terror that was to come, and appointed Felix Dzerzhinsky, a fanatical Polish Bolshevik who had spent many years in exile in Siberia, as its head. The Cheka quickly grew to a huge fighting force that could be unleashed on political and class enemies. It would be one of the main actors in a bloody civil war that pitted the Bolshevik Reds against the Whites, a mix of pro-tsarist regiments and foreign contingents, often united by little more than their hatred of Bolshevism. The Civil War was an existential battle for both sides and was marked by ruthless violence and cruelty. The front lines changed swiftly and unpredictably, and the Bolshevik heritage of *konspiratsiya*, honed over two decades of underground work using disguises and false identities, became priceless. In places where the Whites made territorial gains, Bolshevik agents were ordered to stay put and help coordinate resistance efforts. In June 1919, the Cheka set up an illegal operations department to manage the network of those deliberately 'left behind'.[9]

When the Bolsheviks emerged victorious from the Civil War in 1921, the Cheka again repurposed this legacy. Lenin's concept of combining legal work with the extensive use of illegals would become

the defining feature of how the new Soviet state ran its intelligence services for decades to come. The man who first put these ideas into practice, the father of Russian foreign intelligence, knew all about the importance of illegals. For more than a decade, he had been one.

2

The Old Man:

The First Head of Soviet Foreign Intelligence

One afternoon in the autumn of 1918, a wealthy merchant arrived at a hospital in the remote outpost of Blagoveshchensk, dressed in a grand fox-fur coat capable of staving off the harshest weather. He breezed into the entrance hall and handed his coat to the doorman, together with a healthy 3-rouble tip. Entering one of the wards, he found the bed he was looking for, offered its occupant a warm greeting, and pulled up a chair.

The patient, a skinny man of almost childlike proportions, strained to sit up in the bed. He was undergoing treatment for a lung condition, and he struggled to make himself heard as he greeted his visitor.

'Are you continuing with your trade and speculation?'

'If anyone knows how to trade, it's me, but the conditions now are awful. The front lines are everywhere,' the merchant responded sorrowfully. Others in the ward, many of them White officers injured in battle, looked up from their beds, eager to hear the latest news from the front.

Blagoveshchensk, nearly four thousand miles from the Russian capital, sat just across the expansive Amur River from Chinese Manchuria. Here in the far east of the former tsarist empire, the Civil War had been complicated by the intervention of tens of thousands of Japanese troops, loosely allied with the White forces. Japanese soldiers patrolled the streets of Blagoveshchensk; the White authorities hunted down Bolshevik revolutionaries and their sympathisers.