

VIVALIA Design for Bunions Up to \$40 Off SHOP NOW 100% Money Back Guarantee Same-Day Shipping + Fast Shipping

SHARE Facebook Twitter LinkedIn Email

BOOKS & ARTS | BOOKS | BOOKSHELF 'The Liar' Review: Czech and Double Czech

The tale of a captured Soviet spy who, in the end, turned out to be a valuable U.S. trade piece for one of Moscow's most famed political prisoners.



Soviet agents Karel and Hana Koecher (center), flanked by their Czech handlers, after the Washington-Moscow spy exchange of February 1986. PHOTO: STB ARCHIVES/PUBLICAFFAIRS

By Edward Kosner Aug. 25, 2022 6:18 pm ET

SAVE PRINT TEXT 2

Listen to article (6 minutes) Queue

John le Carré's marvelous novels—"Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy" and the rest—evoke a secret world of Cold War espionage with wily spymasters, intrepid and exhausted operatives, squalid betrayals and moral ambiguities. But there was another, real nest of spies in those days in the captive nations of the Soviet Union's febrile Eastern European empire. Bureaucratic and often inept, these low-rent spooks and their handlers, vassals of Moscow, spied on one another as much as on their adversaries in the West.

Now we have a new, nonfictional glimpse into this netherworld of ideological warriors and turncoats. Benjamin Cunningham's "The Liar: How a Double Agent in the CIA Became the Cold War's Last Honest Man" is an engrossing if convoluted tale of a prickly, narcissistic Czech spy dispatched to penetrate Langley who, in the end, turned out to be a valuable American trade piece for one of the Soviet Union's most famed political prisoners. It's classic *un- le Carré*.



Benjamin Cunningham PHOTO: EDU BAYER

Mr. Cunningham, a former correspondent for the Economist long based in Prague, tells the story of how Karel Koecher (b. 1934) and his sexy wife, Hana (10 years his junior), parlayed ambition, language skills and steely nerve into a long run as spy and helpmeet in the U.S. before being discredited, in 1976, by a scheming KGB general. If "The Liar" abjectly fails to establish Mr. Koecher as a paragon of Cold War honesty and ends with some dubious ruminations about Russia's role in the great East-West struggle, it

still delivers intriguing documentation about spies and spycraft in that fraught era. The author concludes that the old Czech state-security service—Státní bezpečnost, or StB—"looks a lot like a hyper-empowered mutation of the DMV."

The book's armature is a trove of communist-era StB records, including interrogations of Mr. Koecher and reports from the series of handlers who evaluated his material and his character. (Mr. Koecher had soured on the Russians after the 1968 invasion of his homeland that ended the so-called Prague Spring, but he kept that to himself.)

Before his downfall, Mr. Koecher managed to ingratiate himself with important American figures like Zbigniew Brzezinski, the Polish-born Columbia professor who specialized in Eastern European affairs. Brzezinski ultimately became President Jimmy Carter's national security adviser, but by then, perhaps at Brzezinski's recommendation, the CIA had hired Mr. Koecher as a contract worker.

He found a spot at Brzezinski's international-studies institute at Columbia and began working on his Ph.D. while freelancing in New York at Radio Free Europe, the U.S. agency that broadcast to the Soviet bloc. The StB files show that he was constantly complaining to his handlers that he needed more money—even after Hana found lucrative work in New York's diamond district.

At first, Mr. Koecher was essentially a sleeper agent. No model spy, he refused to inform on his colleagues at Radio Free Europe. But, through his American contacts, he inveigled his way into CIA headquarters, where, from 1973 to '75, he monitored agency phone taps of Soviet embassies and trade missions around the

NEWSLETTER SIGN-UP

Books Be the first to find out what's new and what's good. Get the weekend book reviews before the weekend. Preview Subscribe

From the start, Mr. Koecher was at once brilliant and hard to take—cocksure and certain that he was destined for great things. He excelled at school and studied at the lycée in Prague, where he added French to his command of Czech, Russian and English. He made money as a tour guide, but also staged a sophomoric dissident stunt that earned him his first mention in the StB files. Even so, with some lobbying by a chum in the apparat, he was invited to join up. He passed muster and, then married to 20-year-old Hana, was dispatched to the U.S. in 1965 to penetrate the CIA by building his credentials as an academic specialist in foreign affairs.

GRAB A COPY

The Liar: How a Double Agent in the CIA Became the Cold War's Last Honest Man

By Benjamin Cunningham PublicAffairs 288 pages

We may earn a commission when you buy products through the links on our site. BUY BOOK

world. From this sanctum of American intelligence, he was able to tip off his masters in Prague and Moscow to which facilities were being bugged and to U.S. efforts to turn Soviet agents.

In 1975 he got a new job at a CIA think tank that allowed him to work remotely. So he and Hana moved from Langley to New York and bought a small apartment on the Upper East Side. All the while, the couple led not just a double life as spies but a triple one—as spouse-swapping swingers at sex parties in D.C. and New York.

The following year, Gen. Oleg Kalugin of the KGB accused Mr. Koecher of being a double agent for the Americans. Drummed out of the service, he and Hana, now U.S. citizens, stayed in New York and ran their own diamond business. In 1982 the StB reactivated the Koechers to gather intelligence on the new Reagan administration, but two years later the FBI collared them for espionage. In February 1986, the couple were traded by America for the imprisoned Jewish dissident Anatoly (Natan) Shcharansky. They settled in greater Prague, where they continue to live today. When the author interviewed Mr. Koecher six years ago, he found the old spy, then 82 and three decades into his retirement, reasonably mellow.

In the interview, which serves as the book's epilogue, Mr. Koecher argues that the American stance in the Cold War was mistaken or disingenuous—that Moscow's actions were fundamentally defensive and the U.S. was never their real target. What's more, he said in 2016, "it's the Russians who [today] are defending the basic Western values . . . Family values." Mr. Cunningham counters that the Soviets were pretty aggressive in the old days, but he seems sympathetic to revisionist interpretations of the great twilight struggle.

Reading all this barely six months after the bloody, unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine can give the reader a bad case of cognitive dissonance.

Advertisement - Scroll to Continue

Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

Appeared in the August 26, 2022, print edition as "Czech and Double Czech".

SHOW CONVERSATION (0) V

BRIGGS & RILEY \$599

MOST POPULAR NEWS

- The Backlash Against Quiet Quitting Is Getting Loud
- If Your Co-Workers Are 'Quiet Quitting,' Here's What That Means
- Release of Redacted Mar-a-Lago Affidavit Is Ordered
- Student-Loan Plan Ignites Debate Over Inflation, Budget Risks
- A Lake House Is Nice. A Lake House With Mountain Views Is Even Better.

MOST POPULAR OPINION

- Opinion: Biden's Half-Trillion-Dollar Student-Loan Forgiveness Coup
- Opinion: A School Board Revolt in Florida
- Opinion: Student Debt Forgiveness Is Biden's Bluto Moment
- Opinion: The GOP's Abortion Problem
- Opinion: Jerry Nadler Beats Carolyn Maloney in East Germany's Primary

RECOMMENDED VIDEOS

Video thumbnails and titles for recommended content.

ADVERTISEMENT

New Vehicle Shocks EV Market Empire Financial Research Estate Planning Basics [Free Guide] Fisher Investments Smart Money Moves You Can Make To Guard Against Inflation Trustat Credit Expert: Hands Down The Best Card Of 2022 CompareCredit.com Earn up to \$2,000 with a new Citigold account and required activities. CITIGOLD® OFFER Will You Have Enough for Retirement? Charles Schwab

SPONSORED OFFERS

WALMART: Walmart Early Labor Day Sale - Up to 75% off thousands of top deals NIKE: Up to 50% off + additional 20% off top styles of the season with Nike promo code WAYFAIR: Up to 15% off + free shipping at Wayfair EXPEDIA: Today's Expedia promo code: Extra 8% off your stay JCPENNEY: Labor Day Home Sale: Up to 50% off + extra 35% off everything - JCPenney promo code THE HOME DEPOT: \$50 discount sitewide - Home Depot Coupon

BACK TO TOP A

WSJ Membership WSJ+ Membership Benefits Subscription Options Why Subscribe? Corporate Subscriptions Professor Journal Student Journal WSJ High School Program Public Library Program WSJ Live Customer Service Customer Center Contact Us Tools & Features Newsletters & Alerts Guides Topics My News RSS Feeds Video Center Watchlist Podcasts Visual Stories Advertis Adverts Commercial Real Estate Ads Place a Classified Ad Sell Your Business Sell Your Home Recruitment & Career Ads Coupons Digital Self Service More About Us Commercial Partnerships Content Partnerships Corrections Jobs at WSJ News Archive Register for Free Reprints & Licensing Buy Issues WSJ Shop

Facebook Twitter Instagram YouTube LinkedIn Google Play App Store