

A Spy Alone

Charles Beaumont

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Robin Ramsay

This is only the second novel I have reviewed in *Lobster*.¹ The cover and the author blurb tells us that author Beaumont is a 'former MI6 operative'. 'Operative'? Why not 'officer'? The author tells me the word was chosen by the publisher.

It is set in post-2020 UK, with a recognizable Boris Johnson figure as PM,² amidst the dodgy Russian money and influence which has arrived in the UK since the mid-1990s. At the time of the Russian invasion of Crimea, the narrator in Beaumont's novel, Simon Sharman,

sees a rampant Russia annexing sovereign territory and a West that is apparently powerless to respond. He also sees Russians buying up the best properties in London and enthusiastically laundering their money with the help of the City and the compliance of regulators. He decides he has given enough of his life in service to a state that appears unable to defend its most basic interests. (p. 81)

Field officer Sharman resigns from SIS, becomes a consultant/researcher and stumbles across the traces of a Russian spy and influence network based on Oxford University, involving some of the people he knew when he was an undergraduate there. In this setting Beaumont – whether ex-spook or not – has written a very good, nicely written and gripping account of Sharman's investigation of this network (and occasionally killing as the Russians try to prevent him). But what's really interesting are Sharman's comments on the 'laundromat' in 'Londongrad' for Russian money and the consequent Russian influence on British political life.

Not that any of this is secret. The House of Commons Intelligence and

¹ The first was *The Andropov Deception* by 'John Rossiter' (actually Brian Crozier) in issue 10. There is an interview with the author at <https://spybrary.com/a-spy-alone-with-charles-beaumont/>. His voice has been digitally altered to conceal his identity and I found it unlistenable.

² 'Don't forget that this prime minister went straight from a NATO summit to an orgy hosted by a former KGB officer.' p. 170 For reporting of the real world incident – minus the orgy claim – when Johnson was Foreign Secretary, see <https://shorturl.at/vxDV5> or <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/7/28/what-did-boris-johnson-discuss-with-alexander-lebedev>.

Security Committee's 2020 report *Russia* analysed the creation of the 'laundromat' in London for the washing of dodgy money.³ That report noted:

The money was also invested in extending patronage and building influence across a wide sphere of the British establishment – PR firms, charities, political interests, academia and cultural institutions were all willing beneficiaries of Russian money, contributing to a 'reputation laundering' process. In brief, Russian influence in the UK is 'the new normal', and there are a lot of Russians with very close links to Putin who are well integrated into the UK business and social scene, and accepted because of their wealth. This level of integration – in 'Londongrad' in particular – means that any measures now being taken by the Government are not preventative but rather constitute damage limitation.

It is not just the oligarchs either: the arrival of Russian money resulted in a growth industry of enablers – individuals and organisations who manage and lobby for the Russian elite in the UK. Lawyers, accountants, estate agents and PR professionals have played a role, wittingly or unwittingly, in the extension of Russian influence which is often linked to promoting the nefarious interests of the Russian state. A large private security industry has developed in the UK to service the needs of the Russian elite, in which British companies protect the oligarchs and their families, seek *kompromat* on competitors, and on occasion help launder money through offshore shell companies and fabricate 'due diligence' reports, while lawyers provide litigation support. . . .

What's missing from those paragraphs (and the report generally) is the millions the Russians have given to the Conservative Party.⁴ Why is it missing? The Intelligence and Security Committee has a Conservative majority. Add those Russian millions to the more than ten million given to the Conservatives by various City figures in the last four years, and you can see the party's direction of travel.⁵

³ <<https://shorturl.at/loS69>> or <https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CCS207_CCS0221966010-001_Russia-Report-v02-Web_Accessible.pdf>

⁴ <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/feb/23/oligarchs-funding-tories>> and <<https://shorturl.at/EFO04>> or <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/dark-money-investigations/conservative-party-russia-donors-ukraine-invasion/>> .

⁵ <<https://shorturl.at/EHJLT>> or <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/dark-money-investigations/tories-rake-in-11m-from-hedge-funds-and-finance-tycoons/>>

Is there more to this than just self-interest on the part of newly wealthy Russians? Simon Sharman thinks so.

It's the grand strategy where they're [the Russians are] winning. Get the UK out of the EU. Get Scotland out of the UK. Then England won't be a nuclear power any more because we don't have access to Faslane. So you get the British nukes out of NATO. Make the UK desperate for deregulation because it hasn't got any industries left. Have it dependent on global finance and the laundromat for Russian money keeps humming away [. . .] We castrate our hard power and provide concierge services for their funny money. It's killing Britain'. (p. 263)

And while the ISC report alludes to Russian influence operations in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum and Brexit campaigns, it offers nothing substantial. Dominic Grieve, who was chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee when that report was written, was quoted as saying there was an 'embarrassment' that the Brexit referendum might have been influenced by hostile actors, which fed into an unwillingness to look at it too closely.⁶

Did the Russian try to influence the Brexit vote? Yes, they did. But the extant evidence shows that the Russians operations were relatively minor and seem unlikely to me to have had a significant effect.⁷ Is Beaumont actually giving us the SIS view of Russian influence on the Scottish and Brexit campaigns through his character? There is not enough evidence to say this, so this remains a conspiracy theory at this stage – but interesting.⁸

⁶ <<https://www.politico.eu/article/britain-tories-russian-money-oligarch/>>

⁷ The evidence is examined by Jon Danzig at <<https://eu-rope.ideasononeurope.eu/2023/02/22/a-vote-for-brexit-was-a-vote-for-putin/>>. See also Dan Mercea and Marco Bastos at <<https://shorturl.at/IJLRW>> or <<https://www.city.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/2017/10/13500-strong-twitter-bot-army-disappeared-shortly-after-eu-referendum-research-reveals>>.

⁸ The author emailed me: 'The novel is not in any way designed to be a coded message from inside current British intelligence thinking.'