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This is the author’s radio script of this article.

The Petrov Affair was a major event in Australian history, bringing the shadowy world of Russian spies and ASIO agents to the attention of an astonished Australian public at the height of the Cold War, with serious political implications for H.V. Evatt and the Labor Party. Andrew Croome’s novel Document Z follows the Petrovs from their arrival in Canberra in 1951, through the dramatic events of 1954 that made them famous, and beyond.

This is fiction: it goes beyond the knowable into the minds of a few key characters, principally the Petrovs themselves and Dr Michael Bialoguski, the part-time ASIO agent who was instrumental in persuading Vladimir Petrov to defect. Croome doesn’t concern himself much with the political repercussions: Doc Evatt and the ALP hardly rate a mention, though Mrs Petrov does meet Robert Menzies. (‘He had silver hair and black bushy eyebrows. He was a fascist, or at least had fascist tendencies. He was unfailingly polite.’[12])

Both husband and wife are MVD operatives: spies, that is, and despite their relatively junior positions, they have extra privileges and higher pay than most of their colleagues. This naturally causes resentment which the Petrovs are not inclined to discourage. The atmosphere of jealousy and distrust among embassy staff becomes toxic, with petty rivalries expressing themselves in officious over-reactions to minor incidents and malicious reports sent back to Moscow. Both the Petrovs are hyper-sensitive to anything that might be a threat to their privileges, their positions, their freedoms or indeed their lives, and it’s never entirely clear where the line between justified fears and paranoia should be drawn.

Evdokia Petrov, stylish and strong-minded, is the most complex and interesting character in the novel. On arrival in Canberra she wonders ‘if it was possible to be unhappy in a country such as this, where the shopping centres were white-stone temples, where fruit stores sold their produce in the open air, peaches and strawberries in huge boxes’ (8). In one of the quietly memorable passages in the novel she goes shopping with other women from the embassy: ‘Nobody purchased anything without checking Evdokia’s opinion of it first. She thought certain colours were better. The others thought so too. She thought certain designs more fashionable …. She said that Nina Prudnikova’s black floral skirt was dashing but slightly undersized. Nina thought so too’ (115-6). She is, however, apparently devoted to the communist cause despite the attractions of the capitalist world. Her husband, Vladimir, pays lip-service, declaring to his colleagues that conditions in capitalist countries are ‘terrible’, and that ‘Moscow has the best hospitals,’ but he is keen to make the most of capitalism: the tax breaks afforded to the diplomatic service provide him with opportunities to trade in liquor on the local black market, for example; and the fleshpots of Sydney offer temptations he’s only too happy to succumb to. Michael Bialoguski finds it easy to exploit Petrov’s weakness for alcohol, sex and easy money, although he is himself rather vain and convinced that he’s underpaid and underappreciated by ASIO.

The narrative builds slowly, with much careful collaborative detail, to the climax of Vladimir’s defection and Evdokia’s dramatic decision at the last possible moment, in Darwin, to stay in Australia with him,
despite the likely consequences for her family back in Moscow. An epilogue traces their difficult existence as anonymous exiles in a sometimes xenophobic society.

Croome writes well, maintaining a measured pace and a detached, ironic voice, with occasional flashes of brilliance – a puppy is described as ‘a skin of heart and heat’ (16) – outweighing the few awkward sentences and odd word choices. *Document Z* is carefully researched but its strength is in capturing the feeling of an era, the *zeitgeist*, and in the imagination with which Croome has recreated the human story behind the melodrama of the newspaper headlines.