

# Conflicts and resolutions arising from the Petrov defections

by Nicola Connell

The Petrov affair evolved in Canberra in the 1950s and attracted world wide attention and political interest. In the 1950s people from different countries including Australia, America and Britain feared communism and thought of it as a threat to their way of living. The public, particularly those in the Australian Capital Territory, were extremely interested in the affair, as nothing so eventful had happened like this. The affair also attracted interest because it happened at the height of the Cold War and was the ultimate example of good versus evil – the Western powers as good and the communists as bad. This essay highlights the many levels of conflict that emerged during the Petrov affair, such as the personal conflict between Mr and Mrs Petrov, conflict within the Australian government and the conflict between Australia and the Soviet Union.

The Petrovs – Vladimir and Evdokia – came to Australia in February 1951 to work in the Soviet Embassy in Canberra. Mr Petrov's position was Third Secretary to the Embassy and his wife was also employed as an accountant and secretary to the Ambassador. As well as these positions, Mr and Mrs Petrov were involved in Soviet espionage in Australia.

Mr Petrov had the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel in the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs department or otherwise known as MVD. This branch controlled the Soviet government's secret police organisation. Mrs Petrov had the rank of Captain and worked as a cypher clerk, where she would code and decode espionage communications.<sup>[1]</sup>

Mr Petrov's life in Australia provoked a change in his way of thinking. Mr Petrov came into conflict with his country of birth because he started to doubt the communist way of life. For a very long time he was also in internal conflict as he could not make up his mind about what he was going to do. Mr Petrov started to talk to a man called Dr Michael Bialoguski. Dr Bialoguski was a part-time spy for the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and ASIO's intentions were to try and persuade Mr Petrov to defect. However, what made up Mr Petrov's mind was Stalin's death in March 1953.<sup>[2]</sup> From February 1954, Mr Petrov illegally collected information from the Soviet government that he could use when he defected. On 3 April 1954 Mr Petrov defected in Sydney. This act was in direct conflict with his country, as in exchange for his defection he handed over papers about Soviet espionage in Australia, turning his back on his country and letting Australia have Soviet Union secrets. Mr Petrov received 5000 pounds for his defection. This was enough money to buy a car and a house and have some left over. This is the statement he made,

I wish to ask the Australian Government for permission to remain in Australia permanently. I wish to become an Australian citizen as soon as possible. I ask for protection for myself and assistance to establish myself comfortably in this country. I no longer believe in the communism of the soviet leadership – I no longer believe in communism, since I have seen the Australian way of living.<sup>[3]</sup>



Evdokia Petrov being 'escorted' across the tarmac to a waiting plane by two armed Russian diplomatic couriers, 1954, NAA: A6201, 62

Mr Petrov's defection resolved his internal conflict. However, Mr Petrov made a mistake by not discussing his plans to defect with his wife. Mrs Petrov did not have any idea about what was happening, as her position was in Canberra. Soviet Union officials told her that her husband had been kidnapped by ASIO and could possibly be dead. This caused a conflict between Mrs Petrov and Australia as she believed that he had been kidnapped.

On the evening of 13 April 1954 Prime Minister Menzies announced to the House of Representatives the defection of Mr Petrov. This speech was to inform people about the defection and the conflict of Soviet espionage in Australia. From the beginning Menzies was anti-communist as were most of the Australian public. This was because they had been fed propaganda that communism was evil. One comparison used was that communism was the 'big bad wolf'.<sup>[4]</sup> This is part of Mr Menzies speech:

Some days ago one Vladimir Mikhailovich Petrov, who had been third Secretary to the Soviet embassy in Australia since February 1951 voluntarily left his diplomatic employment and made to the Australian Government through the Australian Security Intelligence organisation a request for political asylum . . . The request has been granted.<sup>[5]</sup>

The government and the public responded to his speech with shock, awe and amazement. Harold Logan, a researcher in the National Library in Melbourne, was listening to the radio at the time and described the news as a shock and unbelievable, not just because of the event but because something so interesting had occurred in Canberra. This was especially fascinating because Canberra at the time was no more than a few suburbs and open space. This event is more typical of those occurring in Britain, not Canberra.<sup>[6]</sup>

Furthermore, in Mr Menzies' speech he promised a full inquiry into the conflict of Soviet espionage in Australia and said that Mr Petrov was willing to give as much information as he could as he 'no longer believes'.<sup>[7]</sup> The public gave praise to Mr Petrov for escaping the grip of communism.

When Mr Petrov did not return from Sydney, Mrs Petrov was in virtual house arrest by Soviet officials. She would not just have been in conflict with Australia. She would have also been in conflict with her own country as she was given no freedom and no access to newspapers.<sup>[8]</sup> She would have been confused and afraid as she was living in fear since the Soviets told her Mr Petrov was dead. The best thing she could do was leave for the Soviet Union.<sup>[9]</sup>

On 19 April, Soviet Union officials Mr Karpinsky and Mr Zharkov forcibly dragged a drugged Mrs Petrov to Sydney so she could catch a plane from Sydney to Moscow.<sup>[10]</sup> Before the plane left Sydney Mrs Petrov was dragged through a crowd of anti-communists protestors, losing her shoe along the way. The public was demonstrating against communism, as they wanted Mrs Petrov to stay in Australia. The public had been geared up by Menzies and felt very emotional about the affair.<sup>[11]</sup> When the plane arrived at Darwin at 5am the next morning, the local police and a man called Brigadier Spry of ASIO, who had been sent on Mr Menzies orders, attempted to talk to Mrs Petrov in private. Once again Mrs Petrov was the centre of conflict as the local police struggled with the two Soviet Union couriers to get her off the plane to safety.<sup>[12]</sup> Once in safety she talked to her husband, saying 'I am staying with you'.<sup>[13]</sup> She was then immediately taken into a safe house.

The next day the Petrov affair was no longer only Australian news. British and American newspapers filled pages with the Petrov conflict.<sup>[14]</sup> A newsreel was played before movies showing Mrs Petrov losing her shoe.<sup>[15]</sup> Britain and America gave Australia their full support. The amount of media attention showed that this fear of communism was real, and that people were excited that Australia would have some information on the Soviets.

The Australian public also believed that the steps the government had taken over the conflict of Mrs Petrov was necessary to be able to keep her in the country. One person wrote this to the Prime Minister. It is a good indication of attitudes towards communism.

After reading the account and viewing the pictures of Mrs Petrov's shocking experience may I congratulate you on the action you have taken which prevented the Russian gorillas snatching a defenceless woman from her husband and transporting her back to who knows what.[\[16\]](#)

When Mrs Petrov returned to her husband the conflict between them was resolved. She also resolved her conflict with the Australian government.

As Australia agreed to grant Mr and Mrs Petrov political asylum, a conflict was created between the two nations. The communists felt betrayed and were living in fear as their secrets were going to be exposed. The Soviet Union government sent a letter to the Australian government describing how they felt:

The provocative hullabaloo created by the Australian Government around the person of the criminal Petrov, the kidnapping of Mrs Petrov, the assault of Soviet diplomatic couriers by Australian force, form the most brutal harms of international law and are inadmissible under the normal relations between the states.[\[17\]](#)

On 23 April 1954 the Soviet Union, according to protocol, withdrew their Embassy from Canberra, which also meant the withdrawal of the Australian Embassy from Moscow. The Soviet Union thought this was the best way to resolve the conflict between the two nations. Although it was a resolution, the conflict between the two nations and the two ways of government –democracy and communism – continued to exist after the resolution.[\[18\]](#)

On 17 May 1954 the Royal Commission into Soviet espionage was opened at the Albert Hall in Canberra. The purpose of the Royal Commission was to investigate and resolve the conflict of Soviet espionage in Australia. The Commission lasted ten months, was held in three locations, sat on 126 days and examined 119 witnesses. The Royal Commission received 500 exhibits, which included the 'Petrov Papers'. The Petrov Papers are documents that Mr Petrov handed over to the authorities about his workings in Soviet espionage. Mr and Mrs Petrov were very willing to give important information including specific details and peoples' names.[\[19\]](#)

The Royal Commission was greeted with great enthusiasm from the public. Many people from the public were highly interested and wanted to attend, but there were limited seats. People wanted to see the facts first hand to see how the conflict would resolve. To attend the Royal Commission you needed a ticket. Barbara Byrne was lucky to be able to attend on the day Mrs Petrov was giving her evidence against her old country at the High Court in Melbourne. She described the atmosphere inside as very tense. Everyone was extremely interested in what would be said. Barbara said Mrs Petrov was still very distressed and looked very uncomfortable and worried. She was dressed in all black, wore a hat and had no make-up or lipstick. On the whole she looked very plain. Barbara said the process started to become very boring and tedious, as everything Mrs Petrov said had to be translated into English.[\[20\]](#)

Although the aim of the Royal Commission was to resolve the conflict of Soviet espionage in Australia, the commission created additional political conflict as three staff members of the opposition leader, Dr Evatt were named in one of Mr Petrov's papers. Dr Evatt defended his staff and stated:

Document J had been fabricated by the Petrovs as part of a political conspiracy ... to injure Dr Evatt and the Labor party by procuring the false insertion ... on the eve of the federal election in 1954.[\[21\]](#)

After investigating this they found that Dr Evatt's statement above was false and he was not allowed to appear for the witnesses. Shortly after the Commission began its proceedings, the 1954 election was due. Mr Menzies had planned the Commission to begin shortly before the election so he could use it in his election campaign. Barbara Byrne said 'Mr Menzies needed it'.[\[22\]](#) The Petrov affair was a major contributor into helping the Liberals win the election and keep Menzies in office. Without the Petrov affair the result could have been different. This result was too much for Evatt as he had anticipated victory in the election, but instead he lost. In the end however he lost more then just the election.[\[23\]](#)

After the election conspiracy theories took over Evatt's mind. Evatt claimed that the Petrov affair was forged by Mr Menzies, Spry and other agents from ASIO to keep him from becoming Prime Minister. Evatt began to act in a strange manner. It was his behaviour that caused the Australian Labor Party to split. Evatt attacked members of the Victorian Labor Party accusing them of 'disloyal and subversive actions'.<sup>[24]</sup> This attack resulted in a six-month struggle that resolved by the Labor Party split and the establishment of the Democratic Labor Party.<sup>[25]</sup>

The Royal Commission concluded its hearings in March 1955. In September 1955 the commissioners released their decision to the parliament. The following three things were resolved.

1. The Petrov Papers were authentic documents and the Petrovs were truthful witnesses.
2. From its establishment in 1943 to its departure in 1954, the Soviet Embassy in Canberra had been used for Soviet espionage in Australia
3. The only Australians who knowingly assisted Soviet espionage were communists.<sup>[26]</sup>

When the parliament received the resolution Dr Evatt dismissed all of the outcomes. He claimed to hold reliable information in a return letter from the Soviet foreign minister that claims Soviet espionage in Australia had been false. This shocked and caused conflict throughout the house. Dr Evatt's colleagues could not believe it had been said. Menzies seized Evatt's breakdown as a political opportunity and called another election, which he again won. The breakup of the Labor Party helped the Liberals stay in power for the next 17 years and resulted in Evatt becoming one of Australia's most brilliant but unsettled politicians.<sup>[27]</sup>

At the conclusion of the Royal Commission the Petrov affair was resolved. Many people from the public – whether Australian, British or American – agreed with the decisions of the Australian government and the conflict of Soviet Espionage in Australia was resolved. Mr Menzies was sent several letters. One example is:

Congratulations concerning MVD.<sup>[28]</sup>

The Petrov affair encompassed many levels of conflict. The first level of conflict was felt internally by Mr and Mrs Petrov. The Labor Party experienced another level of conflict because of Evatt's election losses. This was because of the strategic use of the Petrov affair by Menzies. An international level of conflict was felt between Australia and the Soviet Union because Mr Petrov was granted political asylum in Australia. The conflicts were resolved in their own time and space. Mr and Mrs Petrov resolved their conflicts by working them through. The level of conflict within the Labor Party was resolved when the Labor Party split, changing politics in Australia. Even though the International conflict was resolved by the removal of the embassies, the conflict between the nations continued. To be able to fully understand the conflicts and resolutions within the affair, the affair needs to be remembered as being in the height of the Cold War, and the classic battle of good versus evil.

## Endnotes

[1] 'Petrov Case', *Australia* encyclopedia, 1988. Australian Geographic, Australia Volume 6 (Mos–Pri) p.2277

[2] Manne R., 'Mrs Petrov's death brings bizarre affair to end', 27 July 2002, [www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/07/26/1027497412417.html](http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/07/26/1027497412417.html)

[3] 'Soviet official defects' p.359 in *Australia through Time*, 2002 edition Random House, Australia.

[4] Interview with Barbara Byrne, 18 July 2003.

- [5] Reid, Elqin, 'Soviet Embassy official granted asylum: Close guard at secret hideout' *Courier Mail*, 14 April 1954.
- [6] Interview with Harold Logan, 18 July 2003.
- [7] 'Mr Menzies promises full Judicial inquiry' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 April 1954, p.1.
- [8] Manne R., 'Mrs Petrov's death brings bizarre affair to end', 27 July 2002, [www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/07/26/1027497412417.html](http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/07/26/1027497412417.html)
- [9] 'Mrs Petrov drugged before flight', *Daily Mirror*, 21 April 1954.
- [10] 'Mrs Petrov drugged before flight', *Daily Mirror*, 21 April 1954.
- [11] Interview with Mr Gorman, 29 July 2003.
- [12] 'Petrov Case' *Australia* encyclopedia, 1988. Australian Geographic, Volume 6 (Mos–Pri) p.2277.
- [13] 'She stays! Dramatic end to Petrov affair at Darwin airport, Police struggle violently with Russian couriers', *Daily Mirror*, 20 April 1954, p.1.
- [14] 'She stays! Dramatic end to Petrov affair at Darwin airport, Police struggle violently with Russian couriers', *Daily Mirror*, 20 April 1954, p.1.
- [15] Interview with Barbara Byrne, 18 July 2003.
- [16] R Francis, Wellington NZ, 22 April 1954, National Archives of Australia, A462/9 211/2/24.
- [17] 'Soviet Embassy to go after Petrov rescue', p.360, *Australia through Time*, 2002 edition, Random House, Australia.
- [18] 'Petrov case', *Australia* encyclopedia, 1988. Australian Geographic, Volume 6 (Mos–Pri), p.2277–78.
- [19] National Archives of Australia, 'Fact sheet 130 – Royal Commission on espionage 1954–55'.
- [20] Interview with Barbara Byrne, 18 July 2003.
- [21] 'Petrov case', *Australia* encyclopedia, 1988. Australian Geographic, Volume 6 (Mos–Pri), p.2277–78.
- [22] Interview with Barbara Byrne, 18 July 2003.
- [23] Manne R., 'Mrs Petrov's death brings bizarre affair to end', 27 July 2002, [www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/07/26/1027497412417.html](http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/07/26/1027497412417.html)
- [24] 'Evatt attacks Victorian Labor' p.361 in *Australia through Time*, 2002 edition, Random House Australia.
- [25] Manne R., 'Mrs Petrov's death brings bizarre affair to end', 27 July 2002, [www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/07/26/1027497412417.html](http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/07/26/1027497412417.html); 'Petrov case', *Australia* encyclopedia, 1988. Australian Geographic, Australia: Volume 6 (Mos–Pri) p. 2277–78.

[26] National Archives of Australia 'Fact sheet 130 – Royal Commission on espionage 1954–55'.

[27] Manne R., 'Mrs Petrov's death brings bizarre affair to end', 27 July 2002, [www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/07/26/1027497412417.html](http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/07/26/1027497412417.html); 'Evatt attacks Victorian Labor' in *Australia through Time*, 2002 edition Random House, Australia. p.361.

[28] A citizen from the United States, National Archives of Australia, A462/9, 211/2/24.

## Bibliography

### Primary sources

1. National Archives of Australia, A462/9 211/2/24  
This source was good as it held lots of telegrams and letters that were sent to Prime Minister Menzies during the Petrov affair.
2. National Archives of Australia, 'World's debt to Australia', A6282  
This source was helpful as it was from London and gave an overseas point of view.
3. Interview with Barbara Byrne, 18 July 2003  
Interviewing Barbara was really useful. I learnt a lot about the public's view and what it was like in the time. She also attended the High Court in Melbourne the day Mrs Petrov was giving her evidence.
4. Interview with Harold Logan, 18 July 2003  
I was glad I interviewed Harold as he was actually listening to the radio at the time Mr Menzies announced the defection of Mr Petrov.
5. Interview with Mr John Gorman, 29 July 2003  
Mr Gorman told me an interesting story about the Petrovs visiting his father's jewellery shop in Kingston. It was good to talk to him as he had actually met and talked with the Petrovs.

### Secondary sources

1. Bolton, Geoffrey. 1996, *Oxford History of Australia*, volume 5, 1942–1995 second edition, Oxford University Press.  
This book had some information in it but I didn't use it as much as other sources. It talked about the politics.
2. Clark, Manning. 2001, *A Short History of Australia*, illustrated edition, Penguin Books.  
This book only had a small section about the Petrov affair. It talked more about the politics involved and the Labor Party split.
3. Manne. R. 1987, *The Petrov Affair: Politics and Espionage*. Pergamen Press, Sydney.  
Although this book was really long and had lots of detail in it, it was hard to find out specific information and to recognise what I really wanted to know.
4. Whitlam, N. 1974, *Nest of Traitors: The Petrov Affair*, Jacaranda, Milton.  
This book was also all about the Petrov affair and it was also hard to locate information. I didn't have that long to look at it as it belongs in the National Library.
5. Articles on p. 359-361 'Soviet Official Defects', 'Soviet Embassy to go after Petrov rescue', 'Evatt barred from Petrov inquiry', 'Evatt attacks Victorian Labor'. *Australia Through Time*, 2002 edition Random House.  
This book was really helpful. It is a good book as it outlines what happens as time goes on. The book is set up in years. The book also has what people actually said at the time.
6. 'Petrov case', *Australia encyclopedia*, 1988. Australian Geographic, Volume 6 (Mos–Pri) p.2277–78  
I found this source extremely helpful. It went into a lot of detail but not too much. It was

helpful as I found out what Mr and Mrs Petrov did at the embassy and how they were involved in soviet espionage. It also talked about the Royal Commission.

7. National Archives of Australia 'Fact sheet 130 – Royal Commission on espionage 1954–55'.  
This fact sheet was really useful. I learnt a lot about the detail of the Royal Commission. It gave out the three outcomes.
8. 'Communist espionage in Australia' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 April 1954  
This newspaper was good as it showed what was printed after Menzies' speech.
9. 'She stays! Dramatic end to Petrov affair at Darwin airport, Police struggle violently with Russian couriers', *Daily Mirror*, 20 April 1954. p.1  
This article was helpful as it showed the headlines in newspapers around the world. It gave information about the plane trip with Mrs Petrov.
10. 'Mr Menzies promises full Judicial inquiry', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 April 1954, p.1  
This article was helpful. It was about Menzies' speech. This newspaper had a quote from Mr Petrov on it.
11. 'Mrs Petrov: Dramatic scenes at Darwin: Diplomats wife will rejoin husband' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 April 1954 p.1  
Gave information about how Mrs Petrov defected like her husband.
12. Reid, Elqin, 'Soviet Embassy official granted asylum: Close guard at secret hideout', *Courier Mail*, 14 April 1954.  
This article had Mr Menzies speech in it. I found this helpful and interesting.
13. 'Mrs Petrov drugged before flight', *Daily Mirror*, 21 April 1954  
This article explained how Mrs Petrov was given no freedom and how they managed to get her on the plane.
14. 'Tense night Journey in plane to Darwin', *Sydney Morning Herald* 23 April 1954.  
This article named the Russian couriers that travelled with Mrs Petrov.
15. Manne R. 27 July 2002, 'Mrs Petrov's death brings bizarre affair to end', [www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/07/26/1027497412417.html](http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/07/26/1027497412417.html)  
This article was very good. It had a large amount of helpful and specific information.