

The Royal Commission on Espionage, 1954–55

Defection of the Petrovs

On 3 April 1954, Vladimir Mikhailovich Petrov, who had been Third Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in Canberra since February 1951, defected in Sydney. Some two weeks later, on 20 April, his wife Evdokia, who worked at the embassy, also defected, after having been freed from Soviet couriers by Australian police at Darwin airport.

Royal Commission

On 13 April 1954, Prime Minister Menzies told Parliament of the defection and announced the establishment of the Royal Commission on Espionage (RCE) to inquire into and report on Soviet espionage in Australia. Lengthy debriefings by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) following the defections revealed that Vladimir Petrov was a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Soviet intelligence service and had been responsible for Soviet espionage in Australia. Mrs Petrov was also an intelligence officer.

The Royal Commission opened in Canberra's Albert Hall on 17 May 1954 before Commissioners W F L Owen (Chairman), R F B Philp and G C Ligertwood, judges of the New South Wales, Queensland and South Australian Supreme Courts respectively. During the next 10 months, the Commission sat on 126 days in 3 venues, examined 119 witnesses, received over 500 exhibits, including the documents that Petrov handed Australian authorities following his defection (which became known as the 'Petrov Papers'). It published almost 3000 pages of transcript.

An interim report dealing with the authenticity of exhibits H and J, two of the 'Petrov Papers', was presented to the Governor-General on 21 October 1954 (printed as Appendix No. 2 of the final report). The Commission's final report was presented to the Governor-General on 22 August 1955 and to Parliament on 14 September 1955 (see Parliamentary Papers 1954–55, Volume III, pp.187–677). The principal findings of the Commission included that:

- the 'Petrov Papers' were authentic documents and the Petrovs were truthful witnesses;
- from its establishment in 1943 to its departure in 1954, the Soviet Embassy in Canberra had been used for espionage in Australia; and
- the only Australians who knowingly assisted Soviet espionage were Communists.

The Commissioners recommended that no prosecutions be launched as a consequence of their inquiry.

Records about the Royal Commission

Most records of the RCE are held by the National Archives in Canberra. A selection of its records and those of other key government agencies held in Canberra is listed below.

Royal Commission on Espionage (CA 1882)

Title or description of record	Date range	Series number
<u>Exhibits, single number series</u>	1954–55	A6201
<u>Exhibits, single letter series</u>	1954	A6202
<u>Correspondence files (include unpublished transcript)</u>	1954–56	A6213
<u>Newspaper cuttings</u>	1954–56	A6225
<u>Newspaper cuttings</u>	1954–56	A6226
<u>Unbound volumes of transcripts – with index</u>	1954–55	A10930
<u>Register of exhibits</u>	1955	A6210
<u>Report of the RCE</u>	1955	A6216
<u>Report of the RCE</u>	1955	A6217
<u>Report of the RCE</u>	1955	A6218
<u>Report of the RCE</u>	1955	A6235
<u>Annexure to the Report of the RCE</u>	1955	A6219
<u>Annexure to the Report of the RCE</u>	1955	A6220
<u>Annexure to the Report of the RCE</u>	1955	A6221
<u>Printed copy of the transcript for 'in camera' hearings</u>	1955	A6223

Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (CA 1297)

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Personal files</u>	1949–ongoing	A6119
<u>Subject files</u>	1949–ongoing	A6122
<u>Microfilm copy of personal and subject files</u>	1949–ongoing	A6126
<u>Long-playing gramophone records</u>	1952–55	A6281
<u>Newspaper cuttings</u>	1954–56	A6282
<u>Correspondence files</u>	1954–55	A6283
<u>Miscellaneous material</u>	1954–55	A6285
<u>Soviet Embassy Closing 1954, Mrs Petrov at Mascot (film)</u>	1954	A8703, 1419436
<u>Letter to Vladimir Petrov from Prime Minister Menzies</u>	1954	A12994, 1
<u>Letter to Evdokia Petrov from Prime Minister Menzies</u>	1954	A12994, 2

Prime Minister's Department (CA 12)

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Communism – political asylum to Mr & Mrs Petrov</u>	1954	A462, 211/2/24
<u>The future of Mr & Mrs Petrov</u>	1954	A1209, 1977/818
<u>Prime Minister's Office file on the RCE</u>	1954–55	A6227, 1

Cabinet Secretariat (CA 3)

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Petrov defection policy</u>	1954	A4940, C926
<u>Vladimir & Evdokia Petrov – naturalisation</u>	1956	A4940, C1293

External Affairs (CA 18)

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>V M & E A Petrov – request for political asylum</u>	1954–61	A1838, 1500/1/3/23 part 2
<u>Note delivered to Soviet Ambassador</u>	1954	A4311, 445/1

Attorney-General's Department (CA 5)

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Publication of book by Mr & Mrs Petrov</u>	1955	A432, 1955/2784
<u>Personal property of Mr & Mrs Petrov stored at USSR Embassy, Canberra</u>	1955	A432, 1955/2825

KH Bailey (Solicitor-General) (CP 71)

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Letters to MPs seeking comment on their having been mentioned in documents provided by Petrov</u>	1955	M1507, 32
<u>Statements of witnesses to the defection of E Petrov</u>	1954	M1507, 58

Administrator, Northern Territory (CA 1070)

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Mrs Petrov</u>	1954	F423, S33