



WRITING THE WRONG

GETTING INTO THE HEADS OF ASSASSIN CHARACTERS

By Gary Grossman and Ed Fuller

Spies and assassins. Both live in the shadows, travel under assumed names, adopt multiple identities, and do the bidding of others. They can be one and the same, two sides of the same foreign coin. Patriot and killer; ready and able to dispatch their targets unemotionally.

Our challenge as thriller writers? To create believable plots and imbue both characters with equal dimension and appeal.

The fact of the matter is we know what good guys look like, how they act, and what they stand for. Bad guys, assassins in particular, are more like ghosts and phantoms. Invisible. Consequently, they take more time, effort and research to make real.

Preparing to write our new international thriller RED HOTEL we turned to three areas for character research: Declassified intelligence reports, first-person accounts, and the psychologist's couch.

International spy agencies have released detailed analyses that we worked through. Assassins seeking asylum have come clean, gone public, and published. And over the years, academic and government psychologists have produced very credible profiles that, in turn, give deeper insight into the minds of killers.

We used all three sources bringing to life a most clever and expert Russian assassin, Andre Milkos.

We first meet Miklos when he is a young KGB agent, disillusioned after he and his senior intelligence officer are abandoned by the Kremlin in East Germany following the fall of the Berlin Wall. Years later, his superior rises to the highest rank in the Russian Federation and Miklos remains by his side; a fiercely loyal and deadly tool of a megalomaniac dictator.

His opposite is Dan Reilly, a former Army intelligence and State Department officer, now running the international side of a global hotel business. When a terrorist bombs the company's prestigious hotel in Tokyo, Reilly engages old allies and begins to follow clues that leads him around the globe – to Tehran, London, Washington, Moscow, and Brussels – and ultimately a climatic faceoff with Miklos.

Seeking to make Miklos' every act authentic, we had to deep dive into what it takes to correctly write such a wrong man.

The assassin is himself a weapon and a solution; committing political acts and acts of war, expanding and contracting borders, building and destroying allegiances, eliminating and launching leaders.

Of course, not all assassins are tasked to topple governments or even create news. But they are trained to execute and they usually come from a military trajectory.

To understand what it takes to fulfill the role of assassin in a thriller, we now invite Andre Miklos to the psychiatrist couch for his personal story.

We see that Miklos avoids talking at first. As is the case with actual assassins, he has difficulty relating to others socially. More than that, he's on guard. Scoping the room. Looking for tools he can use to defend himself; ways to get out. He sidetracks conversation about his family; his father in particular. But deeper analysis would reveal he seeks recognition from a father-figure. In RED HOTEL, he gets it from his mentor, the Russian president.

Once comfortable, and not feeling threatened, he speaks confidently about his particular skills. He says he never gets nervous or flustered in stressful situations. And for that, he is absolutely telling the truth. Miklos boasts he has no remorse or regret, because he has the "construct of a cause" for killing; a purpose and even a code of ethics.

The shrink would view it as a twisted code, to be sure. Miklos might not want to assassinate a woman or a child directly, but he could blow up a building. He does just that in RED HOTEL.

He talks about ways to kill, but he never uses the word murder. He targets and eliminates. He's more likely to find opportunity when his subject is strolling along a busy street or casually walking through a shopping mall. The momentary chaos he creates allows him to disappear from the scene with the instrument of death. The poison umbrella, the gas pellet, or if disguised as a robbery, his knife or gun.

Andre Miklos is proficient in them all. He believes that his victims are merely targets, not human beings with lives – and lives lost.

He explains the best way to survive is by concealing the very fact that his victim was even a target. After all, the right poisons and gases can dissipate without trace. And heart attacks and accidents happen.

There's another form of deception in the assassin playbook. Nation-sponsored killings can be disguised as terrorist attacks.

On the couch, Miklos shows no tendencies toward violent behavior, though that is clearly his stock and trade. He derives no real pleasure from killing. It's just what he does. What he does so well. And he's totally at ease compartmentalizing his feelings – if he really has any. He views himself as a political undertaker.

Miklos notes he doesn't require a cooling off period after a killing. He is able to move freely through customs using different identities, with weapons hidden at strategic locations, known safe-houses, and cash readily available.

Political beliefs are fundamental, but Miklos doesn't participate in political discussions. He sees himself as a useful instrumental of change, poised to take on and take out the next victim. All to serve the plot's ultimate goal.

These are real traits drawn from actual studies. They helped us color the character and focus the story. Further research demonstrated how assassins are expert in martial arts, *parcours du combattant*, and weaponry. They can kill with bare hands, but that is a last resort. Much simpler are concealed weapons or everyday things found in the kitchen, workshop, garage or living room. A steak knife, screw driver, wrench, lamp stand, or fire poker. Rope works, but an assassin has to have the physical advantage to use it.

Abdominal wounds used to be enough to lead to death, but advanced medical treatment can save a victim. Cutting the jugular or carotid blood vessels on both sides of the windpipe is effective, as is severing the spinal cord in the cervical region.

Perhaps the most efficient way to kill is to encourage someone to take an unintended step off a cliff. Stairwells aren't as good, but an elevator shaft will usually do the trick. Falling off a bridge can't guarantee death unless it's high enough and the victim can't swim. A fall from a train, a shove in front of a truck. Both require split second timing and are popular film tropes.

Then there are drugs. Arsenic, strychnine, and morphine. And bolt-action long range rifles. Perfect to pick off guarded officials and public figures from a distance.

Our research revealed more personal aspects. An assassin likely lives alone. He's interested in sex, but with few or no personal attachments. And the job has its women recruits. In real life, one of the most notorious assassins was Idoia López Riaño, *La Tigresa*. She was a leading commando in the campaign for Basque Independence from Spain in the 1980s and was said to have seduced policemen before shooting them. (*La Femme Nikita*, *Salt*, and most recently *Red Sparrow* may owe her some royalties.)

Point of reference. Government assassins view themselves differently than hitmen. Hitmen are professional contract killers hired by organized crime groups to take out rivals or eliminate troublesome loose ends. They're paid on demand and generally fade back into a seemingly normal life as in the HBO television show *Barry*.

Most state-run assassins, however, are from one degree or another, intelligence officers. That's Andre Miklos' background and what makes him such a formidable foe for Dan Reilly. Professional to professional. Both at the top of their games. And like their real-world counterparts, they can't afford to act irrationally. They must just do their job.

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Research led us to bottom line questions that intelligence officers ask and psychiatrists can't answer. Will an assassin trip up? Can someone who can't be recognized in a crowd be found? Does he/she have a fatal flaw that would tip spies off?

It depends.

Success takes old fashioned legwork, state-of-the-art facial recognition technology, and the willingness of the members of the intelligence community to speak to one another.

The RED HOTEL team working to thwart the plot includes civilian Dan Reilly, a CIA officer who recruits him, and Reilly's own resources from mercenaries to former FBI and military assets. Working against him are those in his own organization who fail to see the obvious and intelligence groups that don't share information.

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Real life on the page.

All of this contributes to the bottom line truth. Hotels are soft targets. Rogue governments create provocations to act in their best interests, and assassins are the tip of the spear.

Andre Miklos is real to us because Andre Miklos' exist today. They're dangerous and level-headed. They work for Russia, China, and North Korea. But the West employs them, too. They're lethal and professional, worthy of respect from writers and readers. And as authors we had to get Andre Miklos dead right. He doesn't work any other way.

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Ed Fuller launched his writing career with the international best-selling business book *YOU CAN'T MANAGE WITH YOUR FEET ON THE DESK*. For twenty-two years he served as president and managing director of Marriott International. His experiences and exploits are woven through the plot of *RED HOTEL*.

In addition to collaborating with Ed Fuller on *OLD EARTH*, **Gary Grossman** is author of the best-selling, international award-winning thrillers *EXECUTIVE ACTIONS*, *EXECUTIVE TREASON*, *EXECUTIVE COMMAND*, *EXECUTIVE FORCE*, and *OLD EARTH*. He is an Emmy Award winning television producer, journalist, and member of the International Thriller Writers Association and Military Writers Society of America.

