

Michelle Scott

*Different Skeletons, But the Same Terrain: Intelligence Lessons from the Soviet and Russian  
Experience*

Professor David Martin-McCormick

University Honors in International Relations

Fall 2010

“We are an exceptional people. We belong to that number of nations, which do not seem to be part of humanity, but which exist for the sole purpose of giving a fearful lesson to the rest of the world” (Deriabin and Bagley)

-Pyotr Chaadayev

Intelligence has long been an institution integral to domestic and foreign affairs in the United States. Back during the Revolutionary War, spymaster General George Washington ingeniously managed dozens of spies in order to conduct espionage and gain an advantage against the British. In the mid-seventeenth century, Confederate generals used Northern newspapers as an open-source to collect information on Union troop movements and actions. During the World Wars, intelligence operations reached a new height, with every nation involved trying to outencrypt and outwit the adversary. American intelligence flourished during the Cold War, rapidly developing capabilities and specializations to protect the homeland and national interests from the existential threat of Soviet Communism. However, today this integral institution is constantly under assault by critics for failing to prevent 9/11 and adapt to the new threat environment.

Whenever there is a failure in the intelligence community (IC), the government has traditionally responded by firing someone, reorganizing the IC, or both. In the decade after 9/11, the United States government has made it clear that it is looking to make the IC more effective and more efficient although the methods and answers have not been nearly as obvious. In its transition, the government has created a Director of National Intelligence to be the supervisor and head of the sixteen intelligence agencies, as well as tried to improve and develop programs to assist interagency cooperation and information sharing, such as Intelink and A-Space, respectively. However, it is wise to remember that the US intelligence community is not the

only one in the world, let alone in history, and that it is not facing these problems alone and is not starting from scratch. Some of the most notable and robust intelligence agencies are those in China, several in the Middle East, such as Israel and Pakistan, those in the Western European nations, particularly the United Kingdom, Germany, and France. These are only a few of the intelligence communities in the world, and it is interesting to occasionally take note of the different perspectives of other national intelligence communities and how they meet their objectives and combat their threats.

One of the most enduring intelligence communities is that of the Russian Federation, with roots stretching back through the Soviet era to Czar Ivan IV's rule in 1565 (Richelson 1). Back then, the Oprichnina, which essentially was a brutal domestic police with clear political objectives, was responsible for wiping out any opposition to Ivan the Terrible, most infamously conducting the 1570 massacre of approximately 3,000 individuals in Novgorod. From the until the 1917 October Revolution, security and intelligence organizations waned and waxed with their respective Czars, typically being dissolved upon a Czar's death and being reincarnated with the next Czar to find such services beneficial. However, once the Bolsheviks took power, they instituted a much more stable security and intelligence structure via the establishment of the Cheka and later the Committee for State Security (KGB) and Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU), which refined their predecessors' techniques while maintaining their brutal and ruthless tactics.

An examination of the Soviet and Russian intelligence structures can provide insights, cautions, and lessons to the US intelligence community, which is especially important at this time of transition, evolution, and restructuring. However, it must be stated up front that the American intelligence community and the Soviet/Russian intelligence and security structure are

different in several aspects. Whereas the Soviet structure in some form or another has been around for centuries, American intelligence has historically been informal and sporadic, tending to appear with outbreaks of wars and disappear in peacetime. After all, it was not until 1882 that the first formal agency, the Office of Naval Intelligence, was founded, and even then, it would not be until the aftermath of World War II that an intelligence structure more similar to the one seen today was established.

However, it is in these differences that today's American IC can learn both positive and negative lessons without having to learn the hard way, which could have devastating consequences. It is imperative that the American IC learns from the operations of the Soviet system to not only guard against mistakes made on the part of Soviet or Russian intelligence, but to better prepare itself for changes in the threat landscape. Scrutiny of Soviet policies and operations can continue to inform the evolving IC, ensuring that American intelligence does not carve out a legacy that is too similar to the Soviet one. The following comparison mostly compares the current American intelligence community to the Soviet KGB, although the Federal Security Service (FSB) is examined to the extent that it is possible given the secrecy surrounding the organization today.

#### *Skeletal Examination: Structural Differences*

Among the most obvious differences between the Soviet intelligence apparatus and the American IC is the difference in objectives. Where the KGB was responsible for maintaining the power of the party, typically through terror, the American IC is responsible for collecting, analyzing, and providing information to "customers at all levels of national security" (Rosenbach and Peritz 10). This is somewhat responsible for and reflective in the difference between the two basic structures; where the Soviet/Russian model is very linear and integrated, the American IC

has sixteen different agencies on the civilian side alone that operate with little to moderate coordination. The differences are most evident after examination of Figures 1 and 2, which lay out the organization of the Soviet intelligence apparatus and the American IC respectively. The Soviet intelligence structure, as demonstrated in Figure 1, is extremely centralized, with control concentrated in a handful of key individuals. This is generally representative of the power structure of the Soviet Union, where power was concentrated in the General Chairman and the few in his immediate circle. The intelligence and security agencies acted on the direct orders of the Chairman and his deputies and were overseen directly by these individuals with the chain of command significantly more concentrated than its American counterpart.

Figure 2 shows the American intelligence community to be a very large entity with dozens of agencies, many of which have redundant purposes. Control and power within the IC is dispersed, with agencies subject to supervision by the DNI and oversight by Congress. However, the very structure of the American intelligence community has been up for much debate and subject to significant reorganization over the past decade; after the 9/11 Commission concluded that the government institutions in place are too tailored to the Cold War threat and are ineffective at dealing with the modern asymmetric threat, the intelligence community experienced major personnel shifts, a redefinition in certain agencies' roles, and the creation of the Director of National Intelligence position (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States). The position of the DNI created in 2005 was meant to give the IC a better sense of accountability; while not an immediate success, the perception and actual power of the position has improved, particularly under General James Clapper's term (Ackerman).

Also, in contrast to the American structure, which is full of redundancies both in terms of capabilities and objectives, the Soviet system was highly specialized with little to no overlap. In

the past few years, the American IC has come under fire for the number, size, and cost of redundant operations within (Priest and Arkin). With this criticism has come an effort to try to fix this problem, with some successes, such as the fact that the overall number of intelligence offices remaining the same during the post-9/11 period, and notable failures, such as the inability for the IC to predict and prevent the 2009 Christmas Day bombing attempt despite the competitive analysis benefit created by these redundancies (Office of the Director of National Intelligence). Increased centralization seen in the Soviet model could be an answer; however, corruption, financial or ideological, is more easily cultivated in this environment, as centralization also meant less supervision. However, as American institutions tend to be more amenable to oversight, perhaps some centralizing efforts, such as giving the DNI more direct oversight, possibly through granting the position budgetary powers could allow for an effective streamlining of the community. Also, a benefit of centralization is the increased ability to communicate to other agencies and directorates. Redundancies in and of themselves are not necessarily bad; it is just when they exist in an environment without communication that these redundancies become ineffective and a waste of money.

In terms of capabilities, Soviet intelligence services interestingly had a very weak and underemphasized analytic capability, a fault which is the result of a past historical development. During Stalin's rule, he initially read intelligence reports, but then told his intelligence directors "not to bother with analysis" (Pringle 178). He felt that he knew the adversary better and was overall more capable of producing an accurate analysis than the intelligence analysts employed, an opinion that ultimately was responsible for several intelligence failures under Stalin's reign. Whether the existence of a weak analytic capability still continues today is subject to speculation due to the secretive nature of the FSB. However, it is known that the Soviet Directorate of

Intelligence Analysis possessed a staff of fewer than 250 who were primarily responsible for completing and editing intelligence reports rather than producing finished analyses (Pringle 178). This is astonishing in comparison to the 100,000 plus analysts that currently work for the U.S. government today (Negroponte). Additionally, due to the centralized and specialized structure of the Soviet structure, there was little opportunity for competitive analysis between agencies. The major benefits of competitive analysis are that it “avoids single points of failure and unchallenged analytic judgments” and allows for the production of intelligence aimed at different audiences (Office of the Director of National Intelligence; Lowenthal 14). However, this was wholly unneeded in the Soviet system, where the main consumer of intelligence was the General Secretary, who was not interested in an analytic judgment that could be challenged. Conversely, the presence of competitive analysis in the American system is indicative the value that the U.S. intelligence community places in analysis, which is appropriate given today’s agile asymmetric threat; Soviet Russia was run by leaders that preferred to do the analysis themselves, while intelligence agencies tended to value covert actions far over analysis as they typically gave more immediate, tangible results.

#### *Cloaked in Secrecy: Agency Transparency*

This concentration of power led to a blatant lack of transparency in the intelligence and security services, which also pervaded all parts of Soviet government. Unlike the American intelligence agencies which have suffered consequences for their actions, including the 1970s arrests of senior NSA officials by FBI agents for the illegal monitoring of US citizens, no KGB officer has ever been convicted for crimes committed during the Soviet Era (Bamford 31; Pringle 182).

This lack of transparency continues in security and intelligence operations today; the FSB, although suspected of being involved with the domestic Russian apartment bombings in 1999 and the 2006 assassination of Alexander Litvinenko, a Russian journalist, has never been subject to serious investigation. When a series of bombs exploded in Bynaksk, Moscow, and Volgodonsk during the first half of September 1999, 293 people were killed and 651 were injured. The FSB, in turn, blamed the bombings on Chechen terrorists, but serious skepticism regarding this statement began to arise later that month when local police prevented a bombing in Ryazan with a similar modus operandi that used the same materials as the previous attacks. The perpetrators of this failed attack turned out to be FSB agents who provided identification upon arrest by local law enforcement. On September 24<sup>th</sup>, FSB director Nikolai Patrushev apologized and stated that the “attack” had been part of a security exercise, asserting that the “explosives” were actually just bags of sugar tied together with wires and a detonator (Tyler). Contrary to this assertion, municipal police said that the bomb did contain RDX, a military grade explosive that had been used in the other attacks, and sugar, which is typically used to increase the size of a blast (Zpoplar). This resulted in many speculating that the FSB had been involved in the previous attacks and were using them as justification for the Second Chechen War. Although an incident and accusation like this in the United States would certainly result in an investigative commission and possibly the dismantling of the organization responsible, the FSB was put in charge of investigating the incidents. Interestingly, subsequent requests to the Duma for independent investigations have been rejected.

Regarding the Litvinenko case, Litvinenko had co-authored a book with Yuri Felshtinsky in 2002 entitled Blowing Up Russia: Terror from Within which incidentally blamed the Russian government for the 1999 bombings. After his murder via Polonium-210 poisoning on November



23, 2006, Russian investigators placed the blame on dissident Boris Berezovsky, a Russian refugee in Great Britain, while British investigators pointed to intelligence and physical evidence which suggested that the assassination was state-sponsored (Ross). Since the assassination, insiders have come forward and directed blame at the FSB for Litvinenko's murder. In 2007, former FSB colonel Mikhail Trepashkin, who had been imprisoned until 2008 for divulging state secrets which have never been identified, stated that in 2002 he had warned Litvinenko that a group had been created in the FSB with the explicit objective of killing Litvinenko, Felshtinsky, and Berezovsky (Vasilieva). More interestingly, those responsible for conducting the Russian investigation happened include agents in the FSB; former FSB chief Nikolay Kovalev stated that the assassination "looks like the hand of Boris Berezovsky. I am sure that no kind of intelligence services participated" (Kommersant).

These incidents are representative of the culture of the FSB; they continue to operate as both an intelligence a security service of the government, with little to no separation of the two functions, all while operating under the protection of the government, which time-and-time again shields them from independent investigations. It is fundamental that the American intelligence community continues to embrace a significant degree of transparency, particularly in light of operations with questionable legality such as rendition and torture by the CIA. While transparency at times can run contrary with the aura of secrecy that must surround the intelligence agencies, when increased transparency would not have a negative effect on national security, it must be pursued. Oversight by Congress and the judicial branch ensures that operations are carried out legally and in accordance with American values, which is essential in maintaining the integrity of these agencies (Doorey 3). Integrity and trust in these institutions

must be maintained to ensure cooperation by the American public and foreign entities during operations.

*Investigator, Judge, Jury, and Executioner: Separation of Intelligence and Security Functions*

This leads to another major difference between the Soviet/Russian and American intelligence communities. Russian intelligence has always been far more than just an intelligence service; they possess powers normally reserved for foreign and domestic law enforcement and security services, including investigatory and detainment powers. In contrast, while still arguably within the traditionally accepted powers and capabilities of an American intelligence organization, when the NSA's warrantless wiretapping operations were revealed to the American public in 2005, the outrage was palatable among the population and resulted in the imposition of laws regulating the surveillance program (Risen and Lichtblau). This wiretapping operation pales in comparison to some FSB operations, which go beyond what the US traditionally considers within the realm of intelligence. While the FBI, a domestic security force, is technically part of the intelligence community, it is constantly kept in check by the other intelligence agencies and the U.S. government, which has enormous oversight into the FBI's operations. As for the FSB, its role as both an intelligence and security service has historical precedence, which can be dated back to the institution of such services by Ivan the Terrible or even the brutal operations of the Cheka in the post-Revolution era (Richelson 5). Covert actions, which were heavily favored by the KGB and were called active measures, frequently included the assassination of dissidents and opposition leaders both on Russian territory and abroad.

Some of infamous active measures were those involving Leon Trotsky and his followers, specifically Andreu Nin and Irwin Wolf, Lavrentiy Beria, and aforementioned Litvinenko. During the 1920s, Trotsky, one of the leaders of the October Revolution and one of the first

members of the Politburo, was gradually removed from power by his rival Stalin and eventually expelled from the Communist Party and the Soviet Union. During the next decade, Trotsky would continue to oppose Stalin's regime from exile; however, this quickly persuaded Stalin that Trotsky should be eliminated via a KGB active measure (Andrew and Gordievsky 155). The KGB attempted to penetrate Trotsky's entourage during his last few years alive, until finally a Soviet agent managed to track Trotsky down in Mexico, arrange a meeting with him under the guise of a sympathizer, and assassinate him in his study. Beria, the chief of the NKVD, one of the KGB's predecessors, largely orchestrated the relentless pursuit of Trotsky, the Trotskyites, and many other dissidents (Andrew and Gordievsky 163). However, his ambitiousness became his downfall after Stalin's death, as he was quickly arrested on charges of treason by rivals. In 1953, he would be condemned by the entire Politburo as a traitor, interrogated by the NKVD torturers he had once employed, and summarily executed by a Soviet Marshall.

The separation of intelligence and security is important to maintain over the coming decades of evolution in the American IC for several reasons. Obviously, the differences in objective, being prevention versus prosecution, are very difficult to reconcile within an organization. Many investigations of intelligence operations, especially when dealing with domestic operations, become muddled when the investigator is also the alleged perpetrator, as demonstrated by both the 1999 bombings and Litvinenko's murder. Additionally, the secretive nature of intelligence agencies is not one that benefits a security service, both from a legal and public relations perspective. Legally, a security service must keep in mind that evidence collected against the defendant must be usable in public court; some intelligence actions are inadmissible, as demonstrated by Guantanamo detainee Ahmed Ghailani's acquittal of all but one of 286 criminal charges in a civilian court due to the fact that some of the most important

testimony could not be used as the testifier had been located using information gained through torture (Kornblut and Finn). Additionally, a lack of transparency in a law enforcement organization can be detrimental to their integrity and global opinion regarding it and the nation as a whole. The integration of these two services does not allow for sufficient oversight into the activities; whereas each U.S. agency keeps others in check, particularly when it is a law enforcement agency versus intelligence agency, there was no system of checks and balances present in the Soviet system. While the American IC's problem of concerning interagency cooperation and information sharing between law enforcement and intelligence could be solved by integrating the two, there are other ways of increasing accountability and communicating between these agencies without sacrificing or risking loss of transparency. The DNI attempts to address this problem by creating a position accountable for the efficient operation of the intelligence community, although this office is a work in progress and could benefit greatly from an increase in powers delegated to it, especially budgetary. A more streamlining and effective utilization of A-Space and Intelink would greatly improve communication between agencies, as both networks are hugely encumbered with "useless" reports and have multiple high barriers blocking agencies from other agencies' networks and information.

### *Politicization*

Another major aspect of the Soviet and Russian systems is the overt politicization of the intelligence services. In 1954, the KGB was established with the explicit purpose of preserving the leaders' powers (Deriabin and Bagley 80; Romerstein and Levchenko 153). This foundation bred a politicized mindset which has led to distorted realities and biased analyses that accounted for many of the Soviet intelligence failures during the Cold War. Biased reports flooded out of the KGB; a great example is when KGB Chairman Viktor Chebrikov stated in 1987 that Western

intelligence agencies operated “from the arsenal of Trotskyism and other opportunist currents” and that the CIA had bred the “virus of nationalism” in the Baltic to thwart Russian power (Pringle 177). This mindset was particularly crippling for the end-users of intelligence, including Stalin. In the years leading up to Operation Barbarossa, the intelligence services continuously warned Stalin of a possible German invasion of Russia, which was quickly dismissed by the Chairman. David Murphy, a former chief of Soviet Operations at the CIA, states that Stalin was “blinded by a combination of Communist dogma and Nazi guile,” assuming that the capitalist powers were more interested in destroying the Soviet Union than Nazi Germany (Ferguson).

Politicization has long been a worry of the intelligence community; when the IC was being established, there was much debate over the level of proximity between the end user, particularly politicians, and intelligence analysts. During the 1950s, American intelligence had accepted the proximate school of thought that argued that if the intelligence process was too separate from the users, intelligence would be less useful (Lowenthal 15). The remedy to this was proper subject training and internal reviews, rather than increased integration among participants in the intelligence process. To make the American intelligence process more efficient, there should be increased integration among collectors, analysts, and users, similar to the process used by the J-2's in the military, which is far more integrated than the civilian intelligence agencies' process (Simon Jr. 158). The politicizing of analysis simply only happens at the highest-levels of political users, as less influential users have little incentive to seek a political answer rather than the actual answer. High-ranking policy makers have shown in the past that they are willing to ignore solid intelligence and even offer their own analyses (Lowenthal 190). This holds true in the Soviet case, such as in the events and reports leading up

to Operation Barbarossa. The intelligence analysts produced accurate reports, although they did not fit Stalin's mindsets and were then discarded. Any reluctance to produce reports in the Soviet Union was not the result of politicization, but rather the product of the fear of death as a consequence that was endemic in the Soviet system, which poisoned the entire intelligence, law enforcement, and judicial system, and thereby corrupting the intelligence process. Far from exacerbating this problem, decreasing the proximity between users and collectors would help solve this problem by providing the user with greater information that must be rebuffed in order to support their analysis, and perhaps even decrease the integrity of their skewed analysis by placing them side-by-side with professional analysts.

*The Internal Enemy: Paranoia and Surveillance*

Unlike the American IC, the KGB, GRU, and even the FSB, to this day, focused on domestic threats and dissent rather than foreign threats posed by nation-states. While it is true that the USSR spent a great deal of effort collecting information about the United States, their preoccupation was ensuring the ideological stability of the motherland and preventing dissidents from speaking out against it (Pringle 177). KGB operations regarding the United States mainly had an ideological basis, where security forces had to combat this opposing power in order to maintain the power and health of the state. When the precursor to the KGB, the Cheka, was formed, the fathers of the Soviet state had domestic security and counter intelligence in mind, as evidenced by the Cheka's extensive list of domestic operations against dissidents and revolutionaries. These violent measures would be continued by the KGB, who in 1953, conducted a violent repression of a workers' revolt in East Berlin using two armored divisions and resulting in twenty-one fatalities (Andrew and Gordievsky 423).

Interestingly, like the Soviets in the 1960s, American intelligence monitored US citizens' activities. During the Vietnam War, President Richard Nixon became increasingly concerned with domestic unrest caused by the war and various civil rights movements, culminating in him asking the CIA and NSA to eavesdrop on U.S. citizens (PBS NewsHour). The public found out about this operation when prosecutors provided tapes to be used in the 1971 trial of White Panthers who had bombed CIA headquarters in 1968; the Supreme Court ruled the next year that the operation violated the fourth amendment of the Constitution and outlawed the practice, resulting in the establishment of FISA. Across the globe, the Soviets prior to that period conducted a policy of "counterrevolution," which entailed the repression of nationalist uprisings and resistance to Soviet control (Deriabin and Bagley 138). Monitoring of citizens has not been relegated to the Soviet period; in 1995, the FSB was authorized to conduct surveillance of civilians as part of the System for Operative Investigative Activities (SORM), which has allowed monitoring of telephone and postal communications and was later expanded to include electronic communications via the Internet in SORM-II (Chazan). Interestingly, the FSB places the burden of setting up surveillance equipment on the telephone and Internet service provider (ISP), which is very similar to the procedure used for the USA PATRIOT Act. This is sometimes the case in the U.S., as in 2007, Comcast agreed to implement the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) at their cost, which was approximately \$1000 for the initial surveillance and \$750 for every month after that (Comcast Legal Response Center). However, the NSA continues to spend an estimated \$6 billion on operations, a significant portion of which likely goes to surveillance due to the importance of such signals intelligence (Electronic Privacy Information Center).

Overall, it appears that these surveillance activities in Russia are somewhat analogous to USAPATRIOT Act, with a major and important distinction: both SORM and the USA

PATRIOT Act require law enforcement and intelligence services to obtain a court order to conduct surveillance, but while US intelligence agencies will actually go to a FISA court to obtain permission, the FSB typically will not bother (Deibert 181). This once again goes back to the lack of transparency regarding the Russian intelligence community, which allows it to often operate outside of the law and without consequence. In one case where Bayard-Slavia Communications, a Russian ISP, refused to implement surveillance equipment in 1993, the Russian courts confirmed that the ISP had the legal right to do so; however, since the court ruling, the government has restricted the Internet access the ISP can technically provide, forcing the company to use a back-up channel with minimal data capacity, severely crippling the company (Borzo).

This is radically different from the scrutiny that the American IC faces as evidenced by the controversies and criticism surrounding ECHELON, which although never publically acknowledged by the NSA to exist has been referenced in several declassified documents, and the President's Surveillance Program (PSP) instituted by President Bush, which has been the subject of a 2009 government report (US Government). Due to the lack of transparency surrounding ECHELON, several countries including the CANUKAUS nations and individuals have accused the program of industrial espionage and expressed concern over the American surveillance of their citizens (Temporary Committee on the ECHELON Interception System; Hager). The PSP, more colloquially known as President Bush and the NSA's warrantless wiretapping system, had massive fallout after then-Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez acknowledged the existence of the program in 2005 in a New York Times article (Risen and Lichtblau). Since, the case has been subject to many legal cases surrounding the issues of statutory interpretation and the Constitutional legality of such surveillance.



Overall, the American IC must take care to respect American values and citizens' Constitutional rights in order to maintain integrity and trust in these institutions. When sacrificing rights that the Supreme Court have time and again maintain exist in exchange for national security, these organizations compromise the integrity of operation and ensure the uselessness of that information in a court of law, which can defeat the purpose of some of these operations in the end. Lawful surveillance is ultimately linked to transparency, which is a huge differentiating factor between the American government and the more oppressive Russian government.

*Friends as Spies: Using Intelligence Cooperations*

During the height of the Cold War, the U.S. decided to ban the presence of Russian intelligence operatives on American territory, to which the Soviets cleverly responded by using extended strategic intelligence systems to bypass this legal restriction (Richelson 216). While Soviet operatives would be banned from operation, operatives from other Soviet-allied nations, including those in the Warsaw Pact and Cuba, could be used without restriction. At its best, this system would also allow for localized knowledge of an area that previously had an insignificant Soviet presence and would provide additional presence in regions where Soviets were not banned from operation. This arrangement did not entail full sharing between the Soviets and their allies as directorates with identical objectives would become more interoperable and would enjoy increased communication with allies. This system is similar to the one that the U.S. maintains with the CANUKAUS nations in that it expands the coverage of and number of operatives involved in operations around the globe, but different in that this cooperation is not intended to bypass any legal restrictions. Regardless, the extended strategic intelligence systems

show the benefits of maintaining cooperative agreements in the event of a major shift in foreign affairs.

A drawback to depending on foreign intelligence during operations is the problem of own objectives. A foreign intelligence service may withdraw support or switch alliances when coordination with the American IC is no longer beneficial or the original objectives are achieved, which could compromise information shared during the coordination. This somewhat explains the US cooperation system with the CANUKAUS nations, which comprise the most stable and reliable American allies in the world, and the lesser cooperation with other intelligence services, such as the Pakistani ISI and Israeli Moussad. Ultimately, it is essential to maintain cooperation with other countries' foreign intelligence services in order to increase the amount of information collected and allied presence around the globe and in the long term will allow the IC to be flexible in terms of options and venues when responding to the asymmetric threat.

*Adventures in Chechnya: Negative Lessons for US Intelligence*

The American government and particularly the intelligence agencies have much to learn from the Soviet Union and Russia's involvement in Chechnya, which has been the home of nationalist resistance to Russian rule since the eighteenth century, during which time Russia tried its hand at empire-building (Shah). This conflict has become one of Russia's most protracted, which continues to sap resources, funds, and effort in combating it. Russian involvement in the region today has been representative of much of Soviet security and intelligence strategy prior to 1991; not only has the FSB been brutal in their military operations, such as their conduct in the 2002 Nord Ost Siege, the covert measures that have been identified, including the 1999 apartment bombings, have been a shock to the Western world but have been entirely in line with

previous known FSB operations. Modern Russian operations in Chechnya are in many ways representative of many of the negative lessons to be learned from the KGB and FSB.

During the Stalinist era, the Stalin deported between 400,000 and 800,000 Chechens to Siberia, for fear that they would collaborate with the German Nazis in World War II (Shah). An estimated 100,000 died due to the brutal conditions during the trek to Siberia and in Siberia itself, breeding much resentment among the Chechen populations. Other nationalist rebellions were met with complete violent oppression by the KGB and military. Once the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the Russian Federation inherited the struggle of maintaining rule over Chechnya, which under the reign of General Dzhokhar Dudayev declared independence. This culminated in the first Chechen War of 1994, but was a huge military failure on the part of the Russians, who failed to capture the capital and killed approximately 80,000 mostly Chechen civilians. This created an environment where radicalization easily took root, with young adults having grown up and seen the brutality of Russian oppression.

During this time, the Russian government's collection efforts in Chechnya were largely limited to military intelligence, as the government was far more interested in imposing harsh military operations indiscriminately on the entire region. In the years leading up to the Nord Ost hostage situation, the Russian government had been successful in tamping down the range and scope of Chechen-based terrorist attacks by carrying out the aggressive sweeps called *zachistki*. They entailed blocking off a Chechen town and searching homes, but was often followed by detainment, interrogation, torture, and disappearances of local Chechens without any acknowledgment of culpability on the part of the Russian military (Nichol 2). While these operations managed to kill most of the masterminds behind previous terrorist attacks, they also served to increase resentment in the region and serve as an effective propaganda and recruiting

tool. By 2002, both tensions and the number of the Chechen militants had grown, culminating in a hostage situation at a theatre in Dubrovka involving 40 militants and 912 hostages (Holiman 3). Despite several fatalities within the first two days, then-President Putin refused to initiate dialogue with the terrorists and did not issue any public statements regarding the situation. Meanwhile, the FSB did not show any attempt to negotiate with the militants for the safe release of the hostages. On October 26<sup>th</sup>, the third day of the hostage crisis, against Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov's advice, Putin authorized a siege of the theatre, which resulted in 130 civilians deaths. Additionally, the FSB used a potentially lethal narcotic gas to subdue individuals inside the theatre prior to the siege; although the government has claimed that the gas was harmless, the formula has never been released and several survivors of the siege sustained hearing loss, vision problems, memory loss, with some later giving birth to severely handicapped children (Holiman 6). At the site, the FSB did not set up field hospitals or provide sufficient medical support for the operation, despite teams knowing over 900 people were inside.

After the siege, Putin declared the operation an "outstanding success" and decorated the commanding officers of the operation (Holiman 6). However, looking at the operation, there not only several tactical errors made but general public relations errors made on the part of both the FSB and Putin. The FSB did not make it appear to the public that they were doing all that was possible within their power to ensure the safety of the hostages, and the government made the grave mistake of not opening a public commission into the operation, in order to learn and make the next operation more successful. Despite the high level of publicity surrounding the hostage crisis, the response to the crisis and investigation into the clearly flawed operation were not nearly as transparent or public. The Nord Ost Siege and the Kaspiysk bombing earlier that year would mark the beginning of a revival in Chechen terrorist attacks in the heartland of Russia

after nearly three uneventful years. Since then, there has been at least one attack every year, with the most recent being an attack on the pro-Russian Chechen Parliament building leaving six dead and seventeen injured (Rosenberg).

The attacks have been met by the Russian government with further oppression and increased military operations in the Caucasus, despite the government formally ceasing all counter-terrorism operations in the region. Reports of zachistki and other violations of established human rights continue to trickle out of the region, with little to no consequence for the perpetrating intelligence and security officers. In turn, the militants have become angrier while gaining more fodder for propaganda and recruiting, with oppression by the Russian military, which has been under the control of the FSB since October 2009, feeding further resentment of the Russian government (Vatchagaev). This has become a vicious circle that neither party seems able to acknowledge and break, creating the risk of further escalation of tensions and the conflict. This demonstrates the necessity for agencies, intelligence or security, to constantly objectively evaluate their operations with consequences in mind in order to prevent situations from becoming worse. Additionally, the whole Nord Ost siege failure, despite Putin's claims otherwise, have shown the need for constant transparency, as the lack of transparency in this operation has clearly damaged the integrity of not only both of the intelligence and security services, but the government as a whole as well.

The very mindset that pervades the FSB today regarding Chechnya is one that is best voiced by now-Prime Minister Putin in the aftermath of the Moscow bombings: "I am confident that law enforcement bodies will spare no effort to track down and punish the criminals. Terrorists will be destroyed" (BBC News Corporation). This black-and-white vision is detrimental to intelligence and security agencies efforts to deal with the situation, as it reduces

their flexibility and likely their innovation when dealing with these militants. It closes the door on possibility for cooperation, negotiation, and compromise. This has some resonance with the American public; in the aftermath of the 9/11 attack, while even President Bush did not use such provocative language, his harshest statements implied pursuit and destruction of al-Qaeda and governments that harbored them, specifically the Taliban: “the United States of America makes the following demands on the Taliban: Deliver to United States authorities all the leaders of al Qaeda who hide in your land...these demands are not open to negotiation or discussion. The Taliban must act, and act immediately. They will hand over the terrorists, or they will share in their fate” (Bush). This us versus them rhetoric is similar to that of the Russian government when responding to terrorism, but it is fundamental that the U.S. government acknowledge while the Taliban and al-Qaeda are a very ideological organizations and are therefore difficult to negotiate with, dialogue is essential in dealing with them. While some may argue that dialogue would legitimize these organizations, these organizations do and will exist regardless of the U.S. government’s interaction with them. By engaging in dialogue, the government begins to rob the terrorist organizations of their pulpit, their propaganda, and in turn, their power.

Russia’s attempts to deal with the Chechen separatists have almost exclusively come via assassinations and general extermination. The FSB made peaceful negotiation nearly impossible when in 2005, shortly after an announced ceasefire by separatist President Aslan Maskhadov, they assassinated Maskhadov and then refused to release his body for burial or even disclose the location of his body. This not only destroyed Russia’s best means to negotiate peace with the republic, but created further resentment among ethnic Chechens. In 2006, Abdul-Halim Sadulayev, Maskhadov’s non-democratically elected successor, was also killed, although the cause is undetermined, with the FSB claiming assassination and others claiming an accident

(Smirnov). Regardless of the cause of his death, Chechen rebels broadcasted across the internet that Sadulayev was a martyr, while the Russian officials declared that "they have sustained a severe blow, and they are never going to recover from it" (Myers). There is clearly a disconnect between the actual consequences and the perceived consequences of FSB operations in Chechnya by the FSB and Russian government. By ignoring the consequences that the FSB's actions have on the ground and the general Chechen population, they are ignoring the very causes of the terrorism they are combating in the first place. A terrorist organization is dependent on the support of the local culture; the best way to remove this support is to engage the local culture and the government or authority that they trust. The 1997 assassination of Mashadov, an elected leader, removed the ability for the Russian government to engage in meaningful dialogue with a leader that the insurgency seemed likely to follow. This is timely when looking at American engagement in Afghanistan and their interaction with the Taliban; while they do engage in terrorist tactics, without engaging in dialogue with this organization, one that clearly has power and authority in the area, the United States is shutting itself off to any sort of negotiation. It is both time and resource consuming to try to stamp out a decentralized, resilient terrorist organization involved in an asymmetric ground war. Rather, it is important to try to understand the enemy and negotiate if possible, especially when the adversary has demonstrated some degree of authority over belligerents, as this has the potential to shorten the duration and cost of a conflict.

The Russian experience in Chechnya serves as a cautionary tale for the American IC when dealing with terrorists. This centuries-long conflict in with these separatists/nationalists who have latched onto the Islamic fundamentalist movement had many points at which the Russian government could practically and effectively deal with or at least minimize the threat,

but chose not to or exacerbate the problem. Ultimately, the United States cannot afford a centuries-long conflict with any entity, let alone a decentralized enemy that has shown resilience to counter-terrorism efforts. Dialogue with the region is essential in tamping down the threat and reducing the support for the organization. Cognizance of the potential repercussions of operations regarding the group is fundamental; the worse case is when an operation meant to reduce the power of the organization instead becomes fodder for propaganda, thereby increasing the power of the group, which is a concept that the Russian government has not understood to this day. Finally, in light of increased globalization, the American IC must be culturally sensitive and make an effort to understand the culture surrounding groups around the globe; the synonymous nature of the word terrorist and Muslim in the U.S. and to a much greater extent in Western Europe in the year following 9/11 has severely hurt efforts to minimize the support for al-Qaeda. It has taken a decade for some governments to rectify this mistake, with the British government only recently ceasing its multicultural policies, which had qualitatively exacerbated the radicalization of British Muslims and contributed to the establishment of right-wing extremists (Neville-Jones 14).

### *Conclusion*

During this time of transition and evolution in the intelligence community, it is absolutely essential that agencies look at their foreign counterparts to better understand the repercussions of their actions in order to create a legacy with integrity. As highlighted, transparency, including operations in which surveillance is used, is fundamental to the intelligence process; while secrecy is no doubt a necessary component of intelligence, some level of oversight must be administered by Congress and some level of accountability must exist. These two aspects are consistent with American values and must not be excluded from intelligence, as a covert



American action is, in the end, still an American action. Competitive analysis must remain and increased integration along the intelligence process must become part of the operations of the IC; competitive analysis, while not perfect, is one bulwark against intelligence failures, while increased integration will ultimately allow for the production of more useful intelligence.

The Soviet story with intelligence is a rich and textured one, filled with successes and failures, some of which were at the expense of Soviet citizens. The U.S. grapples with many of the same threats that Russia has and does, and given the susceptibility of the intelligence community to public opinion, it is prudent to look at the Russian experience to avoid creating a legacy that is as dark and corrupt as theirs. The American intelligence community has much potential to become more effective and more efficient; it is only a matter of examining the components and how they work with one another to streamline the process, and then checking it against the Russian model to make sure they have not already made a legal or human rights disaster with that idea.

## Works Cited

Ackerman, Spencer. "One Spy to Rule Them All: Top Spook Launches Push for Real Power."

Wired 3 November 2010: <<http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2010/11/one-spy-to-rule-them-all-top-spook-launches-push-for-real-power/>>.

Andrew, Christopher and Oleg Gordievsky. KGB: The Inside Story. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990.

Bamford, James. The Shadow Factory: The Ultra-Secret NSA from 9/11 to the Eavesdropping on America. New York: Doubleday, 2009.

BBC News Corporation. "Moscow Metro hit by deadly suicide bombings." BBC News 29 March 2010: <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8592190.stm>>.

Borzo, Jeanette. "Russian ISP Finds Court Victory Sometimes Is No Victory At All." The Wall Street Journal, Interactive Edition 5 October 1999: <<http://www.libertarium.ru/14424>>.

Bush, George W. "Text of George Bush's Speech." The Guardian 11 September 2001: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/sep/21/september11.usa13>>.

Chazan, Guy. "A High-Tech Folk Hero Challenges Russia's Right to Snoop-- Internet Service Provider Says No to E-Mail Taps for Security Agencies." Wall Street Journal 27 November 2000: A28.

Comcast Legal Response Center. "Comcast Cable Law Enforcement Handbook." Confidential Handbook. 2007.

Deibert, Ronald. Access Denied: The Practice and Policy of Global Internet Filtering. Cambridge: The President and Fellows of Harvard University, 2008.

Deriabin, Peter and T.H. Bagley. KGB, Masters of the Soviet Union. New York: Hippocrene Books, 1990.

Doorey, Timothy J. "Intelligence Secrecy and Transparency: Finding the Proper Balance from the War of Independence to the War on Terror." Conference Papers-- International Studies Association Annual Meeting (2007): 1-23.

Electronic Privacy Information Center. Legality of NSA's Secret Eavesdropping Program is Suspect and Cost is Unknown. <<http://epic.org/privacy/surveillance/spotlight/0106/>>: Electronic Privacy Information Center, 2006.

Ferguson, Niall. "Stalin's Intelligence." Niall Ferguson's Blog 5 July 2008: <<http://www.niallferguson.com/site/FERG/Templates/ArticleItem.aspx?pageid=144>>.

Formalizing the intelligence structure: Intelligence dogma, vocabulary and formal reporting structure. Perf. David Martin-McCormick. American University, Washington, DC. 4 October 2010.

Hager, Nicky. Nicky Hager Appearance before the European Parliament ECHELON Committee. Testimony. Brussels, 2001.

Holiman, Alan. "The Case of Nord-Ost: Dubrovka and the Search for Answers." Europe-Asia Studies 61.2 (2009): 283-311.

Kommersant. "Who Orchestrated the Plan to Discredit Russia?" Kommersant 25 November 2006: <<http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=724957>>.

Kornblut, Anne E. and Peter Finn. "White House undeterred after Ghailani terror case verdict." The Washington Post 18 November 2010: <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/17/AR2010111705663.html?hpid=topnews>>.

Lowenthal, Mark M. Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2009.

Myers, Steven Lee. "Russian Troops Kill Leader of Chechen Separatists." The New York Times 18 June 2006:

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/18/world/europe/18chechnya.html?ex=1308283200&en=8912e421eef42532&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland&emc=rss>>.

National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. Commission Report.

Washington, DC: US Government, 2004.

Negroponte, Ambassador John D. Interview of Ambassador John D. Negroponte, Director of National Intelligence, With Mr. Chris Matthews of MSNBC Chris Matthews. 11 September 2006.

Neville-Jones, Baroness Pauline. Security in an Uncertain World: Great Britain's New National Security Strategy. Transcript\.. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institute, 2010.

Nichol, Jim. Stability in Russia's Chechnya and Other Regions of the North Caucasus: Recent Developments. Congressional Research Service Report. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2010.

Office of the Director of National Intelligence. Questions & Answers on the Intelligence Community Post 9/11. Government Memo. Washington, DC: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2010.

PBS NewsHour. "Domestic Security: The Homefront and the War on Terrorism." PBS NewsHour 1 March 2006:

<[http://www.pbs.org/newshour/indepth\\_coverage/terrorism/homeland/fisa.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/indepth_coverage/terrorism/homeland/fisa.html)>.

Priest, Dana and William M. Arkin. "A hidden world, growing beyond control." Washington Post 19 July 2010: <<http://projects.washingtonpost.com/top-secret-america/articles/#article-index>>.

Pringle, Robert W. "The heritage and future of the Russian intelligence community."

International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence 11.2 (1998): 175-184.

Richelson, Jeffrey. Sword and Shield: The Soviet Intelligence and Security Apparatus.

Cambridge: Ballinger Publishing Company, 1986.

Risen, James and Eric Lichtblau. "Bush Lets U.S. Spy on Callers Without Courts." New York

Times 16 December 2005: <<http://www.commondreams.org/headlines05/1216-01.htm>>.

Romerstein, Herbert and Stanislav Levchenko. The KGB Against the "Main Enemy". Lexington:

Lexington Books, 1989.

Rosenbach, Eric and Aki J. Peritz. Confrontation or Collaboration? Congress and the Intelligence

Community. The Intelligence and Policy Project. Cambridge: Harvard University, 2009.

Rosenberg, Steve. "Attack on Chechen parliament in Grozny leaves six dead." BBC News 19

October 2010: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11571673>>.

Ross, Brian. "ABC News Exclusive: Murder in a Teapot." ABC News 26 January 2007:

<[http://blogs.abcnews.com/theblotter/2007/01/it\\_was\\_in\\_the\\_t.html](http://blogs.abcnews.com/theblotter/2007/01/it_was_in_the_t.html)>.

Shah, Anup. Crisis in Chechnya. <<http://www.globalissues.org/article/100/crisis-in-chechnya>>:

GlobalIssues.org, 2004.

Simon Jr., James Monnier. "Managing Domestic, Military, and Foreign Policy Requirements."

Jennifer E. Sims, Burton Gerber. Transforming U.S. Intelligence. Washington, D.C.:

Georgetown University Press, 2005. 149-161.

Smirnov, Andrei. "Sadulaev Death Result of Good Luck, Not Good Planning." Eurasia Daily

Monitor 3.121 (2006):

<[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=31805](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=31805)>.

Temporary Committee on the ECHELON Interception System. Report on the existence of a global system for the interception of private and commercial communications (ECHELON interception system). 2001/2098 (INI). Brussels: EU Parliament, 2001.

Tyler, Patrick E. "Russian Says Kremlin Faked "Terror Attacks"." New York Times 1 February 2002:

<<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E00EFD8163DF932A35751C0A9649C8B63>>.

US Government. Unclassified Report onf the President's Surveillance Program. Report No. 2009-0013-AS. Washington, DC: US Government, 2009.

Vasilieva, Elena. "Trepashkin told the whole truth about the "Litvinenko case"." New Region 15 February 2010: <<http://nr2.ru/inworld/104701.html/print/>>.

Vatchagaev, Mairbek. "FSB Assigned Control Over Operations in Chechnya and the North Caucasus." Eurasia Daily Monitor 6.191 (2009): <[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=35621](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=35621)>.

Zpoplar, Sergei. "The timer was stopped for seven hours before the explosion." Kommersant 24 September 1999: <<http://kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=226161>>.