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SVR: Image Change

How the Soviet foreign intelligence agency, rightly fearing lustration, conceived and successfully implemented a plan to change its image. This plan allowed the SVR to avoid reform.

RIA Novosti / Press Service of the Russian Historical Society

September 28, 2021

Excerpt from the book: **"The Compatriots: The Brutal and Chaotic History of Russia's Exiles, Émigrés, and Agents Abroad"** by A. Soldatov and I. Borogan (*«Свои среди чужих. Политические эмигранты и Кремль: Соотечественники, агенты и враги режима»*)

September 1992, Moscow. The CIA director rose from his seat with a glass in his hand. In front of him, at a long table in the spacious hall of [the SVR](#) mansion in Kolpachny Lane, ten Americans and ten Russians sat opposite each other. Robert Gates had just turned 49 years old, 26 of them served in intelligence and the National Security Council, dealing mainly with the Soviet threat, and a few months ago President George H.W. Bush appointed him director of the CIA. "I want to offer a toast," he said.

Among themselves, the Americans dubbed this white and blue mansion "Beria's house." (In fact, at one time this house belonged not to a sinister chief of the NKVD, but to another, no less bloody - Minister of State Security [Viktor Abakumov](#).) Now the mansion was used by the SVR for meetings with the press and Americans.

Gates flew to Moscow to establish contacts between U.S. and Russian intelligence. In honor of his arrival, the SVR and the Russian Counterintelligence Agency, which would soon become known as the FSB, arranged a gala dinner at the mansion on Kolpachny. "I'm here today," Gates began, "because the relationship between our countries requires the cooperation of our intelligence agencies in areas of mutual interest. The time has come for us to turn the page of history — of course, without forgetting our past and present differences — and to work together to address the threats we face as we enter a new era."

The Russian generals were smiling quite a bit. The concept of "cooperation" fit perfectly into the new image of the SVR.

The following year, SVR Director Primakov flew to the United States. It was the first time since [Kryuchkov](#)'s trip there that a head of intelligence of this level had come to

America. But Kryuchkov came in secret, under the guise of an ordinary diplomat; Primakov flew in on an official visit, and in Washington met with James Woolsey, the director of the CIA in the new administration of Bill Clinton. The following month, Primakov hosted Woolsey in Moscow.

At one of the meetings, the CIA and the SVR, among other things, agreed to abandon the tactics of **active measures**. "It was a gentleman's agreement between U.S. and Russian intelligence agencies," a former SVR official told Human Rights Watch. Service A was officially dissolved - at least so assured The Russian colleagues.

"There has never been a written agreement between us," confirmed Rolf Mowatt-Larssen, who headed the CIA's Moscow station in the early 1990s and attended that very dinner in Kolpachny Lane. "It's just that by the end of the 1980s, both they and we realized that we had to be careful not to disrupt the negotiations between Gorbachev and Reagan."

Now the SVR faced a new task - to win the trust of the Americans. To do this, it needed to improve its image in the eyes of the Western public. Russian intelligence already had a well-thought-out plan: in [Yasenevo](#); work had begun on it even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, and four years later, in 1993, it was finally time to implement it.

But that four-year delay ruined almost everything.

By 1993, Russia had changed beyond recognition. It was now a market country, almost without rules and feelings. People who worked for the state, including in foreign intelligence, immediately lost all social guarantees, and the complex in Yasenevo with its carefully guarded shops and massage rooms was deteriorating before our eyes. Entire departments of smart and resourceful opportunists were being dismissed from the SVR.

Among those who decided to try to catch luck elsewhere was a clever and sociable young officer [Alexander Vasiliev](#). A former captain of the North American Department of the First Chief Directorate, he got a job as a journalist in the popular newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*.

In the summer of 1993, 31-year-old Vasilyev, a smiling, round-faced man with long blonde hair, published a sensational article. It told about one of the most successful active measures of [Service A](#) (*Sluzhba A*) in the history of the KGB: in the mid-1980s, the Indian newspaper *Patriot* published an article claiming that the Pentagon had developed the AIDS virus as part of "experiments to create a new and dangerous type of biological weapon." The story instantly spread around the world, and millions of people believed in the conspiracy of the American military.

The *Komsomolskaya Pravda* journalist was not the first to expose this KGB disinformation: the West had known about it for several years. But Vasilyev was the first to receive confirmation of this story from the mouth of the director of foreign intelligence Yevgeny Primakov himself. However, much more important was something else: the author of the article claimed that the KGB launched this disinformation in response to

the spread of false rumors by the CIA that the KGB was behind the assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II. In other words, in Vasiliev's material, the American and Soviet special services were presented as equal opponents who simply exchanged blows, and the **KGB active measure** looked like a logical response to the CIA attack. The foreign intelligence service could be satisfied: such a view was quite consistent with the legend invented by it.

The day after the article was published, Vasilyev received a phone call from the head of the SVR press bureau, Yuri Kobaladze. He invited his former colleague to the blue and white mansion in Kolpachny Lane to "talk." "I thought I would be skinned for this article," Vasilyev recalled. But instead, Kobaladze made him a business proposal. He explained that the SVR was launching an ambitious publishing project: The Association of Foreign Intelligence Veterans agreed with Alberto Vitale, head of Random House, to publish a series of five books on KGB intelligence operations during the Cold War. Kobaladze invited Vasilyev to join the team.

The KGB helped publish the first such book even before the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was the story of the most famous defector of Stalin's time, [Alexander Orlov](#) (by the way, the boss of Nahum Eitingon in Spain). There were two authors: a KGB officer and British historian [John Costello](#). The book was a success, so SVR decided to sign a contract for five more books. The first was planned to be devoted to the activities of Soviet intelligence in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s, the second to the confrontation between the KGB and the CIA in Germany during the Cold War. The third was intelligence operations in Britain before and during World War II. The fourth to the Cuban Missile Crisis, and finally, the last, fifth, to the story of the assassination of Leon Trotsky. Each book had to be written by two authors, Russian and Western. The SVR received Random House's agreement in principle in June 1992, and since then Kobaladze had been looking for a suitable co-author for the first, most sensitive book on KGB operations in the United States. In the end, his choice fell on Vasiliev.

In negotiating the publication of the books, the SVR clearly knew what it wanted: to produce a well-retouched version of its bloody history for Western audiences, and authoritative American and British historians as co-authors would give it respectability. The SVR was not going to give Western researchers direct access to secret KGB documents — only Russian authors, mostly former or current foreign intelligence officers, were allowed to do so. In short, the SVR leadership was going to tightly control the entire process of writing books, and from the very top. "Primakov personally supervised the negotiations from Yasenevo at the final protracted stage," recalled James O'Shea Wade, who at the time was vice president of Crown Publishing at Random House and led the project from the western side.

The project was positioned as a unique opportunity to look into the secret archives of the KGB, but not everyone in the West bought into this explanation. In Yasenevo, they really wanted to attract the British journalist Phillip Knightley, who became famous for his investigations into the activities of the British special services and was very critical of them - it was he who in the 1960s was the first to expose the Soviet double agent Kim

Philby as an officer of British intelligence, whom the British had previously called simply a diplomat.

Knightley had since maintained contact with Philby, visited him in Moscow, and wrote his biography. But Knightley refused to take part in writing a book about the "Cambridge Five". He rightly feared that the SVR initiative pursued a purely propagandistic purpose. When a book about Orlov was published in 1993, Knightley publicly called it disinformation.

Sitting in Kobaladze's office, Vasilyev pondered the proposal. He knew almost nothing about the KGB's activities in the United States. "Of course, I was aware of the Rosenberg trial, but nothing more. In my time in Yasenevo all the archives were strictly classified. To gain access to them, special permission was required from the authorities. And against the backdrop of all these defector and traitor scandals in the late 1980s, no one wanted to arouse suspicion by trying to find out more than you're supposed to." His intuition told Vasilyev that "all this [the publication of books] was another *aktivka* ((active measure)). They just wanted to fool Americans." He didn't want to become a pawn in someone else's game. When he reminded Kobaladze that he was no longer an employee of the SVR, he assured a former colleague that he would have access to authentic KGB documents: Vasilyev would not have to be content with the information that current employees would deign to provide.

Well, Vasilyev thought, in this case he has a chance to do something really important, earning good money on it. He genuinely believed that Stalin's intelligence operations in the United States deserved to be proud of — and to tell people about them. "There was nothing to be ashamed of. It was a glorious past — our intelligence stole the secret of the nuclear bomb and changed the course of world history. In addition, it really did not participate in the repressions," Vasilyev told us.

This is the version of its history that the SVR wanted to present to the Western public. A former intelligence officer, Vasilyev was raised on this legend and believed that KGB documents would confirm it. It seemed that Kobaladze was not mistaken with his choice of the author.

He and Vasilyev shook hands.

The next two years, Vasilyev spent every day from nine in the morning to five in the evening in the white and blue mansion of the SVR in Kolpachny Lane. He shared a desk with another "historian," an active SVR officer who was working on a book on intelligence operations in Britain — the same one that Knightley refused to write. Day after day, Vasilyev studied the voluminous folders with documents that were delivered from Yasenevo at his request.

As a former Yasenevo employee with a through knowledge of the KGB's internal procedures, Vasilyev knew what to ask for. He hunted for pale green and brown folders with yellowed sheets inside — the so-called operational traffic cases, abbreviated DOP. Hidden in these folders were real treasures: encrypted telegrams exchanged for

decades between Soviet spies in the United States and the Moscow Center. This was the most important and still unknown part of the history of Soviet atomic espionage. (Among other things, there were also reports from [Vasily Zarubin](#) and [Liza Gorskaya](#); it is thanks to Vasiliev that we now know the details of how Zarubin twisted the arms of [Yakov Golos](#), demanding he give up his agent status)

Studying the documents, Vasiliev carefully copied everything into a notebook. When he ran out of notebook, he was allowed to take it home. In total, he filled out eight notebooks.

Trusting his former comrade in arms, Kobaladze did not require non-disclosure agreements from Vasilyev. That was his first mistake.

The SVR leadership simply overlooked the fact that in the 1990s, intelligence did not frighten people in the way that the KGB did. The Soviet regime ended long ago, and the SVR did not have the same terrible reputation as its predecessor. The SVR made another mistake when it did not offer Vasilyev money for the work: the entire fee for the book had to be paid by the American publisher.

Thus, Vasiliev, bound by any obligations, was a free bird. In January 1996, the former intelligence officer realized that he had a real treasure in his hands – and it was time to act. Later, he claimed that he had a bad feeling: "A secret cell of the Communist Party was operating in the SVR, and they began to threaten me." But, most likely, the reason was much more banal. This month, the head of the SVR, Primakov, was transferred from Yasenevo to the high-rise Foreign Ministry on Smolenskaya, appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Vasilyev could simply be afraid that after the departure of his main patron, the Foreign Intelligence Service would close the project and demand the return of all its records.

Vasiliev scanned his notebooks and hid the floppy disks from friends. Thanks to acquaintances at the British Embassy, he quickly obtained British visas for himself and his wife and flew to London. With him in his carry-on luggage, Vasiliev carried a laptop — completely empty, as he suspected that he could be searched at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport and they would start with the laptop — and several floppy disks with an electronic version of his precious notebooks.

Having moved to the UK, Vasiliev, with the help of American historians, turned his notes into two books about the activities of Soviet intelligence in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. These books – "[The Haunted Forest: Soviet Espionage in America – The Stalin Era](#)" (1998) and "[Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America](#)" (2009) – were the most shocking revelations of all that have been published on this topic until then.

Vasiliev was neither a hero nor a fighter for the truth. He just saw the opportunity and did not hesitate to take advantage of it. But what he did helped shed light on one of the world's most secretive organizations. In 2009, his notebooks, translated into English, were digitized on the website of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Science.

Finally, the United States received from Yasenevo itself evidence of the important role played by the US Communist Party in Soviet espionage - which was always categorically denied in Soviet and Russian intelligence. At the same time, the reputation of some prominent American nuclear physicists was restored, especially the head of the Manhattan Project, Robert Oppenheimer, who, as it turned out, had never been a Soviet agent.

What was conceived as a clever propaganda campaign turned out to be a disaster for the SVR. Vasilyev didn't even have to become a defector – he just flew away from the country. Times have changed, borders have been open, but the Russian security services have been too slow to realize the new realities. Meanwhile, the books, as before, continued to work.

The SVR was so confused that they did not even try to start a criminal prosecution against Vasilyev. "I'm not a traitor, they invited me!" – Vasilyev explained to us with a smile from his home in the UK. Indeed, if the intelligence had decided to investigate, its leadership would have been the first to be hit, and no one wanted this. Vasilyev was left alone, but he never returned to Moscow.

Of the five books planned by BP, only four were published - if you count the first, authored by Vasiliev. A book about the murder of Trotsky was never written – most likely, Yasenevo decided that they were not ready to open the KGB archives related to the murder of the most famous Soviet political émigré. Nahum Eitingon's secrets remain securely hidden — and possibly forever.

At the time, it seemed that the failed "book" operation was the last initiative of the old guard, an attempt by the outgoing generation to influence how history would remember them. After all, at that time, all the top positions in Yasenevo were still occupied by generals who had made a career in the KGB. And an old dog, as the saying goes, can't be taught new tricks.

But as the years passed, it became clear that even the departure of the old guard did not change much: Russia's new counterintelligence and intelligence services were not going to give up their old habits.

In the late 1990s, when we began to write about the Russian special services, we constantly heard from more experienced colleagues that they, as before, were actively engaged in disinformation, although no one knew the details. **Operations of this kind were now rumored to be called not active measures, but assistance programs (programmy sodeystviya) or assistance operations (operatsii sodeystviya) — it was believed that they should influence the policies or positions of foreign governments in such a way as to "contribute" to the implementation of the Kremlin's course.**

In 1999, the rumors were confirmed. Oddly enough, this happened thanks to the Federal Security Service itself. At a meeting with journalists, the head of the FSB Public Relations Center proudly announced that he had been appointed **head of a new unit -**

the Directorate of Assistance Programs ((upravleniye program sodeystviya)), which included the press service. Many FSB officers were outraged: their own general had gave out a classified term intended only for internal use.

Ten years later, documentary evidence appeared about what kind of disinformation operations the FSB conducts. In the summer of 2010, a group of disillusioned FSB officers leaked documents showing that the FSB was behind a disinformation campaign in Ukraine designed to prevent Kiev from buying Russian gas in favor of Turkmen gas. A false story was launched in the Ukrainian media that the Ukrainian special services allegedly financed the Turkmen opposition. Almost 20 years passed after the collapse of the USSR, but the FSB continued to use the old KGB tools.

And what about foreign intelligence - did the SVR continue to use the tactics of the KGB FCD (First Chief Directorate)? This was not easy to find out: the SVR, as it turned out, kept its secrets much better than the FSB. But in the spring of 2013, twenty years after Robert Gates toasted a new era of cooperation between U.S. and Russian intelligence agencies, the answer to that question emerged.

The rather ugly concrete high-rise on 67th Street between Third and Lexington Avenues has many different offices, including one that is known as the "submarine" among the initiates.

Officially, this 12-storey building houses the permanent Russian mission to the United Nations. This is a real fortress: built in the early 1960s, the building is carefully guarded - a high fence, CCTV cameras located at every imaginable angle. On the other side of the street is the New York Police Department, so there are always several police cars near the entrance to the building with the Russian tricolor.

One day in May 2013, on the eighth floor of this high-rise, two Russian intelligence officers had an important conversation. The eighth floor is occupied by the SVR Station in New York, and this is a fortress inside the fortress. There are no windows or telephone lines that connect the residency with the outside world. Due to the thickened walls and ceilings, the ceilings here are significantly lower than on other floors, and the power supply and ventilation systems are autonomous to prevent the possibility of installing bugs, so the station became known as the "submarine".

The two SVR officers engaged in conversation sat without jackets. For many years there had been a strict rule: in the "submarine" leave all outerwear and jackets in the coatroom of the eighth floor in case the Americans imperceptibly slip a bug into the clothes.

"Zhenya has prepared, so to speak, a proposal," the first began.

"Ugh," the second muttered.

"I have to work on it it now," the first one continued.

"What is it about?" the interlocutor asked.

"I've already told you, he sketched out a proposal for Bombardier planes."

It was about the Canadian company Bombardier, a manufacturer of aircraft and space technology, which was negotiating with the Russian government about a possible joint project. The first officer explained that the task was to build a plant in Russia for the assembly of medium-haul liners.

"So what's his idea?" asked the second.

Inside the "submarine," the officers were completely sure that they were reliably protected from other people's ears and spoke openly. But they did not take into account the human factor.

Somewhere among the papers in the office was a folder-binder, brought into the "submarine" by the first employee. He had recently recruited a valuable agent and had just received his first trophy from him – an analytical report of interest to Russian intelligence. He didn't know that his newly minted "asset" was an undercover FBI agent. A bug was hidden in the folder-binder handed to him, which now recorded the conversation of the intelligence officers about Bombardier.

The first officer continued to discuss Zhenya's proposal, which he clearly liked. Zhenya's name was [Evgeny Buryakov](#), deputy director of the New York representation office of the Russian state bank, but in fact – an employee of the SVR. Buryakov worked undercover in a bank – that is, he did not have diplomatic immunity.

The first officer noted that there was a problem with the signing of the deal between Bombardier and Moscow: Canadian trade unions opposed it. But unions can be pressured, and that was Zhenya's proposal.

"So," he told his colleague, "he proposes to conduct an **MS** to put pressure on the unions and get the company to make a decision in our favor."

So who or what is hiding behind this mysterious "MC"?

[Sergei Tretyakov](#), a high-ranking KGB/SVR officer and deputy chief of the SVR station in New York until the fall of 2000 (until he had applied for asylum in the United States), solved this mystery long ago. **Back in 2008, he argued that the gentleman's agreement to refrain from conducting active measures, informally concluded by Russian and American intelligence in the early 1990s, was originally a ploy. "We said [to the Americans], 'Okay, now we're friends. We will stop doing this," and the SVR shut down Service A," said Tretyakov. - But Service A just changed its name. It became the MS Directorate, and "active measures" turned into "facilitation measures" (meropriyatiya sodeystviya), abbreviated MS.** "In the SVR, the same people who dealt with them in the KGB were responsible for them," Tretyakov added.

Thus, the MS that was talked about in the "submarine" in May 2013, was still the same "active measure" from the old arsenal of the KGB.

In January 2015, the FBI arrested Buryakov as a foreign agent, and two Russian intelligence officers who had inadvertently discussed his offer in the "submarine" left the United States. Buryakov pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 30 months in prison. In April 2017, he was released early and sent to Moscow on an Aeroflot plane.

Two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the old guard was replaced by a new generation of Russian intelligence officers. Although many of them had no experience in the KGB (Buryakov was only 16 when the USSR collapsed), the spirit of the organization changed little. Post-Soviet intelligence officers continued to adhere to the old traditions and methods of work. Russian intelligence has proven to be a self-replicating system.

Disinformation has been and remains the most important method in the arsenal of Russian intelligence, a key tool in the arsenal of its means. In the 1990s, foreign intelligence did not refuse to conduct active measures, seeing it as the best way to ensure its survival. This approach has fully justified itself. In the 2000s, after making a small rebranding, the intelligence continued to work by the old methods and carried out active measures abroad in the same way as the KGB intelligence did during the Cold War.

Agentura.ru 2020