Soviet Espionage Before and During the Great Patriotic War

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SOVIET ESPIONAGE BEFORE AND DURING THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR

Alexandra Rairigh, English

Abstract

In this early years, Russian espionage had a primarily internal focus. The creation and evolution of intelligence organizations within the country show the changing Russian (and later, Soviet) attitude towards intelligence and counter-intelligence. Leading up to the Great Patriotic War, Soviet espionage began to shift its focus externally, forming large spy networks.

Despite this changed focus, in WWII the Soviet Union faced issues such as lack of preparedness in equipment, technology, and personnel, especially at the beginning of the war. In addition, much of the intelligence received from the various networks and informants was disregarded as untrustworthy.

The United States created the Venona program in response to the presence of Soviet espionage within the United States. This program aimed to intercept, analyze, and eventually break KGB communications. However, only a fraction of the intercepted communications were successfully broken. Venona also identified a number of mysteries that live on this day, years after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Pre-WWII

Espionage was used in Russia centuries before the Great Patriotic War, but it did not exist on nearly the same scale as that of the Soviet Union during the war. Early intelligence organizations were focused internally, on the people of the country, and over the years the focus gradually broadened.

The Okhrana, a Russian secret police organization formed in 1861, had a foreign bureau in Paris, although it focused primarily on Russian threats. Russian officials began communicating in code with their agents abroad, and intelligence reports from them continued to grow.

The Okhrana worked closely with the recently formed secret police agency, the Vecheka, or Cheka, founded in 1918 by Felix Edmunovich Dzerzhinsky. The Cheka had a foreign bureau in Paris, although it focused primarily on Russian threats.

By the early 1920s, Russian intelligence had a primary focus on the United States. The United States had established a foreign bureau in Moscow, and the United States. Intelligence reports from the Cambridge Spies and two reports containing details about Operation Barbarossa were disregarded.

By the autumn of 1941, more attention began to be paid to the intelligence gathered by spies. Stalin formed Smersh, the counterintelligence service of the NKVD, in 1943.

However, despite the changing attitude towards espionage, the Soviet Union suffered from a lack of preparedness, especially in the beginning of the war. The Red Army had insufficient communications equipment and personnel, and new technology was being developed slowly, as illustrated by the multitude of orders issued by Stalin and other Soviet officials regarding secrecy and communication. By 1943, communications were improving, and training and supplies were increased, and the number of people in communications units continued to grow.

WwII

During the Great Patriotic War, the Soviet Union spied on not only the Axis Powers, but also on Britain and the United States.

Extensive spy networks were in place; however, the Soviets were suspicious of the spies and any intelligence they passed on. Intelligence reports from the Cambridge Spies and two reports containing details about Operation Barbarosa were disregarded.

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Venona

Venona transcripts confirmed the accuracy of information passed by Soviet defectors and also revealed how the KGB conducted its operations. The transcripts enabled Arlington Hall and FBI agents to determine the identities of cover names used in KGB communications.

The Venona Project

While the Soviets spied on the Allies—and especially the Manhattan Project—the Allies worked to break Soviet one-time pad codes. A small, secret program known as Venona was founded on February 1, 1943, in an effort to intercept, analyze, and then break KGB communications. During the early years of the war, the Soviets experienced a shortage of cipher material, so they duplicated their one-time pads. This allowed their codes to be more easily broken by the Allies.

Venona transcripts confirmed the accuracy of information passed by Soviet defectors and also revealed how the KGB conducted its operations. The transcripts enabled Arlington Hall and FBI agents to determine the identities of cover names used in KGB communications.

However, only a fraction of the intercepted KGB communications were decrypted. The Soviets had devised a coding system that was highly complex—when they had adequate materials to provide for it. Even decades after the war, the majority of the intercepted messages remained untranslated; a number of informants and cover names are yet unidentified.

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Selected References:


“The cryptographic systems used by the KGB’s First Chief Directorate involved a codebook in which words and phrases were represented by numbers. These numbers were then further eniphered by the addition of random number groups, additive, taken from a so-called one-time pad. ... One-time pads used properly only once are unbreakable; however, the KGB’s cryptographic material manufacturing center in the Soviet Union apparently reused some of the pages from one-time pads ... In order to break into the system successfully, Arlington Hall analysts had first to identify and strip off the layer of additive in order to attack the underlying code. These two levels of encryption caused immense difficulty in exploiting the codebook and many code groups were, therefore, never recovered.”

The 1942-43 New York-Moscow KGB Messages