

## **Soviet Intelligence on the Eve of the Great Patriotic War**

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Studying Soviet intelligence has long been a problem. On the one hand, academics, should it be by ideology or conformity, have historically avoided the question, refusing to see the originality of these services and their central place in the power system set up by the Bolsheviks. On the other hand, journalists and former Western services personnel repeatedly stressed the omnipotence of the “Organs” and their essential role in the alleged communist “world plot.” This was done without explaining why this supposed power system proved so ineffectual during the German lightning attack of June 1941 or, again, at the time of the collapse of the USSR in 1991.<sup>1</sup> Today, the debate has been revived. Russian archives were opened at the end of the twentieth century, some partially or temporary, and many previously secret documents were published—often at the instigation of the new Russian intelligence services.

One of the things that has clearly emerged from the archives is that probably the most significant event that impacted the Soviet intelligence services was the physical consequences of the 1937–1939 purges within the Soviet intelligence services, which resulted in the disappearance of the most experienced personnel. After the purges, the Soviet services had lost a sturdy portion of its workforce but retained access to a significant flow of information. The inability of the services to provide the country’s leadership with a clear analysis of the political and military situation in Germany and the imminence of the June 22, 1941, attack was therefore linked to new work practices resulting from this “purification.” In what follows, we discuss these developments at length.

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<sup>1</sup> Gaël Moullec, “Le KGB, Dégénéré,” *Libération*, February 9, 2001.

### **One Fatherland, 3 + 1 Intelligence Services**

At the end of the 1930s, three Soviet administrations were in charge of acquiring intelligence abroad: the People's Defence Commissariat (NKO); the People's Commissariat for the Navy (NK-VMF); and the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), which became the People's Commissariat for State Security (NKGB) in February 1941. Each of these services has its own history which, for the moment, is only known in general terms:

*Military Intelligence (NKO):* On November 5, 1918, a Registration Directorate was created within the Red Army General Staff. Its regulations, adopted on June 19, 1919, made it the "central body of the secret intelligence networks" within the army. In the early 1920s, this department had nearly three hundred employees. Ethnic Latvian Jan Karlovitch Berzin (Pēteris Ķuzis), was its director from March 1924 to 1935.

*Naval Intelligence (NK-VMF):* Data on this aspect of Soviet intelligence remains very elusive. On the eve of the war, this subdivision of the Navy Headquarters was led by Rear Admiral Zuykov.

*Police Intelligence:* Created on February 6, 1919, within the All-Russian Extraordinary Committee to Combat Counter-Revolution and Sabotage of the Russian SFSR), otherwise known as the Cheka (*Vserossijskaâ črezvyčajnaâ komissîâ po bor'be s kontrrevolûciej, spekulâciej i prestupleniâmi po dolžnosti private Narodnyh Komissarov RSFSR*) this Special Section (*Osobyj Otdel*)<sup>2</sup> oversaw counterintelligence within the Red Army. This police structure, initially responsible for controlling the army, was also entrusted with intelligence tasks abroad after the Polish campaign of 1920. On December 12, 1920, Felix Edmundovitch Dzerzhinski, the head of the Cheka, ordered the preparation of a decree prohibiting the sending of agents abroad without its authorization and requested the creation of a Foreign Section

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<sup>2</sup> The *Osobyj Otdel* of the Cheka, headed initially by Mikhail Sergejevich Kedrov (born 1878, executed October 28, 1941).

within the Cheka and the liquidation of the Foreign Sector of the Special Section. This new Foreign Section was the sole department granted the right to send agents abroad. On December 20, 1919, this was formalised and the Foreign Section took over all the Cheka's actions abroad as well as its relations with the People's Commissariats for Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade, and the Comintern.<sup>3</sup> Included in a secret operational directorate in January 1921, Soviet police intelligence remained for many years under the leadership of Trilisser (Moskvin).<sup>4</sup> When the Cheka was disbanded in 1922, the police foreign intelligence unit was integrated into its replacement the OGPU, and then into the NKVD in 1934. Composed of seventy people in 1924, this organization had one hundred twenty-two personnel, including sixty-two abroad in 1930.

In addition to the above, intelligence from abroad was gathered via *political intelligence* channels, namely through the Comintern. The latter was not only a political organization responsible for coordinating the action of the emerging communist parties, it also was a fully-fledged intelligence service, the fourth at the service of the Soviet Union. Thus, a first secret section within Comintern was created on August 8, 1920. Led by the Latvian David Samouilovitch Beika, the work of this structure was deemed unsatisfactory, and, in June 1921, it was replaced by the International Liaison Section (*OMS, or Otdel meždunarodnoj svâzi*),

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<sup>3</sup> Comintern, the (Third) Communist International, an international organization that advocated world communism. The Comintern resolved at its Second Congress to "struggle by all available means, including armed force, for the overthrow of the international bourgeoisie." Existed from 1919 to 1943.

<sup>4</sup> Mikhail Abramovich Moskvin (1883–1941) (Real identity Meer Abramovitch Trilisser): Soviet communist and intelligence officer. Head of the GPU Foreign Section. Admitted on December 19, 1922, to the ECCI (The Executive Committee of the Communist International) Standing Clandestine Commission, which on November 1, 1924 became the Standing Commission for Clandestine Work in the Organising Section. Worked at ECCI from 1921 to 1938, member of ECCI, ECCI Presidium and deputy member of the ECCI Secretariat. From 1935 to 1938, the "Moskvin" Secretariat was part of the ECCI Secretariat and was responsible for ECCI's financial matters, the work of the International Liaison and Administration Section. In January 1936, a commission was created "for the control of the qualification of workers in the ECCI apparatus" entitled the "Moskvin Commission." Arrested in November 1938 by the NKVD.

placed under the political responsibility of Piatnitski<sup>5</sup> and directed from 1926 to 1936 by Abramov.<sup>6</sup> At first sight, this structure had the same instruments as any of the secret services: agents (legal and illegal), couriers, coders, radios, and a service in charge of preparing false documents. Its workforce increased from thirty-three in 1926 to forty-five in 1927, reaching sixty-five in the mid-1930s.

Rules of the game were quickly adopted between the managers of the various departments. On August 8, 1921, a joint directive from the Cheka (Unschlicht),<sup>7</sup> the Military Intelligence (Zeibot),<sup>8</sup> and the Comintern (Zinoviev, Piatnitski) separated the powers of each of the services:

1. Representatives of the Comintern could not be the plenipotentiary of both the Cheka and the Military Intelligence Directorate. In turn, the representatives of the Military Intelligence Directorate and the Cheka could not act as representatives of the Comintern or any of its sections.

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<sup>5</sup> Iosif Aronovitch Piatnitski (1882–1939). PCR(b) official, ECCI official (1921–1936). Deputy member of the ECCI from 1924, member of the ECCI and its Presidium from 1928. From 1936 to 1938, worked in the Central Control Commission of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (PCR(b)) apparatus. Victim of repression.

<sup>6</sup> Aleksandr Lazarevitch Abramov (1895–1937) (alias Aleksandrov, Mirov, Lazarev). Came from a bourgeois family. Member of the PCR(b) from 1916. Studied in Germany. Participated in the February and October Revolutions in Moscow. In 1920–1921, head of the liaison point of the International Liaison Section (OMS, Otdel meždunarodnoj svâzi) of the ECCI and Second Secretary at the USSR Embassy in Germany. Representative of the ECCI in Germany (1924–1926). From June 1926 to October 1936, head of the International Liaison Section of ECCI. Head of operations in Spain at the Directorate of Intelligence of the Red Army, convicted and executed during the repressions of the late 1930s.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Stanislavovitch Unschlicht (1879–1938). Member of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (POSDR) since 1900. In October 1917, member of the Petrograd Revolutionary Military Committee. Member of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs since December 1917. In 1921–1923, Deputy Chairman of the OGPU. In 1923, member of the Revolutionary Military Committee of the USSR. Candidate member to the Central Committee of the RCP (b) from 1925 to 1937. Chief of the Civil Aviation Branch in 1933–1935. Arrested, sentenced, and executed as an “enemy of the People” in 1938. Rehabilitated in 1954.

<sup>8</sup> Arvid Ianovitch Zeibot (1894–1934, Latvian). Member of the RCP(b) in 1918. From September 1920 to February 1924, civil servant, then head of Soviet military intelligence. From 1925 to 1934, held various responsibilities in the Soviet civil administration.

2. Representatives of the Military Intelligence Directorate and the Cheka had no right to finance political parties or groups abroad. This right belonged exclusively to the Comintern Executive Committee.
3. Representatives of the Cheka and the Military Intelligence Directorate could not proposition foreign political parties or groups in order to cooperate with them. The Military Intelligence Directorate and the Cheka could only ask the communist parties for help through the representatives of the Comintern.
4. The representatives of the Comintern were under an obligation to provide the Cheka, the Military Intelligence Directorate, and their representatives with all possible assistance<sup>9</sup>.

### *The Question to be answered*

Given the existence of these extensive intelligence services, the question of the apparent Soviet intelligence failure on the eve of the Second World War has yet to be adequately addressed. The history of the so-called Red Orchestra<sup>10</sup>—a nebula of intelligence that brought together bona fide antifascists, Soviet officials, and recruited agents—has already been the subject of numerous studies that have been both detailed and documented. However, forgetting the actual state of Soviet intelligence in the years immediately preceding the war and neglecting the existence of other networks, some authors present this group as the main source of information for the Soviet hierarchy, focusing on it to a degree that obscures the larger story.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> V. N. Ousov, “La naissance du renseignement soviétique,” *Communisme*, 2000, no. 61, 43–68.

<sup>10</sup> Die Rote Kapelle, or the Red Capella, as it was known in Germany, was the name given by the Gestapo to anti-Nazi resistance workers during World War II.

<sup>11</sup> Teodor Gladkov’s book, published in 2010, highlights for the first time the role of Willi Lehmann (alias Breitenbach), a Kriminalinspektor in the Berlin police and member of the SS, who was at the same time a Soviet agent, executed in December 1942. See Teodor Gladkov, *Ego veličestvo agent* [His Highness the Agent], (Moscow: Pečatnye tradicii, 2010).

The question is no longer whether the information provided by the Berlin branch of the Red Orchestra announcing the German attack was valid or not, but why Stalin ignored it and why, until the first day of the war. Indeed, the Soviet leadership refused to see the danger. Thus, for example, P. M. Fitin's<sup>12</sup> note of June 16, 1941, compiled from information provided by Arvid Harnack<sup>13</sup> (code name Corsican) and Harro Schulze-Boysen<sup>14</sup> (code name Chief Warrant Officer)- announces in the first paragraph that "all measures taken by Germany to prepare for an armed intervention against the USSR have been completed and the attack can take place at any time." However, Stalin annotated the note with these few words: "You can send your 'informant' from the German Air Staff to f\*\*\* his mother. He's not an informant, he's a disinformers."<sup>15</sup>

Stalin was not the only one to have this type of reaction to reports of the imminent attack by Germany. Even on June 21, 1941, Beria affixed the following annotation to received warnings: "Recently, many public servants have fallen into shameful provocations and caused panic. These organ officials must be turned to dust in the camps as accomplices of the international provocateurs who want us to quarrel with Germany."<sup>16</sup>

### Disorganization

Such behaviour can be explained, first, by Stalin's mistrust of intelligence services which, because of their frequent contact with foreigners, were the first to be suspected of having been "infected" by "Trotskyist traitors" or "agents of international imperialism." The five

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<sup>12</sup> Pavel M. Fitin (1907–1972). Joined the NKVD-NKGB in 1938. From May 1939 to February 1941, Head of the 1st Intelligence Directorate of the NKVD. February–July 1941, Chief Executive Officer of the NKGB. From July 1941 to the first half of 1946, Head of the 1st Directorate of the KVD, in charge of external intelligence.

<sup>13</sup> Arvid Harnack (1901–1942). After brilliant studies in Germany, England, and the United States, he obtained a doctorate in economics and philosophy. Became a member of the NSDAP at Moscow's request to promote it as an adviser to the German Ministry of Economics. Executed in 1942.

<sup>14</sup> Harro Schulze-Boysen (1909–1942). Graduated from the University of Berlin. Joined the Intelligence Department of the German Ministry of Aviation in 1934. Executed on December 22, 1942.

<sup>15</sup> "Iz istorii Velikoj Otečestvennoj vojny" [About the Great Patriotic War], *Izvestiâ CK KPSS*, 1990, no. 4, 221.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 222.

chiefs of the General Staff's Central Intelligence Directorate, who succeeded each other from July 1937 to July 1940, were successively eliminated: Ja. K. Berzine, in charge of intelligence from March 1924 to April 1935 and then from July 1937 to September 1937; S. P. Ouritski, from April 1935 to July 1937; S. G. Gendin, from September 1937 to November 1938; A. G. Orlov from November 1938 to April 1939; and finally I. I. Proskurov, from April 1939 to July 1940.<sup>17</sup>

These incessant changes, due to the multiple purges carried out in the services from 1936 to 1940, led to disastrous outcomes for the operational capacities of the “1,000 informants and military intelligence officials, half of whom were clandestine, acting abroad on the eve of the war.”<sup>18</sup> The *Report on Transfer of Power between K. E. Voroshilov and S. K. Tymoshenko*—when the latter was appointed minister of defence by the decree of the Council of People's Commissars of May 8, 1940—kept a record of this. In this document, the military hierarchy recognizes that:

The organization of intelligence is one of the weakest sectors in the Office's activities. An organized system of systematic intelligence and data on foreign armies does not exist. The activity of the Intelligence Directorate is not linked to that of the headquarters. The People's Defence Commissariat does not have a body in the Intelligence Directorate that provides the Red Army with data on the organisation, armament, and disposal of foreign army troops. At present, the Office of the Defence Commissioner does not have such information. The theatres of operations and their preparation are not studied.<sup>19</sup>

Police intelligence was also affected by the extent of repression. Five directors succeeded one another at the head of the foreign department of the NKVD (INO-NKVD) between July 1934 and February 1941: Artuzov, Sloutskii, Passov, Merkulov, and Fitin. The first three were executed. Well trained, but without the experience of older officials, the new

<sup>17</sup> A. G. Pavlov, “Sovetskaâ voennaâ razvedka nakanune Velikoj Otečestvennoj vojny” [Soviet Military Intelligence on the Eve of the Great Patriotic War], *Novaâ i novejšaâ istoriâ*, 1995, no. 1, 49–60.

<sup>18</sup> A. G. Pavlov, “Voennaâ razvedka SSSR v 1941-1945” [Military Intelligence of the USSR from 1941 to 1945], *Novaâ i novejšaâ istoriâ*, 1995, no. 2, 26–40.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 26–40.

Soviet intelligence officers reached positions of responsibility at a very young age. Thus, Fitin was only thirty-two years old when he became director of the Foreign Section.<sup>20</sup> In his memoirs, Elisei Sinitsyn (Eliseev), the “resident” responsible for Soviet intelligence in Finland and Sweden, recalls his meeting, at the end of 1940, with Fitin, who painted a dark picture of intelligence for him:

Yet you know that while we were at the Central School, in most of the “residences” from 1937 to 1939 and even within the central intelligence apparatus, more than half of the experienced and qualified officers were “repressed.” They were shot under various pretexts: links with enemies of the people, denunciations, provocations. In the central apparatus, several operational sectors no longer have a leader. So, since you have taken the clandestine agent courses—where the teaching is of good quality—you will have to teach our young agents their profession in addition to your duties. You will have to answer to Beria for their training in Finnish and, before me, for their practical training.<sup>21</sup>

The difficulties encountered by the Red Army during the Finnish campaign (30 November 30 1939–March 13, 1940), was much greater than those encountered during the Polish campaign in September–October 1939 and prompted the Soviet leaders to organize a meeting of high-ranking military officials in April 1940.<sup>22</sup> The minutes of this meeting, declassified at the end of the 1990s, make it possible to trace the confrontation between Stalin and Proskurov, responsible for military intelligence, and to note the real state of Soviet

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<sup>20</sup> During these years, police external intelligence changed its name many times:

From July 10, 1934: Foreign Section of the Central Directorate of State Security of the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (INO GUGB NKVD SSSR);

From December 25, 1936: 7th section of the Central Directorate of State Security of the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (7 Otdel GUGB NKVD SSSR);

From June 9, 1938: 5th section of the 1st Directorate of the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (5 otdel 1 upravleniia NKVD SSSR).

From September 29, 1938: 5th section of the Central Directorate of the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (5 otdel GUGB NKVD SSSR).

From February 26, 1941: 1st Directorate of the People’s Commissariat for State Security (1 Upravlenie NKGB SSSR)

- July 31, 1941: 1st Directorate of the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (1 Upravlenie NKVD SSSR).

For more details see: A. Kokurin, N. Petrov, Lubânka, VČK-KGB. Dokumenty (Moscow: Demokratiâ, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> E. Sinicyn, *Rezident svidetel’stvuet* [The Rezident testifies] (Moskva: Geâ, 1996), 62–63.

<sup>22</sup> E. Kul’kov, O. Ržeševski, “Zimnââ vojna 1939–1940. I. V. Stalin i finskaâ kampaniâ. Stenogramma sovešaniâ pri CK VKP(b)” [The Winter War, 1939–1940. I. V. Stalin and the Finnish Campaign. Minutes of the CC meeting of the RCP (b)], vol. 2 (Moscow: Nauka, 1998).

intelligence one year before the German attack. From the very beginning of his presentation, Proskurov broke the silence on repression by paying a barely veiled tribute to his predecessors:

For our part, we consider that intelligence had the essential information to assess the forces necessary for the annihilation of the enemy ... However, this is not to the credit of the current heads of the Intelligence Directorate, as most of this data dates to 1937–1938.<sup>23</sup>

Continuing his presentation, Proskurov underlined the weakness of its workforce:

We have to admit, we don't have any real information and we have to redo everything. We need more people working for intelligence. The People's Commissars tells me every time: Show me the goods and you will have people. Who will show them, there is no one to show them, there is a lack of staff, they are inexperienced, they need to be trained and recruited more.<sup>24</sup>

Once the chronic lack of personnel had been highlighted, Proskurov returned to the deficiencies of intelligence at the front:

The implantations have taken place in peacetime. However, the intelligence section [of the Leningrad Military District] made a huge mistake in thinking that the speed of the troops would be similar to that of the campaign in the West [against Poland]. They have set up agents and meeting places too far into the enemy's territory. [It was said to the agents] in ten days, you will come to the meeting point and give us your information, but [our] troops never made it [were unable to advance] there.

To this Stalin replied, "That's stupid." Proskurov continued,

Of course, it's stupid. We must admit that many of our Intelligence men have been influenced by some great military men who thought they would wait for us there with bouquets of flowers. It must be said that the reality was very different.<sup>25</sup>

These one-off problems were, in Proskurov's view, in fact the result of the incredible chaos in the organisation of the various intelligence services, both at home and abroad:

In practice, we are witnessing a break-up. In peacetime, no one is in charge of intelligence [at the front]. In contrast, in wartime, the Fifth Directorate [in charge of external intelligence] is also obliged to manage intelligence on the front lines when it has neither the apparatus nor the necessary powers to do so ... Although it may seem

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<sup>23</sup> E. Kulikov, O. Ržeševski, op. cit., 203.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 207.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 212–13.

strange, I was the one who signed the reports of the intelligence agencies on the front, even though they are not subordinate to the Fifth Directorate of the Red Army.<sup>26</sup>

In conclusion, Proskurov presented a method first introduced during the war against Finland and which, taken up by others, subsequently enjoyed undeniable success in the fight against the German occupation troops:

I have been heavily criticized for organizing partisan and diversionary groups and brigades. There was great resistance. Comrade Chapochnikov even went so far as to prohibit staffs from organizing such groups. However, some have been set up and have proved to be very useful .... It is essential to establish such groups and we will thus obtain active intelligence resources. We shouldn't be afraid of it.<sup>27</sup>

A few months later, Soviet espionage faced another problem. As early as March 1941, a growing flow of information from various Soviet “residences” abroad describes German military preparations. However, the external services, like counterintelligence, were unable to analyse in their entirety the many pieces of information in their possession and, even more seriously, were unable to draw the necessary conclusions.

One of the reasons for this blindness most certainly came from the fact that the “information obtained was reported on a case-by-case basis to the country’s management, in the form in which it had arrived at the Centre, without analysis or comments.”<sup>28</sup> The only additional information was limited to an assessment of the value of the informant and the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 210–11.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 213. Proskurov’s vision was to prove to be premonitory. In his memoirs, Sudoplatov states that during the war the diversion groups under his command “destroyed 157,000 German soldiers and officers, liquidated 87 senior German officials, uncovered 2,045 enemy diversion groups.” Pavel Sudoplatov, *Specoperacii. Lubânka i Kreml'. 1930-1950* [Special Operations: Lubyanka and Kremlin. 1930–1950] (Moscow: Olma-press, 1997), 203. These data are confirmed by V. S. Hristoforov, *Istoriâ strany v dokumentah arhivov FSB Rossii: Sbornik statej i materialov*. [The History of the Country through the Documents of the Archives of the FSB of Russia. Collection of Documents and Materials] (Moscow, 2013), 383–84, which quotes a document from the Central Archives of the Federal Security Service (FSB), f. 89, op. 5, d. 16, l. 3–5.

<sup>28</sup> *Sekrety Gitlera na stole u Stalina, razvedka i kontrrazvedka i podgotovka germanskoj agressii protiv SSSR. Mart-iûn' 1941* [Hitler’s Secrets on Stalin’s Desk: Intelligence and Counterintelligence in Preparation for the German Aggression against the USSR. March–June 1941] (Moscow: Mosgorarhiv, 1995), 11.

information that had been received. Thus, it was only in 1943 that a first information analysis structure was created within the Soviet intelligence services.<sup>29</sup>

Russian books on the subject stress the quality and importance of the information provided by agents Chief Warrant Officer and Corsican on German military preparations. However, these informants did not have access to the most confidential documents. Based on conversations or rumours, their data on the imminence of the German attack were contradictory, diminishing the credibility given to them by the Soviet leadership.

The *Summary of the Data Provided by Corsican and the Chief Warrant Officer on German Military Preparations against the USSR from 6 September 1940 to 16 June 1941*<sup>30</sup> makes it possible to reconstruct the flow of information made available to the Soviet leadership. On March 20, 1941, Chief Warrant Officer noted that there was a 50 percent chance that the German attack would occur because “all this may just be a bluff.” According to information provided on April 14, 1941, “the war [against the USSR] will only begin once Yugoslavia and Greece have been defeated. It is to be expected that Germany will issue a prior ultimatum.” On April 24, Corsican and Chief Warrant Officer stated that the attack on the Soviet Union had been cancelled to make way for an attack on the Middle East.

However, on April 30, they reconsidered this information and announced that the final decision to attack the USSR had been taken. On May 1, there was new information: an ultimatum must be given to the Soviet Union before Germany takes decisive action in the Middle East. On May 14, a message announced the postponement of the attack on the Soviet Union. Such contradictions certainly explain the coarseness of Stalin’s resolution on on the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>30</sup> *Organy Gosudarstvennoj bezopasnosti v period Velikoj Otečestvennoj vojny. Sbornik dokumentov, T.1/2 (01.01 - 21.06.1941)* [State Security Organs during the Great Patriotic War] (Moscow, 1995), 286–96. This document prepared by the NKGB services to demonstrate the imminence of the German attack was not transmitted to Stalin. The People’s Commissioner for State Security, V. N. Merkulov, refused to allow the document to be circulated.

document from June 16, 1941. On the eve of the German attack, the NKGB services remained unable to provide an analysis warning of the risk of war:

The transfer of troops from France and Greece to Lublin, Brest, and East Prussia continues. Sanitary columns and tanker trucks have been located ... The population of the border area was informed of the start of the German army's major manoeuvres and was asked to remain calm.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, these bits of information, taken one after the other, did not provide a complete picture of the situation and did not give any answers to the main questions: what is the purpose of these preparations, did the German government definitively decide to attack, when is the attack planned for, and what are the enemy's tactical and strategic war aims?

Furthermore, beyond the problems caused by the high mobility of personnel within the intelligence hierarchy, the purges had a direct effect on the behaviour of surviving officials. In July 1940, after a reorganization of the central apparatus of the People's Defence Commissariat, the Intelligence Directorate (5th Directorate) was placed under the authority of the General Staff and F. I. Golikov<sup>32</sup> was appointed as its head. While his predecessor I. I. Proskurov was described by his colleagues as intelligent, honest, and straightforward, Golikov did not benefit from the same judgment. Thus, M. P. Poliakov, an intelligence officer from 1937 to 1946, characterized him as "a good general of the battlefield, but who did not know, and was not interested in, the particular characteristics of our activities. He never defended the interests of intelligence either before Stalin or the general staff; working with him was not easy."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *Velikaâ Oteĉestvennaâ vojna, 50 let* [The Great Patriotic War, 50 Years] (Moscow, 1991), 28–29.

<sup>32</sup> Filipp Ivanovich Golikov (1901–1980). Member of the CPSU since 1918, involved in the civil war. Graduated from the Frunze Military Academy in 1932. In 1942, after his departure from Intelligence, commanded the front and, from 1943 to 1950, was responsible for executive management at the Ministry of Defence. Director of the Armoured Academy from 1950 to 1957. From 1958 to 1962, he was head of the political direction of the Soviet Army. Joined the Group of Inspectors General of the Soviet Army in 1963.

<sup>33</sup> L. Dvoinykh and N. Tarkhov, "O ĉem dokladyvala voennaâ razvedka," [Military Intelligence Reports], *Nauka i ĉizn'*, 1995, no. 3, 5.

In his published memoirs, former head of the Military Intelligence Information Department V. A. Novobranec reports a feature characterizing Golikov's behaviour. The head of the military intelligence always went to Stalin with two files containing contradictory information. As soon as he arrived, he tried to find out the views of the "Master" (*Khoziain*) and used, depending on the case, one or the other of these files.<sup>34</sup> For example, on March 20, 1941, Golikov submitted a report to Stalin on "Declarations, measures, and variants concerning the German military actions of the year against the Soviet Union." From the information contained in this report, it was clear that the German attack must begin between May 15 and June 15, 1941. However, General Golikov's conclusions are quite different:

1. On the basis of all the information presented and the alternatives for action planned for the spring of this year, I consider that the most likely time frame for action against the Soviet Union is when Germany will defeat England or sign a favourable peace with it.
2. Rumours and documents suggesting that a war against the USSR is inevitable for this spring must be considered as misinformation from the English services and perhaps even from the German services.<sup>35</sup>

In turn, Pavel Fitin concedes, in a fragment of his memoirs, the lack of vigour with which intelligence officials defended their views:

Despite the information we had and our willingness to defend the point of view of our management, we were still emotional. The party and country leader [Stalin] had undeniable authority. And it could perfectly well happen that something didn't please him or that he saw a mistake on our part and then any of us could find ourselves in a very unenviable situation.<sup>36</sup>

Such behavior—tending to report only information that confirms management choices—was not the solely characteristic of senior management but can be detected throughout the chain of command. In a note written in January 1942 at the request of the Military Counterintelligence (Smerch), Captain Kravtsov—who in the spring of 1941 was in

<sup>34</sup> V. A. Novobranec, "Nakanune vojny" [On the Eve of war], *Znamâ*, 1990, no. 6, 171–72.

<sup>35</sup> V. M. Lur'e, V. D. Kočhik, *GRU. Dela i lûdi* [The GRU. Affairs and Personnel] (Moscow: Olma Press, 2002), 578–79.

<sup>36</sup> *Vospominaniâ načal'nika vnešnej razvedki P. M. Fitina* [Memories of P. M. Fitin, Head of Foreign Intelligence], *Očerki istorii rossijskoj vnešnej razvedki*, vol. 4 (Moscow: Meždunarodnye otnošeníâ, 1999), 20.

charge of a local section of the intelligence department of the Western Special Military District (Zap.OVO)—pointed out that from March to May 1941, his informants had informed him three times of concentrations of German troops. Informed each time, his hierarchy refused to transmit the information to the Center:

According to the data of secret agent Felix, in March 1941, 100 infantry divisions and 8 to 10 armoured divisions were concentrated in Poland and East Prussia. However, after a conversation with the heads of the department, Felix was described as a disinformant and the section was ordered to report that the Germans had only 25 to 40 divisions on our front.<sup>37</sup>

In April 1941, converging data indicated that the Germans had concentrated 1.5 million soldiers at the border, but the department's reaction remained the same: "Such nonsense can only be expected from this section." Indeed, according to the department's data, the Germans still had only 25 to 40 divisions and these figures had remained the same for almost a year. On May 28, 1941, Agent Arnold crossed the border again into the USSR and provided concrete information on the German disposition. It was immediately sent to Minsk, to the department which, once again, concluded that:

This local section is always sensational and would do better to look at the German regimental number, because Arnold's information is false and comes from English intelligence ... After reworking this data for more than five days, the department finally sends Moscow a truncated note.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to this self-disinformation by the Soviet services, there were also efforts by the German services to validate the idea that an attack on the USSR would only take place if the clauses of a future ultimatum were rejected. As early as April 1941, an ever-increasing number of messages announcing the possibility of a German ultimatum arrived in Moscow. In the same vein, Berlin spread rumours about the preparation—or even the existence—of negotiations between the USSR and Germany. Thus, on May 26, Soviet intelligence obtained

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<sup>37</sup> V. P. Pavlov, "Moskve kričali o vojne" [Moscow was Informed of War Sounds], *Voенно-istoričeskij žurnal*, 1994, no. 6, 21–30.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

a document from the German Foreign Office indicating the possibility of such a negotiation. On May 31, the Finnish president announced to the government the opening of these negotiations.

In May–June 1941, Meissner, Hitler’s Chief of Staff, assured Dekanosov, the Soviet ambassador in Berlin, that Germany was about to take an initiative to strengthen its ties with the USSR and that Hitler himself would like to meet Stalin after his appointment as President of the Council of People’s Commissars.<sup>39</sup> Finally, the meetings between Dekanosov and Schulenburg on May 5, 9, and 12, 1941<sup>40</sup>—often presented as an attempt by the German ambassador to warn the Soviet Union of the imminence of the attack—were in fact only a new attempt to make people believe that negotiations were possible.

If such behaviour by Soviet intelligence personnel responds to a certain bureaucratic logic—in the Soviet sense of the word—there is still an enigma: why did Stalin stubbornly refuse to believe that the German attack was imminent?

### **Disinformation**

Siegfried Muller, an officer of the Gestapo, provided to the Soviet counterintelligence services during his interrogation on May 21, 1947, with a detail that could answer this question. According to him, since August 1940, a Gestapo agent had been infiltrated into the circle of

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<sup>39</sup> V. Pečerskij, “Bol’šâ igra, kotorû proigral Stalin” [The Great Game Lost by Stalin], *Novoe vremâ*, 1995, no. 18, 22–24. The series of diplomatic documents published by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not mention such a meeting. See *Dokumenty vnešnej politiki. 1940–22.06.1941* (Moscow, 1998).

<sup>40</sup> For the meeting of May 5, 1941, see *Dokumenty vnešnej politiki*, 654–57. For the meeting of May 9, 1941, see *ibid.*, 664–67. For the meeting of May 12, 1941, see *ibid.*, 675–77.

Amiak Z. Kobulov,<sup>41</sup> “legal” resident<sup>42</sup> of the NKGB in Berlin (code name Zakhar) and younger brother of Bogdan Z. Kobulov,<sup>43</sup> one of Beria’s closest lieutenants. This agent, Orest Berlinks, code name “Sixth-Former,”<sup>44</sup> was born in Riga in 1913 into a family of doctors, raised by his aunt, and studied in the Latvian capital’s French Lycée. In 1934, he joined a Latvian political magazine as a translator and was sent to Berlin in 1939 as a journalist correspondent. His activities were regularly reported to Adolf Hitler, “who was concerned about every detail of the conversations with Kobulov, the expression on his face, the intonation of his voice, and his reaction to the ‘information’ he received.”<sup>45</sup>

The Gestapo had chosen its “victim” perfectly. Poorly prepared for such a mission, Amiak Kobulov—talkative and arrogant—was using all his energy to highlight his special status within the embassy. Despite a telegram from the “Center” dated September 17, 1940, warning Zakhar that his protégé had an anti-Soviet and pro-Nazi past in Latvia, contacts continued, and Sixth-Former’s financial requirements only increased. Recruited at 100 marks per piece of information, he soon asked for 300 and then 1000 marks per month for the price of his services. The request for authorization of payment sent by Kobulov to the Center was

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<sup>41</sup> Amiak Zakharovich Kobulov (1906–1955), of Armenian origin, was in charge of the NKVD in Ukraine from December 1939 to September 1939, then appointed to the Soviet embassy in Berlin until the beginning of the war. Head of the NKVD for Uzbekistan in 1943, from 1945 to 1946 he was head of the administration in charge of Soviet property abroad; from 1951 to 1953, deputy director of the Gulag and head of the GUPVI-NKVD Directorate. After Stalin’s death, A. Z. Kobulov became deputy head of the NKVD Inspection Department. Shot after the fall of Beria. See Michael Parrish, *The Lesser Terror, Soviet State Security, 1939–1953* (Westport-London: Praeger), 1996.

<sup>42</sup> Member of the Soviet diplomatic corps posted abroad and in charge of intelligence, but not using clandestine networks made up of so-called “illegal” agents, present clandestinely abroad under an assumed identity.

<sup>43</sup> Bogdan Zakharovich Kobulov (1904–1953). Cheka official from 1922, member of the PCR(b) in 1925. Career in the organs of the Georgian SSR Security Police. From September 1939, head of the NKVD’s Economic Directorate General. From February 1941, Deputy People’s Commissioner of the State Security of the USSR. In 1950, Deputy Chairman of the Allied Control Commission in Germany. From March to June 1953, First Deputy Minister of Home Affairs. Arrested in June 1953. Shot on December 23, 1953, as an “accomplice of L. P. Beria.”

<sup>44</sup> O. Berlinks (1913–1978?), better known as the code name assigned to him by the NKGB: “Sixth-Former” (*Lyceeist*).

<sup>45</sup> V. Pečerskij, “Gitler vodil za nos Stalina” [Hitler Led Stalin by the Nose], *Novoe vremâ*, no. 47 (1994): 40.

annotated by P. A. Soudoplatov<sup>46</sup> himself: “No need to bargain. It should be increased, but only according to the increase in the informative capacity of this source.”<sup>47</sup>

In April 1941, the same Soudoplatov wrote a commendation note on the informant, which he concluded with these words: “the ‘Sixth-Former’ must be trained and thus we will be able to have a valuable agent.”<sup>48</sup> This disinformation operation, like self-disinformation from truncated reports by policy or command, was made possible by the changes in Soviet intelligence following the purges of services conducted since the mid-1930s. Beyond the disorganization caused by the elimination of the most competent executives, the purges revealed new behaviours within the organs that the Germans—knowingly or not—succeeded in exploiting.

In the spring of 1941, criticism and self-criticism, which had been advocated from 1937 to 1939, were no longer in order. To build a career, vigilance alone was no longer enough. On the contrary, it was now necessary to send the Center ad hoc information that confirmed the intentions or impressions of the leaders. Such a tendency was further accentuated by Stalin’s methods of governing. Knowing how to play factional struggles, the “Master” temporarily gave his trust to one or another of the groups that revolved around him. This was where the intuition, or luck, of the German services lies.

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<sup>46</sup> Pavel Anatol’evitch Soudoplatov (1907–1996): General-Lieutenant of the State Security. In 1919, at the age of twelve, he was a messenger in the Red Army. Participated in the fighting against Denikin and the Polish campaign of 1920. In May 1921, joined the Cheka. In 1923, he was a civil servant of the Communist Youth. In 1925, joined the OGPU. In 1935, for the first time on mission abroad. On August 23, 1938, while in Rotterdam, P. A. Soudoplatov liquidated E. Konovalts, one of the leaders of the Ukrainian nationalists; posted to Spain the same year. From March 1939, posted in Moscow with the task of preparing for Trotsky’s elimination. After the beginning of the Great Patriotic War, Soudoplatov oversaw the NKVD’s diversionary groups, acting in the rear areas of German troops. From 1945, in charge of acquiring information on the American A-bomb and responsible for sabotage teams to operate in Europe in the event of war. From 1950, he oversaw Bureau No. 1 in charge of sabotage abroad. Arrested on 21 August 1953 as “Beria’s accomplice” and sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment. Released on August 21, 1968. Rehabilitated in 1991.

<sup>47</sup> Pečerskij, “Gitler vodil za nos Stalina,” 42.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

By manipulating Amiak Z. Kobulov, the Reich's services disinformed Stalin through Amiak's brother Bogdan Z. Kobulov, a member of the Beria group. Indeed, throughout his career, Bogdan Z. Kobulov was admitted only eight times to Stalin's office, once in 1939 but five times between January 17, 1941, and June 18, 1941, including four times between June 10 and 18 of that year. Thereafter, he was in Stalin's office only twice, both times in 1947.<sup>49</sup>

The few months, even days, preceding the German attack of June 22, 1941, were the subject of a significant number of publications during the years 1985–1991, a period of historical revision in the Soviet Union. The main historiographical avatar, the book *Icebreaker*,<sup>50</sup> published in 1990 by Victor Suvorov, presents the German invasion as a preventive attack intended to counter a Soviet offensive in preparation, thus taking up the themes of Nazi propaganda of the time. However, after the changes in the layout of the Soviet borders in 1939, after the incorporation of eastern Poland, the strategic plan adopted in 1938 was not revised until August 1940 and finally approved on October 14, 1940, after Stalin himself had made some changes. On Zhukov's orders, a detailed version was prepared for March 8, 1941, for the north-secondary defence variant and for March 22 for the south-main defence variant. The final detailed plan was ready by March 11, 1941.

However, as Stalin told Zhukov that “we still have to think, choose the most important issues, and present them to the Government,” this March 1941 plan was only in the field in the form of a sketch by June 1941. The German attack, led by the “Center” and “North” military

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<sup>49</sup> The nominal and detailed lists (day, time of entry, and time of exit) of officials admitted to Stalin's office were published for the years 1924–1953. See *Na prieme u Stalina. Tetradi (žurnaly) zapisi lic, prinâtyh I.V. Stalinym (1924-1953). Spravočnik* [Received by Stalin. Notebooks (Diaries) of the Presence of Persons Received by I.V. Stalin (1924–1953). Guide] (Moscow: Novyj hronograf, 2008). For the dates of receipt of Bogdan K. Kobulov, see p. 633.

<sup>50</sup> See the French version: Victor Souvorov, *Le Brise-Glace. Juin 1941. Le plan secret de Staline pour conquérir l'Europe* (Paris: Olivier Orban, 1992).

groups, forced the Soviet generals to move, in an emergency and not without risk, the overconcentrated troop formations in the southern region.

Returning once again to the question of the battle plan it is true that Tymoshenko and Zhukov presented to Stalin in May 1941 their “Concepts on the strategic deployment plan of the Soviet armed forces in the event of war with Germany and its allies in the situation of 15.05.1941”:

Taking into account the fact that Germany is currently keeping its mobilized army and rear in deployed position, it has the opportunity to prevent our deployment by striking a blow to us. In order to guard against such an eventuality, I consider it essential not to leave the initiative to the German Command, to thwart the enemy in its deployment and to attack the German army when it is deploying and has not yet organized the multiple fronts and coordination of the various weapons.<sup>51</sup>

Based on this text, published only in the late 1990s in its entirety, some authors, such as Suvorov, believed they could conclude that the Red Army was preparing to enter a campaign against Germany. A date was even proposed, July 6, 1941. A more complete analysis of the literature available in Russian would have quickly ruled out this hypothesis. In early 1965, V. A. Anfilov, a professor at the General Staff Academy, had the opportunity to meet Georgi Zhukov to question him about the events that took place in the weeks before the German attack. Thus, according to Zhukov:

The idea of a preemptive strike against Germany was born in my mind and in Tymoshenko’s following Stalin’s speech on May 5, 1941, to graduates of the Military Academies, in which he spoke of the possibility of acting in an offensive way. Such an intervention at a time when the enemy was concentrating its forces on our borders convinced us of the need to prepare a directive providing for the possibility of a preventive attack. This task was entrusted to A. M. Vasilievsky. On May 15, he presented the draft of this directive to myself and the People’s Commissioner of Defence. However, we did not sign this document because we previously wanted to submit it to Stalin. When he heard us offer him a preemptive attack on German troops, he literally started to boil. “It’s not okay, you’ve lost your mind, you want to provoke the Germans?” Stalin lost his temper.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> For more details, see L. A. Bezymenskii, “The Zhukov Plan of 15 May 1941,” *Modern and Contemporary History*, 2000, no. 3, 58–67.

<sup>52</sup> V. A. Anfilov, “Razgovor zakončilsâ ugrozoi Stalina” [The Conversation Ended with Threats from Stalin], *Voенно-istoričeskij žurnal*, no. 3 (1995): 39–46.

Despite this crucial testimony denying the preparation of a preventive attack, troop movements from the east of the country are documented as early as mid-May. These movements took place just one month after the signing, on April 13, 1941, of a nonaggression pact with Japan, which freed up the troops stationed at the Chinese border and allowed the Soviet leadership to use them on the western borders.

In mid-May, troops from the 16th, 19th, 21st, and 22nd armies left the Military Districts of Baikal, North Caucasus, Volga, and Urals to take up positions by July 10 on the Western Dvina and Dnieper. The transfer of these troops was carried out by train, according to a movement chart corresponding to that of peacetime. In addition, a clandestine mobilization of troops began in the first half of June under the pretext of a recall of reservists for manoeuvres. In the end, more than eight hundred thousand additional soldiers were in uniform.

At the end of the first half of June, the strategic deployment of Soviet troops became even more important. In accordance with the directives of the Supreme Headquarters, thirty-two reserve divisions of the border Military Districts began to operate in night stages in order to be deployed on July 1 to an area twenty to eighty kilometres from the border. These troop movements were accompanied by an increase in meetings between Stalin and the military on May 10, 12, 19, and 23.

On June 13, Tymoshenko again asked Stalin for authorization to set up the first wave armies in accordance with the deployment plan. However, Stalin refused again. Under these conditions, the strategic deployment of the Red Army proceeded without following the initial plan and without covering forces, responsible for containing a German attack, being put on alert.

On analysis, however, some disturbing elements can be seen in the explanation of this “strange defeat” constituted by the German attack of June 22, 1941. First of all, Soviet

intelligence, despite the heroic conduct of some of its agents, could not provide the country's leadership with indisputable evidence of the imminence of the German attack. More seriously, the Soviet services seem to have been "disinformed" by those of the enemy. Even more serious, the Soviet army began the war without a clearly defined battle plan in all its details, while the troops had not reached their starting positions and had, for the most part, an overwhelming but often outdated armament. Finally, too long sought in Stalin's psychological traits, the causes of this "strange defeat" lie in the characteristics of the regime that emerged from the Great Purges of the late 1930s. Extremely centralized, impersonal, and conformist, the system existed only to wait for an order, sign, or allusion from the "Guide" that did not come or was too late, only a few hours before the German attack. In November 1941, as the regime faltered, everything had to be redone: on that date, only nine kilometres remained between the German forces and Moscow, Russia, and its people. However, yesterday's weaknesses reveal the strengths of tomorrow.

Thus, after the blatant mistakes made by Soviet intelligence in the first period of the conflict, the strength of its services lies both in their political dimension—the ability to federate national aid networks around the Soviet Union—and also in the combined effects, often encouraged by cross-appointments, gradually established between the Comintern and the "traditional" military or police intelligence services.