THE KGB'S BLACK BOX: SOVIET INTELLIGENCE OPERATIONS AND BIAS IN CHINA

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The Soviet Union's intelligence operations in the People's Republic of China (PRC) contributed to escalating tensions between the two communist powers by feeding fears of conflict based on analytical biases and difficulty operating in the PRC. After the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s, the Soviet Union was alarmed by the potential of a Chinese attack, and prioritized China as a top intelligence collection target right behind the United States. Although the Soviets assessed China to be a much junior military and technological power, the former had great difficulty in assessing Chinese intent due to cultural differences, challenges in recruiting mainland Chinese spies, and flawed analytical frameworks. These difficulties on the Soviet side fed into policy decisions that created a feedback loop of distrust and escalatory tensions with the PRC.

While the nature of spy craft produces sparse public documents, this paper refers to leaked USSR official notes carried by a defector, and published by Andrew & Gordievsky, to inform on Soviet intelligence operations in China and organizational mentalities. This provides insight to Soviet challenges in operating behind "enemy lines" in the PRC, and how the Soviets viewed the PRC. The challenges of this type of analysis are that there are no other known leaked documents from the USSR to corroborate testimony on operations in the PRC mainland, and that defectors have an incentive to misstate information to maintain their own relevancy. (Luckily, the elevated KGB activity in Hong Kong resulted in spy ring busts that did become public record.) Regardless of these limitations, the leaked official notes carried by the defector are a valuable and unique perspective on USSR operations in the PRC and are the best source of information available for these specific Soviet intelligence practices.

Chinese Nationals in the Russian Revolution

Prior to the Cold War, Soviet intelligence agencies had easy access to Chinese nationals that they could recruit as spies and informants (referred to in the intelligence community as "assets"). Soviet historians estimated that tens of thousands of Chinese nationals served in the Red Army during the Russian Revolution and Civil War, forming full "internationalist" brigades. Russian revolutionaries viewed the Chinese as helpful volunteers by Russian revolutionaries

because they were "extremely unpretentious and hardy… almost completely without understanding Russian… [and] they did not ask unnecessary questions and could not move to the side of the enemy."[1] Some Chinese soldiers were so trusted that they served as bodyguards to Vladimir Lenin. Unfortunately, succeeding Soviet leader Josef Stalin did not agree with these sentiments: As soon as he assumed power in 1922, Chinese national Red Army soldiers were not permitted to settle in the Soviet Union, despite having fought in the Bolshevik Revolution as part of the "Soviet Peoples," and many having settled and married local women. These restrictions did not apply to other "internationalist" comrades such as Latvians, Lithuanians, Finns, and Poles. Only Chinese communist fighters without Russian citizenship were "strongly encouraged" (by denied visa extensions) and "evacuated" to return home.[2] Stalin's distrust for Chinese nationals stemmed from his stated concern that the Chinese were not "real communists" but instead "margarine Communists," with enough ideological differences and population size to threaten the Soviet Union.[3,4] Even some fifty thousand Muslim Bolshevik fighters from central Asia, whom the Soviets distrusted with firearms, were allowed to stay (as long as they publicly denounced their religion for communism). In a presumption that would influence future Soviet intelligence and foreign policy maneuvers, Stalin believed that different ethnic groups had fixed cultural identities that he never felt comfortable with, a belief which he especially applied to the Chinese as a non-Soviet people.[5] To Stalin, world socialism would have to wait for the sake of distrusting his comrades to the east.

Regardless of the racism encountered, many Chinese students in the Soviet Union were captivated by socialism's pro-worker message and returned to their hometowns to set up local Chinese Communist Party (CCP) committees. In Russia's far east regions, communities of ethnic East Asian-Soviet citizens were consolidated and rebranded as "Soviet Peoples," an attractively unifying banner against an aggressive and hostile Japanese Empire. East Asian communities in Russia's far east regions and universities provided a fertile recruiting ground for the young Soviet intelligence agencies. The Chinese section of the Soviet Communist Party established a provincial Soviet Party School in the far east Primorskii region, which would later move to become the Chinese-Lenin School of Vladiovostok in 1933. Here, Soviets trained select Chinese "cadets" not just in ideology but also in sabotage, infiltration, small unit tactics, and intelligence gathering. Chinese nationals continued signing up

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[1] V. V. Shelokhaev, ed. *History of political repression and resistance to tyranny in the USSR* (Moscow: Mosgorarchiv Unification Publishing House, 2002), 95.

[2] Jon K. Chang, "East Asians in Soviet Intelligence and the Chinese-Lenin School of the Russian Far East," *East Asia Border Review* 9, no. 1 (2008): 48.

[3] For example, Soviet and Chinese communist ideologies differed on which "underclass" would lead the worldwide communist revolution. The Soviet Union believed industrial workers would triumph, as opposed to Chinese beliefs that it would be the peasants.

[4] Bevin Alexander, "Stalin Calls the Chinese Reds 'Margarine Communists'," in *The Strange Connection: U.S. Intervention in China, 1944-1972* (Praeger Publishing, 1992): 4-6.

[5] Peter Whitewood, "Nationalities in a Class War: Foreign Soldiers in the Red Army during the Russian Civil War," *Journal of Modern European History* 14, no. 3 (2016): 352-354.

to serve the Soviet Union throughout the post-Revolution period due to the attractiveness of overthrowing world capitalism to establish a "workers' paradise," and to gain status in a society that otherwise excluded them from the benefits and status of socialism. Even at the Chinese-Lenin School, they were mocked and occasionally harassed. Soviet politician and revolutionary Nikolai Bukharin gave a 1927 speech about the vast population of China, that was quadruple that of the Soviet Union's, and investing in such programs like the Chinese-Lenin School would allow the Soviet Union to influence the future of Asia as a nexus of communism.[6] Although comrades at face value, the Soviets generally saw Chinese nationals as useful, yet ultimately disposable, projections of communist influence.

The Soviets deployed hundreds of Chinese agents into mainland China from 1920-1945. Declassified rosters of full-time personnel for these agencies often did not record agents sent into China as these agents were recruited ad-hoc for specific missions and employed for the duration of just that mission. However, research from leaked Soviet personnel files estimate that, in this time-period, four hundred East Asian agents were recruited from the Chinese-Lenin School and another two-to-three hundred were recruited from the Red Army. These agents were tasked with intelligence collection in Chinese cities such as Shanghai, selected due to its proximity to foreign establishments.[7] Some of these agents would go on to fight against the Japanese in underground movements in China, and later in Chinese partisan fighting forces, while relaying information to back Soviet intelligence about Japanese forces. Approximately one hundred and eighty of the four hundred agents from the Chinese-Lenin School would be arrested by PRC authorities during the Great Terror campaign.[8] In the Chinese communist revolution, the value-add of these Soviet-trained agents' experience was secondary to the potential threat they posed to Mao's leadership.

Comrade Stalin's Intelligence Blindsides

During Stalin's tenure as General Secretary of the Soviet Union, the intelligence bureaucracy adapted and institutionalized analytical and communication frameworks of his preference. These institutional mentalities were projected on Western and Chinese adversaries alike during the Cold War.

Stalin had a voracious appetite for intelligence but was highly suspicious of any data that did not conform with his own preconceived notions of the world and what was going on. He thus exhibited a strong confirmation bias for his internal beliefs. For example, when deep undercover spies placed in British intelligence correctly reported that the British had no spies in Soviet political circles, he suspected that his own agents had been compromised. Furthermore, there was no

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[6] Chang, "East Asians in Soviet Intelligence and the Chinese-Lenin School of the Russian Far East," 46-54.
[7] Chang, 46-47.
[8] Chang, 52-53.

dedicated analytical service in Soviet intelligence agencies, with bureaucrats simply forwarding select information up to Stalin himself. This placed Stalin as the Soviet Union's sole intelligence analyst, with his own adage, "Don't tell me what you think. Give me the facts and the source!"[9]

After the horrors of World War II, Stalin (after purging many agents who had served in the West) consolidated his intelligence agencies' reporting procedures to route information for a Committee of Information (KI) for analysis and started building espionage networks for the Cold War. Created in the fall of 1947, the KI was meant to verify and filter data collected by all Soviet intelligence services and emulated the United States' Central Intelligence Agency created that July. The KI, led by deputy prime minister and foreign affairs minister Vyacheslav Molotov, was Stalin's creation to reconcile his general distrust of outside information with the explosion of data about the world that was coming about. When personally communicating to Stalin, the KI did little to filter analytical and perceptive biases in information as it made its way to Stalin, but that didn't matter either: Intelligence agency chiefs soon were bypassing the KI to report "fresh" information to Stalin directly, and as such, the KI was downsized to a small committee of handpicked confidants in 1949 after Molotov fell out of favor with Stalin.[10] Confirmation bias, instead of being mitigated, was further institutionalized.

Soviet intelligence collection was arguably better than Western intelligence agencies in terms of agents recruited and data sources collected, but lacked considerable analytical capability to convey verified, corroborated data to policymakers.[11] Soviet intelligence did not prioritize intelligence collection in the PRC during the postwar diplomatic honeymoon period, which created painful intelligence gaps when the PRC eventually closed itself off in the Sino-Soviet split.

Honeymoon, Divorce, and the KGB

The Allied victory over the Axis powers in World War II brought a brief honeymoon period of enthusiastic Chinese-Soviet cooperation. After expelling the Japanese forces from mainland Asia, consolidated CCP forces under then-party Chairman Mao Zedong decisively defeated Chinese nationalist forces and expelled them from mainland China to Taiwan in 1949. The following year, the Soviet Union and newly created PRC signed a "Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance" promising collaboration on political, economic, and military affairs. This relationship was unique for the Soviet Union as it was supplying considerable economic and military support to a state that was not a member of its Soviet bloc.

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[9] Raymond Garthoff, "Soviet Leaders, Soviet Intelligence, And Changing Views of the United States, 1965-91," in *The Image of the Enemy: Intelligence Analysis of Adversaries since 1945* (Georgetown University Press, 2015), 29.

[10] Vladislav Zubok, "Soviet Intelligence and the Cold War: The 'Small' Committee of information, 1952-53," *Diplomatic History* 19, no. 3 (1995): 454.

[11] Zubok, 456.

The Soviet Union provided military aid to the CCP to ensure a fellow communist neighbors' stability against the capitalist West by providing material, technical, and military support today worth US$5 billion at one percent interest, half of what Stalin charged his Eastern European allies for aid.[12] Stalin was very clear—and unusually trusting—with Mao that he hoped to see China become a communist power supervising the Eastern hemisphere while the Soviet Union overlooked the Western hemisphere, as equal partners in global communist governance.[13] If the "Special Relationship" between the United States and United Kingdom was the hallmark alliance of the West, then the Soviet-PRC alliance was set to be the quintessential relationship of post-war communism.

However, PRC-USSR relations deteriorated rapidly after Stalin's death. Incoming Soviet Premier Nikita Krushchev's 1956 "Secret Speech" denouncing Stalin's economic policies, international isolation, heavy handed governance, and cult of personality. Following the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 against the USSR, Mao asserted that the USSR under Krushchev had lost credibility to govern and was pursuing a "revisionist" policy that betrayed true socialism.[14] Thus became the Sino-Soviet split; Krushchev's initiative to peacefully coexist with the capitalist West contradicted Mao's ideological goal of worldwide communist revolution by force if necessary. The Soviet Union ultimately escalated their former communist ally to a top intelligence collection priority. Unfortunately, the difficulties of recruiting agents, penetrating political circles, and making sense of Chinese intentions contributed to escalatory tensions between the USSR and PRC, which was a barrier to repairing relations.

The vigorous *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti* (KGB) intelligence agency, created in 1954, undertook ambitious goals to collect and analyze as much information as possible about Soviet adversaries and friends alike. The KGB established its "Line K" department for Chinese espionage and operations. The stated goal was collecting intelligence on the PRC's approach to diplomacy with the USSR and internal political affairs in the PRC.[15] Throughout Line K's operations, the KGB complained about a chronic shortage of PRC documents passed along by assets that would enable the KGB to draw serious assessments about PRC policies.[16] Ironically, it was other communist countries outside the Soviet bloc—China, Albania,

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[12] Andrei Ledovskii, Raisa Mirovitskaia and Vladimir Miasnikov, "Memorandum of Conversation between Stalin and CCP Delegation," June 27, 1949, in *Sovetsko-Kitaiskie Otnosheniia, Vol. 5, Book 2, 1946-February 1950,* trans. Sergey Radchenko (Moscow: Pamiatniki Istoricheskoi Mysli, 2005), 148-151.

[13] Liu Shaoqi, "Cable, Liu Shaoqi to Mao Zedong," in *Liu Shaoqi's Manuscripts since the Founding of the People's Republic of China,* vol. 1, tran. David Wolff (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2005), 30-37; Chen Jian, "The Sino-Soviet Alliance and China's Entry Into the Korean War," (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1992), 14.

[14] Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 6.

[15] Christopher Andrew & Oleg Gordievsky, *Comrade Kryuchov's Instructions: Top Secret Files on KGB Foreign Operations, 1975-1985* (Stanford University Press, 1993), 18.

[16] Andrew & Gordievsky, 9.

and North Korea—that proved the most obstructive areas in which the KGB could operate.

Throughout Line K's operations, the KGB would exhibit confirmation bias when analyzing intelligence out of China, framing information to paint a picture of threats to the USSR, which fed into more fear. American intelligence agents noted that the KGB was obsessed with gathering the minutia of details on intelligence targets to the point of irrelevance, especially if collected through covert means, which to the KGB indicated the value of a piece of data.[17] Soviet intelligence prized information that had been collected by human spies placed inside foreign organizations, and heavily relied on proxy data such as indirect evidence, surrogate/indicator data, and stand-in data for its priority intelligence tasks.For example, KGB analysts would use the number of nighttime lights in a government office building as an indicator of a pending attack. The KGB falsely equates the creativity of data collection with its contextual analysis by overemphasizing minutiae without applying rigorous, unbiased analytical frameworks.

To Soviet officials, China's foreign policy built on engaging and spreading communism in Asia (as directed under Stalin) resembled a warmongering power gunning for world hegemony at the expense of the Soviet Union. Soviet documents condemned China as "an enemy of the international forces of socialism, democracy and peace," "concentrating its blows on the Soviet Union," and "sharing in the ideology and practice of world anti-Communism." In the Soviet image, China was the sole advocate of war: Soviet documents accused PRC leaders of "identifying war with revolution and world war with world revolution."[18] These were strong words for a country that had been Stalin's comrades in Asia. Mao's cabinet turned these around and accused the Soviet Union of "stretching its tentacles farther and farther, [it] has become a much more dangerous source of a world war than the United States."[19]

Due to the lack of agents in China and Soviet intelligence's inaccurate beliefs about Chinese thirst for war, they missed that Mao's cabinet had actually been open to restoring relations. A 1959 PRC cabinet report, endorsed by Mao and circulated within party leadership, affirmed that the Soviet Union was making great strides in promoting socialism worldwide through economic and scientific achievements, such as the Sputnik satellite, which would "galvanize the will of the people all over the world for the struggle against imperialism." The report insisted that the Soviet Union must be engaged to prevent imperialist forces (namely the United States) from taking advantage of the situation through forming an alliance with the Soviets that could attack and isolate China. The report called for China to continue following the ideological lead of the Soviet Union to prevent the United States from driving a wedge between the two communist nations, and to "further discredit the United

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[17] le Carrè, "The KGB in Asia," 4.

[18] Peter Tang, "Stalin's Role in the Communist Victory in China," *American Slavic and East European Review* 13, no. 3 (1954): 317.

[19] Tang, 319.

States, and isolate the United States."[20] Going beyond international camaraderie, Chinese leaders thought a reevaluation of the Sino-Soviet relationship would strengthen the security of both sides. The CCP implored the Soviet Union to continue leading the international movement, even sending a delegation to Moscow in 1959 to pressure Khrushchev to reverse his resignation as the leader of international socialism at the 21st Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Khruschev agreed and reversed course. CCP official Zhou Enlai spoke to a Soviet audience at the 21st Congress of the CPSU on the importance of maintaining the alliance against Western threats.

Unfortunately, Mao may have concluded on his end that relations were irreparable that year when Khrushchev reneged on the Sino-Soviet nuclear support agreement in order to comply with nuclear test ban negotiations with the United States. Mao saw this as compromising China's security for the sake of a concession to the United States.[21] Due to the KGB's lack of well-placed assets in China, and its predisposition to believing that China wanted violence, Khrushchev didn't have the information in this critical period to consider a course of action that may have mended the Sino-Soviet alliance and produced a dual-nuclear alliance to confront the United States. This would have enhanced communism's worldwide prestige and projected formidable strength to the West, but unfortunately tensions precariously manifested into a shooting war in the Sino-Soviet Border Conflict of 1969.

Recruiting Assets in Mainland China

While the KGB recorded some unspecified successes in recruiting Chinese spies, such successes were isolated and did not meaningfully serve the goal of informing Soviet policy decisions towards the PRC. The KGB particularly struggled to recruit qualified Chinese nationals with access to PRC institutions and to hold them on a permanent basis with a field officer, or even as a "confidential contact" for occasional meetings. These challenges applied in mainland China (under the PRC), Hong Kong (under British dominion), and Taiwan (under Chinese nationalist rule). Mao's Cultural Revolution made the PRC the most challenging environment for the KGB in the world. In fact, in mainland China the spy mania and xenophobia by the Red Guards made it challenging for foreigners to walk around Chinese cities without harassment, reflecting ethnic bias on the Chinese side as well. The KGB reoriented towards recruiting qualified Chinese nationals posted abroad such as technical specialists and students, as recruiting in Asia itself was proving difficult thanks to inability to connect with Chinese nationals.[22] Besides the KGB's unsuccessful recruiting in the PRC, there were various factors that disincentivized

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[20] Dong Wang, "The Quarrelling Brothers: New Chinese Archives and a Reappraisal of the Sino-Soviet Split, 1959-1962," (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2006), 6-8.
[21] Wang, 10-18.
[22] Andrew & Gordievsky, 12, 184.

Chinese nationals from working with the KGB. Differences between Khrushchev and Mao's versions of communism, general distrust of foreigners, and turnover within Mao's own leadership circle, which reduced his colleagues' career continuity and willingness to compromise his trust, would have discouraged any potential well-placed asset from wanting to work with the Soviets. The glory days of Soviet intelligence plucking agents from their own socialist school were long gone.

Therefore, KGB memos documented the specific Chinese characteristics that recruiters needed to be cognizant of, and exploit, while working to sign up Chinese nationals. A 1984 memo emphasized, "Nowhere more than in working against China do we require circumspection, patience, endurance and accurate appreciation of the particular characteristics of the Chinese."[23] These memos redacted the many racist terms that the Soviets had for Chinese nationals, but even with these removed one may see the bias of contempt. According to a 1976 KGB recruiting guide, "[T]he bulk of the Chinese have not been taught to think in an abstract way …. [They] are distinguished by their hot temper, great excitability, and a tendency to sudden changes from one extreme to another …. By common consent, this is a nation of actors."[24] This guidance was arguably a third-party projection of the Barnum effect whereby one ascribes personality traits that they think are specific and accurate but are in fact vague and general enough to encompass most people regardless of race.[25]

Aware of European and Japanese colonization still in the memory of the current Chinese generation, the memos guided recruiters to watch the phrasing of their language to avoid upsetting a Chinese citizen's national self-esteem and pride, and to commend Chinese history, culture, and arts. Chinese custom's emphasis on preserving an honorable reputation ("face") made the use of compromising material "a strong lever to make a Chinese collaborate," which would lead KGB recruiters to spend significant bandwidth observing and documenting unscrupulous practices by Chinese officials for material to blackmail them with. These compromising materials could include evidence of unauthorized meetings with foreigners, politically critical statements, adultery, vices, taking bribes, or abuse of political position to purchase luxury goods. To persuade collaboration, the memos advised softening the psychological blow of a Chinese national "losing face" with reminding them that their help would be used in the interests of their country by re-establishing diplomatic relations with the USSR, thereby helping to establish world peace.[26] This appeal to world peace was a strange diversion from previous assessments that Chinese nationals were primarily focused with material goods, and a carrot compared to the stick of heavy handed recruiting method that incentivized coerced collaboration.

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[23] Andrew & Gordievsky, 12.
[24] Andrew & Gordievsky, 190-191.
[25] K. D. Vohs, "Barnum Effect" *Encyclopedia Britannica*, August 1, 2016.
https://www.britannica.com/science/Barnum-Effect.
[26] Andrew & Gordievsky, 187-194.

While the KGB found operating in mainland China to be tough, they did manage to make contact with a few potential sources. That said, as few assets were converted to full-time informants or supplied information on a consistent basis, the KGB's recruiting techniques should have been internally scrutinized. The leaked memos do not elaborate on any discussion inside the KGB on how to improve recruiting results, and the continuous lackluster agent numbers and intelligence gaps point to an institutional inability to introspect and adapt. Espionage, especially human intelligence, relies on persuasion to recruit assets that can be molded into reliable sources of information, but the plainly derogatory attitudes towards Chinese nationals could not have possibly helped with recruiting. The headquarters-directed application of these caricatures arguably reduced any Chinese national's willingness to voluntarily risk their lives working for the KGB, a willingness the KGB were able to rely on recruiting assets in the West.

Something Fishy in Hong Kong

As Soviet networks in China quickly dissolved after the split due to crackdowns and the PRC shutting itself off from the rest of the world, Hong Kong became a more important base of operations in China than Beijing for KGB operations due to the saturation of Western targets in the then-British colony, and it being easier to recruit assets than in the mainland. While Hong Kong was under British governance at the time, the geographical proximity to mainland China and Hong Kong's general openness to foreigners provided decent recruiting grounds for assets. The saturation of PRC-affiliated banks, business groups, scientific institutions, journalists, and intelligence outposts were a target-rich environment for prospecting.[27] KGB interest in Hong Kong was noted by PRC and Western intelligence agencies alike.[28] What the KGB missed out on in mainland China, it attempted to make up for by using Hong Kong as a proxy.

The KGB's Hong Kong operations became known to the world in a spectacular 1972 bust by Hong Kong police and British counterintelligence. The British were aware that Soviet flagged ships were the primary method of infiltration by KGB agents, and each Soviet flagged ship arriving in Hong Kong almost certainly carried a number of KGB agents. These agents would come under various identities such as students, mariners, and businessmen. Also, Soviet ships arriving for repair at Hong Kong's dockyards frequently arrived with more personnel than required.[29] Starting in 1969, a ring of KGB agents posing as mariners, cooks, and a marine superintendent recruited two Hong Kong businessmen in a payment for information

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[27] Christopher Andrew & Oleg Gordievsky, *More 'Instructions from the Centre': Top Secret Files on KGB Global Operations 1975-1985* (New York: Frank Cass, 2005), 68-78.

[28] John le Carrè, "The KGB in Asia: Society of Subversion," *Far Eastern Economic Review,* January 3, 1975, 4; Greenway, "Chinese: Following Sage Advice," *Washington Post,* Dec. 25, 1975, 1.

[29] le Carré, "The KGB in Asia," 5.

scheme. When police raided a meeting at one of the businessmens' homes, they found two KGB agents and a detailed plan for recruiting KGB informers in Asia. The two businessmen were prosecuted, and the two spies expelled. South China Morning Post journalist Kevin Sinclair, who broke the story, called the spy ring the "floating James Bond of the Russian merchant fleet."[30]

The KGB only got more ambitious with its recruitment. Agents recruited Singaporean national Amos Dawe in Hong Kong to front a venture to buy American banks lending to the budding technology sector in Silicon Valley. This would reduce the need for placing spies in Silicon Valley by getting access to the corporate documents of debtors through a Hong Kong-backdoor. Dawe acquired two American banks in 1975 for almost $45 million (adjusted for inflation), but an attentive CIA agent in Singapore noticed suspicious lending from a Russian bank to Dawe.[31]

The plot was foiled by the CIA's "Operation Silicon Valley" in October 1975. The CIA had released a briefing to a local journalist who reported that the KGB, through its front man Dawe, was trying to gather intelligence on American technology and destabilize the banking system. Dawe went on the run, but agreed to surrender to the United States for fraud charges, which dropped all fraud charges against him in February 1979. Authorities extradited Dawe to Hong Kong in 1981 for stock market manipulation charges, but before he could serve a five-year sentence he fled to Thailand before getting caught again and serving two years and eight months. After that, Dawe disappeared from the public record, but is allegedly in Taiwan.[32]

The KGB after Mao's death

KGB Line K operations received a jolt of attention from higher-ups in 1976 when the KGB correctly assessed Mao's death was imminent. The USSR chartered a commission to judge the future of Sino-Soviet relations, for which the KGB was supposed to provide information. Indeed, Mao died in September that year, and KGB assets were immediately directed to report on any indications that Chinese officials' attitudes toward the Soviet Union had changed. They charged Line K operations with obtaining intelligence on power struggles within the CCP and the Chinese military, assessing any significant policy changes, and selecting potential assets for "deep study." The following year, the KGB was still concluding that the

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[30] Stuart Heaver, "When Russian spies tried to infiltrate Hong Kong to destabilise China," *South China Morning Post,* November 8, 2018.
https://sc.mp/o4y40?utm_source=copy-link&utm_campaign=2172062&utm_medium=share_widget

[31] Stuart Heaver, "When Russian spies tried to infiltrate Hong Kong to destabilise China"; Raymonde Sacklyn, "Mr Amos Dawe Comes to Town," in *History of The Stock Exchange of Hong Kong And of Its (important) People.* (Historic Publishing House of Hongkong Limited, 2015). https://www.tolfin.com/tolweb/finstory/fin_book_c6s1.html

[32] Heaver, "When Russian spies tried to infiltrate Hong Kong to destabilise China"; Sacklyn, "Mr Amos Dawe Comes to Town."

new PRC government under CCP Chairman Deng Xiaoping was just as anti-Soviet as with Mao, admitting China was a "conundrum" with little prospect of improved relations.[33] Soviet intelligence did, however, correctly assess that the PRC was supporting (with American coordination) the Afghan mujahadeen fighters in the Soviet-Afghan War, much to their frustration and fear.[34] Counterintelligence operations led the KGB to declare PRC intelligence operations in the Soviet Union a tantamount threat to state security, and an official sarcastically remarked that the most lasting impact of the 1979 Soviet-Chinese border negotiations was the increase in PRC intelligence personnel in Moscow.[35] Chinese cooperation with the European Economic Community was also viewed with alarm as evidence of anti-Soviet collusion.[36] Soviet leaders, instead of seeing a new Chinese premier seeking to expand Chinese connections with the West, continued to see an impending nuclear opponent. Despite the potential for reforming relations in the wake of a new Chinese leader, the KGB reverted to previous analytical frameworks and confirmation biases that were a roadblock to improving relations.

The reality was that the new PRC government was pursuing a foreign policy that prioritized economic development and independence from both the United States and USSR by abandoning Mao's confrontationist approach to diplomacy, and engaging the US and other countries.[37] With the KGB relaying the disappointing assessment of no realistic change of relations, then-Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev announced a shifting military budget prioritizing Soviet forces facing China over Soviet forces in Europe,[38] which alarmed China enough to prioritize developing its relationship with the United States,[39] and contributed to the feedback loop of distrust and escalating tensions between both countries. As for Chinese actions supporting indigenous Afghan mujahadeen fighters, the KGB failed to assess that it was their own military actions in Afghanistan, and China's fear of Soviet encroachment in its geopolitical backyard, which pushed China ever closer to the United States.[40] The PRC and United States collaborated by operating a joint spy station on the Soviet border in 1981, and by 1989 operated 10 joint spy stations, with these achievements

[33] Andrew & Gordievsky, *Comrade Kryuchov's Instructions,* 12, 184, 195-196.
[34] S. Frederick Starr, *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, (M.E. Sharpe, 2004): 157.
[35] Filip Kovacevic, "The Soviet-Chinese Spy Wars in the 1970s: What KGB Counterintelligence Knew, Part II," *The Wilson Center.* April 22, 2021. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/soviet-chinese-spy-wars-1970s-what-kgb-counterintelligence-knew-part-ii.
[36] Andrew & Gordievsky, *Comrade Kryuchov's Instructions,* 163.
[37] Shuoseng Zhao, *The Dragon Roars Back* (Stanford University Press, 2022): 9-10; Yahuda, "Deng Xiaoping: The Statesman," *The China Quarterly* no. 135 (1993), 554.
[38] Lowell Dittmer, *Sino-Soviet Normalization and its International Implications*, *1945–1990* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992): 209.
[39] Zhao, *The Dragon Strikes Back,* 9-10.
[40] Starr, *Xinjiang,* 157.

even being publicly reported.[41] Soviet intelligence by now had a poor track record of contextualizing information and of self awareness, which reflected in their analyses that missed out on another critical period to have mended relations.

Then-KGB chairman Yuri Andropov succeeded Brezhnev to the Soviet Premiership in 1983 and carried over an inherited bias on China from his former position. Andropov publicly affirmed his desire to improve relations but was privately terrified of a nuclear attack from the United States or China, and worried about how China could undermine Soviet leadership of the communist bloc.[42] His administration directed the KGB to prioritize looking for indicators that China was abandoning its economic system under Mao as an indicator for prospectively improving relationships with the United States in a paranoia of a coordinated joint strike on the Soviet Union.[43,44] The KGB continued to deny China any benefit of the doubt, especially as China was reopening relations with the United States. Soviets leaned into "détente," the thawing of Soviet-U.S. relations, to counter the Chinese cooperation with the United States. In an ironic twist to Mao's accusation of Soviet ideological betrayal, it was now the Soviets calling the PRC the traitor. The KGB looked on with dismay as China stole the United States away from détente, and feared the creation of a new "correlation of forces" between its adversaries. A 1984 KGB memo accused: "Peking is blocking normalization of Sino-Soviet relations.… Peking is counting on deriving political advantages for itself by maneuvering between the West and the socialist countries and trying to blackmail the West with the prospect of an improvement in relations with the Soviet Union."[45] The American tilt towards China also cast suspicion on détente and set back any thawing of Soviet-U.S. relations. If Soviet intelligence thought that détente was simply too good to be true, China's opening to the United States did little to assuage these fears.

As with 1959, Soviet analysts later admitted that their leadership had missed an opportunity to repair relations in the early 1980s. Chinese leaders had been discussing reopening dialogue with the Soviet Union as they perceived it to be slowly losing its grip as the center of the communist bloc and isolated by a growing NATO presence. These problems made the Soviet Union less of a threat to the PRC than

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[41] George Lardner Jr. and R. Jeffrey Smith, "Intelligence Ties Endure Despite U.S.-China Strain," *Washington Post*, June 25, 1989. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1989/06/25/intelligence-ties-endure-despite-us-china-strain/f8b2789d-0f0c-4ea7-932b-9f4267a994a3/; Philip. "U.S. and Peking Join In Tracking Missiles in Soviet," *The New York Times*, June 18, 1981. https://www.nytimes.com/1981/06/18/world/us-and-peking-join-in-tracking-missiles-in-soviet.html.

[42] Elizabeth Wishnick, *Mending Fences: The Evolution of Moscow's China Policy from Brezhnev to Yeltsin* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001): 10.

[43] Gilbert Rozman, *Moscow's China-Watchers in the Post-Mao Era: The Response to a Changing China*, The China Quarterly no. 94, 216-218.

[44] Andropov applied these same paranoias towards the West in the early 1980s with launching Operation RYAN, meant to gather data to predict an incoming preemptive nuclear strike. The resulting data feeds and "analysis" therefore culminated in bringing the Soviet Union and NATO (unknowingly) to the brink of nuclear war in the 1983 Able Archer exercises, a fascinating incident that is unfortunately outside the scope of this paper.

[45] Andrew & Gordievsky, *Comrade Kryuchov's Instructions*, 7.

before.[46] The KGB failed to inform Soviet leaders of an opportunity that would have possibly bettered the course of both countries by providing avenues for relaxed tensions and a return to collaboration against Western incursion in their region.

Unfortunately, the literature and sources available regarding the KGB's intentions and activities towards the PRC stopped with Soviet Premier Andropov's administration. It would have been a complicated analysis: political hierarchies, cliques, and departmental turf wars make assessing who led who difficult, especially on the analysis of the Sino-Soviet relationship. The Sino-Soviet summit of 1989 in Beijing saw the long-awaited rapprochement of the two sides, with Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev and PRC President Xiaoping shaking hands and promising economic cooperation while renouncing any return to their storied alliance in the 1950s. They bolstered these commitments when they saw American/NATO actions in the Middle East during Operation Desert Shield in 1990, concerned about growing western hegemony. The two countries made several trade agreements, and while the Soviet Union's economy liberalized at a snail's pace compared to China's, the two traded raw goods and manufactured products.[47] The eventual collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, and the new Russian federal government, opened a new era of Sino-Soviet relations that outlived the KGB's dissolution.

Conclusion

Soviet intelligence had an easy time recruiting assets prior to the Cold War. However, the KGB's specific methods of handling Chinese nationals, analytical frameworks, and self-perpetuating intelligence gaps revealed the KGB had operational practices that were detrimental to strategic analysis and asset recruitment during the Cold War. This inhibited their mission to inform rational decision making and risk assessments for Soviet leaders. KGB officers misunderstood the tact and specific circumstances necessary to recruit qualified assets and the contextual analysis required to make use of information coming out of the PRC. As the Sino-Soviet split happened and China closed itself off, the KGB's lack of assets and quality information presented a black box that contributed to uninformed policy decisions towards China. The resulting policy decisions that came out of KGB analyses on China resulted in the diversion of resources that could have been dedicated elsewhere during the Cold War, namely towards the United States. These biases contributed to paranoid policy decisions which created unnecessary escalation and greater paranoia on both sides, creating a negative feedback loop. The value of intelligence to a policymaker is to save costly resources, but the KGB's practices and analytical deficiencies were very expensive in terms of military spending and diplomatic opportunity costs.

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[46] Wishnick, *Mending Fences,* 110.
[47] Wishnick, 104-130.

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