Career Trainee Program, GRU Style

~~SECRET~~

The Soviet military intelligence agency's system for selecting, training, and assigning officers to foreign intelligence operations.

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By consolidating information derived from a number of different Soviet sources, it has been possible to reconstruct the process Soviet intelligence uses to spot, screen, train, and assign case officers. The procedures herein outlined had their beginnings in the mid-1940's, were generally established by the mid-1950's, and to our knowledge remained substantially in effect as late as 1961 and projected at least to 1964. The system described is that of the GRU, the military intelligence organization. State Security, the KGB, operates separate but similar machinery, in addition to having a hand, as we shall see, in the GRU's.

The GRU strategic intelligence directorates—four area directorates charged with foreign strategic intelligence operations—have the mission of collecting information broadly defined as contributing to General Staff estimates of the willingness and capability of any nation to wage war. The development of cadres for these directorates and their training for specific foreign assignments is done in a three-year program of the Staff College of the Soviet Army, commonly called the Military-Diplomatic Academy by members of the GRU. The use of MDA as an unofficial title for the Staff College grew out of the fact that a major function of the College is training military attachés, and a faculty which once handled

this training was called the Military-Diplomatic Training Faculty.

The Staff College is actually a university of intelligence, for it carries on a number of related programs, including refresher, mid-career, specialized training, and ad-hoc courses, and awards the degree of Kandidat to those who complete the requirements for this doctorate-level diploma. Although administratively under the control of the GRU, the MDA is formally a joint GRU-KGB establishment, and the KGB's Foreign Directorate in fact shares in its output, has done so since its founding in 1944-45. The main MDA campus is in the Sokol suburb of Moscow, some seven and a half miles northwest of the Kremlin, but various elements are scattered about the city and other suburbs.

Spotting

A number of roving teams called "Mandate Commissions" look for potential candidates for the MDA. On the teams are members representing the interested elements of the GRU—the strategic intelligence directorates, which handle foreign operations and so establish training doctrine, the Personnel Directorate, which is responsible for staffing the operations and for support of training, and the MDA administration, which coordinates the selection, training, and assignments of new officers. These spotting teams rely most heavily on the graduating classes of the twenty or so military academies of the Soviet Union, starting their scrutiny of students' records early in the calendar year in order to locate candidates for September enrollment. But they also scour the military districts, consider graduates of civilian colleges, take candidates already in the GRU, and review the recommendations of GRU officers.

Those with the most promising records are sounded out about continuing their education in an institution run by the General Staff. There is no reference to intelligence or espionage, and no commitments are made. Those who are interested are asked to complete detailed biographies of themselves and their families and to stand by for further notice. In the interval, the KGB and the Central Committee of the CPSU separately undertake intensive and continuing investigations of the candidates. Eliminations by the Mandate Commission and the

investigations leave a pool of candidates perhaps two and a half times the number that will actually be enrolled in the MDA in September.

Those who receive orders to report to the MDA thus show marked aptitude, in the opinion of well-qualified judges, for case officer assignments and have no readily discoverable blemishes in their background. Kulak or White Russian parenthood, relatives living abroad, criminal records in the family, or unstable home environments would probably be disqualifying. Now they undergo further culling by a Medical Board, a Selection Board, and a Special Group representing the Central Committee of the CPSU, who will reduce the candidate-pool to the number actually required for the entering class.

Screening

As the GRU gives all its officers medical examinations every three months and before they go overseas, high physical requirements for the MDA are not surprising. Although physical reasons are sometimes used to reject gracefully a candidate with a minor political blemish, genuine medical disqualification is the most frequent of all causes for rejection. A representative of the Medical Board sits on the Selection Board, and any candidate on whom he reports adversely is eliminated from further consideration.

Since the pool from which the Selection Board will choose is made up of male graduates of Higher Educational Institutions—usually called VUZ's—it is already a selection from the upper 4% of the age group. Graduation from a VUZ requires not only high academic ability but considerable physical and mental stamina, self-discipline, and political reliability; and thus VUZ graduates (including the 3% who are females) constitute an elite under Soviet standards. Candidates from military academies are understandably preferred for the MDA, but graduates of equivalent institutes are also considered if they are military officers.[1]

Jews have been automatically excluded since 1953, and minority nationalities such as Uzbeks, Armenians, and Georgians get short shrift. Some Ukrainians and members of other minority groups have been admitted, but most are Great Russians, and all are members or eligible

to be members of the Communist Party. Candidates must have acceptable manners, be reasonably good-looking, and come from backgrounds that will pass close scrutiny; their wives must be such as to become assets rather than potential liabilities if sent abroad.

The Selection Board has about six members, chiefs of area directorates or men of similar calibre, assisted by a small staff of senior-officer adjutants. The members begin with summaries of the candidates' files, the findings of the Mandate Commission on them, their biographies and the reports of the KGB investigation, and a good idea of their interests and aspirations. There are no competitive written examinations—they would add nothing in a screening like this—but the candidates appear individually before the Board to answer questions and discuss any topics the members choose. But individual Board members also meet the candidates informally and talk with them in relaxed and casual situations. Thus they are able to form a well-based, albeit intuitive, judgment,[2] generally objective though sometimes apparently influenced in a minor way by pressures of friends and associates who want their sons or sons-in-law to win acceptance.

The Board not only chooses who will be invited to matriculate, it also designates the regional area in which each will specialize and picks the target country he will work in. It selects the relatively few who will operate under deep cover—as *illegals*, in Soviet parlance—rather than official cover. It chooses the languages most appropriate to the student's initial assignment and decides on the nature and extent of any supplemental training he is to receive. The candidate is allowed to express his preference, but the final decision is based on the Board's judgment of his physical appearance and manner, his aptitude for intelligence specialties, and—for illegals—the likelihood that he can pass as a native or at least as a non-Soviet resident in the target country. There is some bargaining among Board members shopping on behalf of their own area directorates, trading say a light blond suitable for Scandinavian deep-cover operations against a swarthy candidate who might pass as indigenous to the Balkans.

Because regional and country assignments are based on projections of operational requirements three years hence, dual designations are sometimes made against future contingencies. Official-cover assignments are made to Spain and the Iberian region, for instance, against the day when diplomatic recognition will permit sending in a contingent of qualified legals without delay; the alternate for this

assignment might be a Latin American or other Spanish-speaking country.

The languages are selected according to operational advantage, not necessarily by what is native in the target country. English can be used effectively in Japan, Iran, Israel, and a number of Arab states and is useful in GRU operations for many other purposes; it might, then, be the primary language for students going to these areas, with Japanese or Parsi or Hebrew or Arabic secondary. Aptitude for language, as determined by an examination, is also a factor in the decision; a student may be given a simpler one if it would require too much time and energy for his talent to master the esoteric primary language.

The Special Group representing the CPSU Central Committee exercises its judgment only after all prior administrative approvals have been given. Its concern is only a final determination of the candidates' political reliability. Its right to disapprove a candidate is seldom exercised, but it is never questioned.

Attractions

The professional intelligence officer, the candidate already in the GRU, wants to attend the MDA because he cannot normally expect to advance beyond the rank of major without its diploma. The typical candidates, however, are regular officers of the Soviet Armv, Navy, or Air Force, and for them it is a question of changing careers. The advantages in the change are numerous. They retain their current grade and keep their seniority, thus starting the new career at their present pay instead of beginning at the bottom. They are furnished suitable apartments if married and are supplied with both military and civilian clothes. They will have more opportunity for promotion than in their present units.

GRU officers, like other military officers, receive the base pay for their military rank and also the pay for their duty station slot; a major will get his regular salary and if assigned, say, to an operations officer's slot the pay of such an officer too—both salaries in full. Special bonuses of 10% for each foreign language were at one time allowed (the student knows Russian, a provincial language, and at least one foreign language from his VUZ training, and he may learn one or two more in the MDA), but

there are some indications that these were discontinued at the same time the special tax exemptions granted medal winners under Stalin were withdrawn.

The candidate knows that as a student he will remain in the Moscow area for three years, and Moscow is considered an excellent duty post. He will be with his family for this tour, and he and they will have their reputation enhanced by the numerous prerogatives a GRU officer enjoys. He continues his education, a thing he does not value lightly, and may win the degree of Kandidat and the 15% raise that accompanies it. The security of his career is enhanced, for removing an MDA graduate from a GRU position is a long and involved process and one therefore seldom undertaken. He has not only the opportunity but a commitment to go abroad and see what lies on the other side of that curtain the capitalist countries keep referring to.

He will, of course, be subject to the stresses normal in the intelligence profession—the GRU ulcer rate is probably as high as ours—but he is still young and in extremely good physical condition; he is academically competent; and through long conditioning he has developed a high order of self-discipline. He is apparently not warned of the disadvantages. A few decline the recruiter's pitch, and though he has cited the importance of serving the Motherland in positions of great responsibility, no stigma is attached to the refusal.

Matriculation

The MDA program has varied from two to four years; it was three at the time of our most recent data. Area and language training starts immediately and continues until graduation. Non-intelligence subjects are taught for a few months until final clearances are received. The program is modified to fit individual needs within GRU requirements: highly proficient specialists, or students with extensive prior intelligence experience or language and area knowledge, may complete their studies in less than normal time. It is more sensible, in the GRU view, to train a subject-matter specialist as an intelligence officer than it is to take an already competent operative and give him training in some highly technical field required for a special operation or peculiar assignment.

The degree of Kandidat requires passing courses in Marxism as well as in intelligence and in the student's subject-matter specialty. Like the Ph.D., it requires a learned dissertation. After the student successfully defends his dissertation before an academic board (which passes on it by secret ballot, using procedures similar to those of Western universities), he gets the degree. And the 15% bonus.

Although the Selection Board has ruled on the student's program, the first six months are probationary. During this time he is kept under close observation by his instructors and presumably by the MDA Party Commission and KGB informants among the students. Some time after his final security clearance, his assignment is reviewed and either confirmed or changed; only then is he officially informed of his prospective career. Careers may actually be redirected at any time, and students are occasionally withdrawn when required for special assignments, regardless of how close they are to graduation.

Student Life

The student is most likely to be a captain or major; some colonels are reported. He ordinarily will be at least 25, generally not over 29 years old, but exceptions have been made to age 35. He may be married and have children even in their teens. But it will be the unmarried, usually 25 years old or so, who are chosen as illegals. All are treated as the mature men they are, with the dignity and seriousness the Soviet system devotes to fulfilling its priority purposes. There is some horseplay, of course, but apparently no time or energy is wasted on hazing. The students and instructors help each other meet the high standards of the MDA system rather than compete for position along a theoretical distribution curve.

The entering class, which numbers from 60 to 100 according to needs (there are 1,000 or more GRU case officer positions abroad to fill) is controlled by a class proctor, a position carrying the rank of general although it has been held by senior colonels. The proctor, his deputy, and a small staff both mother and monitor the group. They submit detailed assessments of each student which, with reports prepared separately by the MDA Party Commission and the chief instructors, govern the student's final assignment.

The school year starts in September, continues through August. Classes are held six hours a day, except that after the probationary period Wednesdays are free for research, special training, work on the dissertation, and reading in the Spetsfund—Special Repository, a library of classified material on espionage. Students with special interests in technical matters have various laboratories to use for self-study, and all are encouraged to supplement the substance of lectures with outside reading. Those lacking in zeal in this respect (as gauged by hours spent in the Spetsfund) must justify their behavior to the class proctor.

Single students live in campus dormitories, married ones being furnished apartments in the area. All spend much time in study but are otherwise as free as their schedules permit. Apparently there is an increase in free time as one progresses through the course. Students usually spend Sundays in Moscow, returning to Sokol by metro in time for Monday morning classes.Except in attending general lectures, students are divided into units of three to five according to language and target country. These units meet with those from adjacent study areas for regional seminars. Written examinations are given in subjects whose mastery is essential for the projected assignments, but academic evaluation rests primarily with the instructors, who prepare narratives on the students' attitude and performance and rate them on a five-point evaluation scale.

Students are discouraged from taking notes for security reasons, but the practice is not forbidden. They are allowed and presumably encouraged to ask questions, yet the general practice seems not to do so. There is no indication that academic failures occur; the selection process would generally preclude them, and the Soviet system tends at this level to dropbacks rather than washouts. The discovery of undesirable character traits or less than impeccable background results in summary dismissal. Students so banished are apparently returned to their original military units, and there is no indication that their non-GRU careers are jeopardized.

The original KGB and Central Committee investigations are backstopped further by the KGB security control program, whose agents under MDA student cover guard against hostile penetrations, detect incipient conspiracies, and observe the students' personal, social, and sexual proclivities. Overt KGB monitors warn the students away from restaurants frequented by foreigners, instruct them not to have their pictures taken in Moscow or with their comrades, and generally keep

tabs on them both on and off the campus. Although the students and staff recognize the KGB's responsibility for internal security in the armed forces, including the GRU and the MDA, snide comments indicate that the ever-present KGB observers are irritants that GRU officers would like to do without.

The Faculties

The teaching staff is organized into faculties and departments according to subject matter, and a few distinguished scholars have been awarded special chairs. A fairly permanent cadre, including some women, comprise the language and area faculties, but most of the instructors are intelligence officers on two-year rotation tours. MDA is considered excellent duty, and appointments are highly prized. The recipients are typically senior officers, colonels and generals with considerable status in their respective fields. Tradecraft instructors are generally experienced legals or illegals who have had cheek-to-jowl experience in handling agents, often rezidentura chiefs or deputies. The students have considerable respect for their teachers. Guest lecturers and VIPs of international prominence occasionally speak on topics of special interest, and the MDA instructors regularly hold sessions in other GRU schools in the Moscow area.

A Faculty of General Studies teaches art, architecture, economics, history, music, logic, philosophy, and psychology. It may be responsible also for law; Soviet, international, and Western legal procedures are taught, but the faculty has not been identified. In these subjects the student tends to learn history and theory rather than acquire skills, the purpose being to give him the cultural polish he should have to operate in Western societies and will not have acquired from his military academy studies.

There are two separate faculties for Area Knowledge and for Language Studies, but they coordinate closely with each other and with others whose subjects involve language and area knowledge. In languages the aim is conversational ease approaching native fluency. Area studies follow the typical intelligence breakdown—geographic, transportation, economic, political, and the like—but they stress also a practical

knowledge of the behavior, customs, manners, social patterns, and taboos of the indigenous people, so as to be able to work with them without giving offense.

Faculties of Military Science and of Foreign Armed Forces are also separate but work closely with each other and with the area and language faculties. Military history courses begin with the early Roman era. The study of military science and tactics concentrates on armed forces organization and order of battle in the United States, Great Britain, France, and of course the student's target country. The student's whole orientation toward his target country is along military-strategic lines, for his intelligence requirements will likely lie in this area. Field trips and demonstrations keep students abreast of the latest developments in weaponry.

A Faculty for Special Training teaches espionage and intelligence subjects and also the courses in military attaché duties that earlier were run by the Faculty of Military-Diplomatic Training. Intelligence and tradecraft run the usual gamut, but stress is placed on the organization and operation of rezidenturas, the practices of the intelligence and security services in the target countries, and third-country operations. This faculty works closely with those of area and languages, for effectiveness in personal relationships with non-Soviets is a central theme of the tradecraft curriculum. These courses extend over two of the three MDA years, but they are considered to impart only a basic intelligence training; specialized training in depth is given outside according to individual needs, both during and after the MDA program.

Supporting Activities

Technical tradecraft is apparently taught by specialists from the GRU's First (Technical) Department. The depth of the training varies; most subjects such as secret writing, photography, microphotography, concealment devices, and the like are covered only to the familiarization level, but different aspects of radio operation may be taught successively over a period of two years. Driver training, important to a man going abroad who has probably never owned an automobile, is handled by an element under the MDA's Deputy for Administrative

Matters. In addition to the operation of different makes of foreign automobiles, the student learns mobile surveillance, doing photography from cars, and how to conceal compromising material in them.

The inevitable Marxism and political theory courses are handled by a Political Instruction Section under the Deputy for Political Matters, who is also chairman of the MDA's Communist Party Commission. Should disputes arise between GRU and KGB interests in the MDA, this Deputy would apparently be the one to resolve them as directed from the Central Committee.

A Department of Scientific Instruction is responsible for pedagogical matters without doing any teaching itself. It organizes the study procedures, compiles the schedules, runs support elements like Training Aids, Publications, Stenographic Pool, and Translation Units, maintains the General Library and the Spetsfund, keeps custody of instructors' papers and student notes, and otherwise provides professional guidance and support to the instructors. An Academic Board, apparently consisting of MDA faculty and department heads, seems to set the training policy that the Department of Scientific Instruction carries out and to handle matters that cannot be resolved at lower levels.

Lectures, demonstrations, discussions, case studies, laboratory assignments, term papers, field trips and tours, self-study by general reading and browsing in the Spetsfund, and research for the doctoral dissertation (which may require extensive visits to other institutions) are all devices for instruction. Tradecraft is practiced on the streets of Moscow under the watchful eyes of both the KGB agents and the instructors. Most of the training is in-house, but students visit other locations for special assignments, particularly if they are being groomed for deep-cover operations.

Beginning in 1954 it became the practice to take graduating students on thirty-to-forty-day field trips to stations abroad, where, under tutelage of field case officers, they study the organization of the rezidentura and the way it functions. They inspect its operational files and see how its analysis of the operational environment is applied in operational planning. They observe agent meetings and participate in what they think are bona fide agent contacts, though these are actually with case officers from other rezidenturas. In accordance with Soviet stress on communications breakdowns as a cause of security failures, they are given a tour through the communications facilities of the center.

The purpose of the field trips is to relate classroom theory to the reality of the operating areas. Students are shown what can and can't be done, the local factors that affect access to target personalities, the limitations under which these can be sought out and developed, and the reasoning behind the operational decisions. They are generally impressed by the personal diligence and frankness of their field mentors and find this transition step most helpful.

Fruition

At graduation ceremonies, the importance of which is marked by attendance of the Chief of the Soviet General Staff, the students are awarded diplomas. These are put for safekeeping in their dossiers in GRU Headquarters.

From 10 to 25 percent of the class (but the proportion has run up to 50 percent) are invited to join the KGB, which thus keeps itself supplied with military expertise. None of GRU's illegal designees are so proselyted. Acceptance is not enforced, but the presentation is so attractive that few decline. The proselytes may take another two years' training in the KGB's Higher Intelligence School before being assigned to its Foreign Directorate.

The graduates earmarked as GRU deep-cover operatives generally go on to individual training in safe houses. The rest are assigned abroad as case officers under cover of military attachés or officials of the Ministry of Foreign Trade, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, TASS, Aeroflot, Novosti, Sovfracht, Morflot, etc. Some leave immediately after graduation; most are overseas within six months. A few receive interim assignments until openings develop, but the delay is generally brief, often just long enough for them to read in on current operations in the area and get acquainted with the desk that will support them. Arrived abroad, the new case officer will continue his intelligence schooling, joining his colleagues in formally scheduled training and review sessions that may run something like half a day biweekly. After completing his tour he may return to Moscow for a desk assignment, for specialized or refresher training, or even as an instructor at the MDA.

Commentary

Few countries have poured as high a proportion of their energies and resources into educational activities, in the broadest sense, as the Soviet Union has. From the beginning, organized learning has been treated with greater seriousness by the Soviet leadership than by political leaders in other countries, and this seriousness is shared by Soviet teachers and students at every level of the system. Further, the Soviet leaders possess the controls necessary to impose their attitudes on their country; the system of educational admissions and weeding-out and redirection is so devised that it leaves little room, particularly at the VUZ level, for the political waverer, the leisurely scholar, or the lily-fingered beloruchka disdainful of manual or applied arts.

The non-Communist observer has difficulty judging the Soviet system in that his own standards often do not apply. The Soviet system is expressly designed and controlled to help build a Communist society, rather than to liberate the individual's intellect. Its success or failure is judged by the extent to which it serves the political and social ends of the CPSU. The British or American observer may be appalled by the tight central control, the sheer weight of cramming and emphasis on memorizing, the enforced social conformity and constant political indoctrination; and certainly these faults have frustrated the more talented Soviet teachers, inhibited the effectiveness of their training, and impaired the skills of their graduates. Unlike the Chinese, however, the Soviets are increasingly willing to revise, reinterpret, or even ignore Marxist educational theory in order to meet the needs of reality, and this realism in examining the causes of success or failure seems especially pronounced in their intelligence training.

In charter, priorities, and resources, the Soviet GRU differs from its counterparts in the Western world, and comparison of disparate training systems must necessarily be generalized. But we have a number of interests and objectives parallel with theirs, and they and we are confronted with almost identical problems in staffing overseas intelligence installations. If we—cutting across cultures—paralleled GRU practices, we should recruit only the cream of our service academies' and leading universities' graduates for our intelligence assignments. The

Western intelligence academician is unpleasantly aware that some 15 years back the GRU had developed a system to select the best candidates available in the USSR and develop them into military intelligence officers of premium quality. Its program is one that any intelligence service must look on with respect.

Bibliography

1 Unlike our military academies, the Soviet ones train not only staff and command officers for the Soviet Army, Air Force, and Navy but also specialists in supporting subjects. Military academies that train linguists, engineers, chemists, economists, and the like are generally considered superior to their civilian counterparts. The MDA preference for military graduates thus represents sound judgment rather than prejudice.

2 The Soviets have little confidence in personnel selection tests and seldom use them. They tend to rely on subjective individual and group assessment, especially when critical assignments are in question.

Posted: May 08, 2007 08:08 AM