

Book review of Inside a Soviet Embassy by Aleksandr Kaznacheev

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INSIDE A SOVIET EMBASSY. By *Aleksandr Kaznacheev*. Edited, with an Introduction, by Simon Wolin. (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott. 1962. Pp. 250. \$4.95.)

Intelligence operations officers generally tend to discount books and articles published by defectors--and for good reason. All too often the defector's story (frequently prepared for a spy-conscious public by a hack writing ghost) is lost in a welter of self-justification or is so embroidered and farfetched as to be completely worthless to the serious reader. The veteran case officer, whether out of real expertise or pure cynicism, is likely to view the defector's account as a highly expurgated version of the real events or even as a mere propaganda ploy which he can use without being himself taken in by it. In the words of one CIA chief of station with considerable European experience, "As a rule, defectors are great when you're chasing them; but once they have come over and gone through the mill and are ready for resettlement, they become for the professional a very large headache, their books a bore."

To this rule--and in particular to the generalization that defectors write

more fiction than fact, more trash than substance--Aleksandr Kaznacheev is a whopper of an exception. At the age of 25, fresh out of Moscow's Oriental Institute, an embodiment of the heralded "New Soviet Man," he was sent in early 1957 as a junior Foreign Service probationer to the USSR's embassy in Rangoon. As the only Burmese-speaking member of the embassy staff, he was soon recruited (during a short trip back to Moscow) for Soviet intelligence; and from then until June 1959, when he walked into the USIS Library in Rangoon, he was a rising young careerist--a sort of co-opted Junior Officer Trainee--in the huge intelligence complex operated by the KGB in Burma.

Inside a Soviet Embassy chronicles Kaznacheev's own experiences as a student intelligence officer. That he learned his lessons well is evidenced both by his promotion to attaché rank--ironically, on the very day he made up his mind to defect--and by the wealth of operational data he includes, almost unconsciously, in recounting the circumstances which led to that defection. His is a relatively simple story, recited with a minimum of melodrama and without attempting to inflate the author's own importance.¹ What is more, Kaznacheev wrote it entirely by himself, in English; editorial advice and organization obviously came from Simon Wolin, but the style is unmistakably that of Kaznacheev, and its very simplicity is a quality some of his Western counterparts might do well to emulate. For in a sense the book is really a collection of contact reports--as it were an operational file--which, although not without a certain appeal to the lay reader, can be savored fully only by a case officer or operations chief. It is a story of the personalities and personal relationships which are central to ninety percent of the daily routine of a field operator in any service. Admittedly a worm's-eye view, it nevertheless provides a fairly accurate and realistic assessment of the then current Soviet situation in Rangoon, by an unusually gifted observer.

In his very unpretentious way, Aleksandr Kaznacheev has produced a fascinating and informative report, worthy of detailed study by case officers concerned with operations in Southeast Asia, particularly in neutralist countries such as Burma where the Soviet stake is equal to, if not greater than ours. We can allow him the moderate amount of cold war philosophizing probably insisted upon by his publishers. His remarkable achievement is to have given us an intimate picture of Soviet intelligence life by a device too seldom used--a series of well-related episodes documenting the development and training (as well as the disillusionment) of a junior intelligence officer--and, not incidentally, to

have provided considerable insight into an operational system which, productive though it may have been, was exceptionally cumbersome and inept.

As seen by Kaznacheev, Burma during the late 1950's was not a particularly happy place for the Soviets. Their aid program, in the face of Burmese bureaucracy, was poorly administered and seldom appreciated; their position as the spokesman for all progressive forces was being undercut daily by the Chinese; their relations with U Nu's government were never cordial; and, toward the end of Kaznacheev's tour, they suffered a number of propaganda blows (one being Kaznacheev's own defection) which brought Soviet prestige in Burma to its lowest point in postwar years. Morale in the embassy was non-existent; the clique-ridden atmosphere, punctuated by frequent squabbles between the ambassador and the KGB units, made life, in Kaznacheev's words, "definitely abnormal and unhealthy." To a man, none of the Soviets ever really liked Rangoon. The crowded living conditions--worse, if anything, than Moscow--the unbearable heat, and the inability to communicate with the Burmese or even any non-Bloc diplomats combined to create an environment in which the major preoccupation for the Soviet officer became the regular, rapid achievement of a state of absolute inebriation, and the next morning to count up once again the days remaining before rotation back to Moscow.

Of more than passing interest is Kaznacheev's appraisal of the Soviet political action program. Surprisingly enough, the Soviets had not had the degree of success in Burma with which most Americans are likely to credit them. Despite the plethora of Communistic parties and individual pro-Communists there (it was a mark of distinction among many Burmese intellectuals to be considered a "fellow traveler"--this conveniently made one a "progressive" without absolutely committing one to either side), the Soviets were never able to weld all the leftist groups into a single effective mass organization. Kaznacheev gives an interesting reason for this: the men who staffed the KGB's Political Intelligence Unit simply refused to believe that any Burmese Communist was loyal enough to be trusted with anything more than the overt Moscow line. The aura of mutual suspicion which pervaded the embassy itself was projected in an even greater suspicion of those outside who declared themselves friendly to the Soviet Union. That this distrust was still more pronounced among the Referentura's intelligence personnel was reflected in Kaznacheev's instructions from his superior to be careful of "provocations."

This reviewer had on several occasions opportunities to talk with Burmese politicians who had been (and in some cases still are) active in Communist organizations. Invariably, whenever the subject came up, the Soviets in Rangoon were roundly criticized, not for their over-all policy, but for their hostile attitude "toward the masses," that is their lack of empathy and support for Burma's progressive forces. Curiously, the Chinese Communists were never regarded with quite the same dislike, although they were even more inaccessible to Burmese leftists.

One very bright and capable young Burman, more candid than most, confessed that in the course of several years' exposure to Marxist indoctrination as a member of an extremist youth organization he had been sincerely ambitious of becoming a full-fledged member of the Communist Party and doing more for the Soviet cause. After some difficulty he succeeded in getting in touch with Ivan Rogachev, whom Kaznacheev describes as a leading KGB officer in Rangoon during the late fifties. Then there began a long drawn-out series of meetings during which Rogachev assiduously pumped his young acquaintance for "information" but never bothered to establish any real operational, let alone a personal, relationship. After nearly a year, the Burman grew tired of what he felt was only casual interest and drifted away. He was looking for guidance, for development, for a chance to assist the Communist movement in any way his mentor might suggest. All he got, in his own words, were "a fishy eye and a lot of bloody questions they could have answered well enough themselves."

To Aleksandr Kaznacheev this incident would not have seemed unusual. The Soviet intelligence officers he knew had very little understanding of their indigenous targets and a surprising lack of concern for classic agent development. Apparently vetting procedures in the Referentura were both clumsy and unreliable, and this, combined with the ever present fear of provocation, frequently inhibited them from making important operational contacts. In the age-old conflict between security and effectiveness, the Soviets automatically opted for security, and they applied it in such a rigid and stultifying manner that it was often counterproductive. Information reports could of course be gathered from the host of fellow travelers who openly reported to the embassy. The lack of real communication with the Burmese people, however, prevented a marshaling of the elements in Burma that could have been of invaluable assistance.

Since Kaznacheev's departure a good many changes have occurred in

the Soviet Union's Rangoon installation. A new and dynamic ambassador with an intelligence background, Andr  Ledovsky, took the place of the bumbling, ineffectual Schiborin. Many officers are now permitted to live outside the Soviet compound. In Kaznacheev's own place there are now four or five Burmese-language officers, some of them in the upper echelons. Intelligence operations, too, have obviously been redirected. The intelligence personnel, although just as distinctive by their mode of living and cliquish behavior as they were in Kaznacheev's day, are now assiduously cultivating key personalities at all levels of Burmese society.

Inside a Soviet Embassy has been termed the Soviet counterpart of *The Ugly American*, and there is, whether by accident or design, a similarity in the attitudes and personalities described in the two books. And just as authors Lederer and Burdick caused an agonizing review of the type of American serving overseas, one can assume that Aleksandr Kaznacheev has been at least partially responsible for an outwardly apparent change in the Soviet method of conducting intelligence operations. It is hardly likely that any future probationer will be able to fabricate intelligence reports and receive commendations on them from Moscow, as Kaznacheev did; with Andr  Ledovsky in charge, it is doubtful that code clerks like Viktor Kabin will continue to insult their ambassadors; one can only speculate on the future effectiveness of Soviet black letter operations, the texts of which were formerly prepared in Moscow and mechanically disseminated without a single change by the Rangoon Referentura.

This is not a deep book, and it would be too much to say that it should become a standard reference work for professionals. Nevertheless, it is highly useful for an understanding of the atmosphere in which the opposition had to conduct its business. It is also a book that can be enjoyed, if for no other reason than to give the case officer the feeling that the other side can be just as frustrated and confused as he may be. With respect to its author, it offers ample testimony that he was an able student of intelligence operations and a keen observer of the *modus operandi* that gave those operations their peculiar Soviet imprint.

--Matthew N. Caslon

1 Also note Kaznacheev's testimony before the Internal Security

Subcommittee of the Senate Committee on the Judiciary: Soviet Intelligence in Asia, Hearing, December 14, 1959, and Conditions in the Soviet Union, Hearing, January 22, 1960.

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