

# A Note on KGB Style

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*Methods, habits, and consequences*

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The KGB like any enduring institution has a style, its own way of doing things. When we seek to understand the service and its officers, we should perhaps pay attention to how they do business as well as to what kind of business they do. This article is intended to raise the subject for discussion, to present largely one man's opinion. It is far from a definitive study.

By way of indicating something about KGB style, consider the implications for the organization as a whole of a communication system that carries one tenth or less as much traffic—both electric and by pouch—as its American equivalent. The KGB sends very few cables and its dispatches are infrequent. For maximum security, they are pouched on undeveloped microfilm, which is recovered and printed when the dispatch reaches its destination. Although Moscow headquarters does excellent and prompt printing, both exposure and development are sometimes haphazard in the field. Ten years ago, they were downright unreadable at times. Now, the quality is generally better. Volume, however, does not seem to have risen much.

The prints of the developed films are seen by the Rezident (the KGB Chief of Station) and by the case officer concerned. In large Rezidentury (KGB Stations) some intermediate may also read the traffic, but that is by no means always the case. The Rezident keeps a file—sometimes in the form of notes or perhaps as copies of pertinent cables and dispatches—for reference. The case officer keeps all his files in a

briefcase or a notebook. Calling them "files" is perhaps misleading. It is better to say that the KGB officer keeps a movable In-Box. When a document leaves that box it is either returned to the Resident or destroyed and the fact of destruction recorded. The case file is really in the case officer's head. The excellent memory that KGB officers often display concerning the details of their operations may well be traceable to the necessity of remembering the vital information on each operation that they cannot look up anywhere. Of course, when a new case officer replaces an old one, especially if the latter has been unable to brief his successor fully, complications may ensue. Illness, car accidents and PNG'ing have led to real chaos in some KGB operations when a harassed new man has tried to tie down the broken threads of a departed colleague's dropped contacts.

Although the amount of paper that he sees is small, the KGB case officer is held strictly accountable for each sheet of it. When he destroys a document, a notation to that effect is included on a record. Even his scrap paper may bear a serial number and have to be accounted for. At the Moscow headquarters each document is sewn into the file by the senior officer directly responsible for the case. A special record of all documents in the file is kept by the case officer and its accuracy is regularly verified by the case officer's supervisor. Safe storage areas are locked and sealed with wax each night.

The ritual of sewing in the documents is often regarded as a waste of time by senior case officers in Moscow. Nevertheless, they would not dream of delegating the job. It seems to have a symbolic significance as an embodiment of both their authority and their responsibility.

The KGB case officer is his own intel assistant. At headquarters he does his own traces, gets his own documents from the archives and handcarries his own messages. Not too long ago, he also often wrote or typed his own dispatches. Even now he may write his own telegrams and personally take them and dispatches to his supervisor for review. In the field he is, if anything, even more responsible for doing everything connected with his operation except for technical surveillance and the like where he must call on experts.

The field case officer under official cover often works at his cover job about as much as do his colleagues who do not have intelligence responsibilities. This obligation is usually not as demanding on the case officer's time as it might first appear because KGB cover slots are

usually selected so that cover duties complement intelligence tasks to a substantial degree. By contrast, other KGB officers have virtually no serious cover responsibilities and rely on the all-embracing security system of the Soviet colony to protect their true affiliation. In either case, the 'KGB officer is not expected to spend much time on the administrative or reporting aspects of his intelligence job. Within the limitations of his cover assignment, he is supposed to be out on the street, making contacts, working agents and performing other intelligence tasks, reporting only the highlights and the most crucial information back to headquarters.

In developing new sources, he will usually bring things along to the point where recruitment or some other substantial development is clearly foreseeable before asking for traces from headquarters or getting approval to go ahead with his plan. Local informers and support agents are sometimes picked up without reference to headquarters at all, except perhaps after the fact of recruitment. The KGB officer must account with some precision, however, for his operational expenditures and is usually quite limited in what he can spend for development prior to coming up with a concrete proposal for recruiting a source.

Once an agent is recruited or is established as a source, headquarters' control and demands for accountability are exacting, though never voluminous. For a recruited source with significant access, a senior officer, such as a branch chief or his deputy is specifically charged with responsibility for the case. Moscow's concern to insure that information is really coming from the source as described by the case officer and that the source is bona fide is very considerable. Somewhat by contrast, Moscow's requirements (outside of S&T operations) sometimes seem quite general, apparently leaving it up to the case officer and source to report what seems to them most important. On the other hand, reporting is expected to be factual and documentary, if possible. Sometimes the KGB seems obsessed with documents as the only reliable sources. Speculation is not usually encouraged.

In such a system of extreme compartmentation and vertical lines of communication and authority, the advisory role of staffs and other elements not within the chain of command is small. The First Chief Directorate, the foreign intelligence arm of the KGB, has a counterintelligence unit, for example, that actually takes over a case from the regular chain of command in the event that the agent appears to be doubled, compromised or in danger of compromise. The field case

officer may remain the same, but in Moscow the Counterintelligence Service assumes full authority for directing the case. Deception and some types of complex political action operations often appear to be run directly by the headquarters element, Department A, that prepares the operation in Moscow. In such cases, of course, local assets of a Rezidentura may well be employed in support, but the operations are frequently run by specialists.

The typical KGB officer, trained in an environment where political agitation is part of daily fare, sees political action and propaganda as part of his regular routine. There are numerous examples of Soviet officers around the world who seem to concentrate almost exclusively on pushing the Soviet line on the issues of the day with whatever contacts they meet. To them the political approach is not something apart from spotting, developing, assessing, recruiting and agent handling. It is integral to that effort. Some do it crudely, some ineffectively, some with great skill. The point is that in almost all cases, it is a part of the operation.

In addition to politics, KGB recruiting and training of staff personnel emphasizes operational and area knowledge and experience from bottom to top. The main sources for new KGB officers are the institutes of International Affairs and Eastern Languages in Moscow. These institutions, which are better compared to the U.S. service academies than to other organizations of higher learning in America, prepare young Soviet citizens for careers abroad not only in the intelligence services, but for the foreign service, the Ministry of Foreign Trade, Radio Moscow, etc. Assignment of a student after graduation is worked out among the various consuming organizations. The students are under what amounts to military discipline and are required to accept the assignment given them. Few students see much difference among the organizations these days except for differences in pay, length and location of overseas service and other practical matters.

In the course of their education the students learn two or three foreign languages well and study the history and culture of the area in which they specialize in considerable detail, although current politics is likely to be a much weaker course than history. Access to native sources is still circumscribed. A substantial number of students go for a year or more as exchange students or as trainees with Soviet organizations working abroad. As a result, they often end up knowing the area, its language, its politics, customs, police systems, local geography and so on very well.

Although the old-style Soviet intelligence officer who was raised in the shadow if not the institutions of the Komintern and could recruit agents through appeals to an international revolutionary ideology are long since past, the newest generation of Soviet intelligence officers can be quite effective by trading on their precise knowledge of target personalities and the problems and frustrations of the countries in which they operate.

A KGB officer is ranked in his service by two systems. He progresses up the ladder from junior lieutenant to senior lieutenant and so on up to colonel and general. At the same time, he is classified as a junior case officer, case officer or senior case officer and then as he progresses further by his position, such as Rezident, which he may hold. His pay depends on his ranking in both hierarchies and there is no necessary coincidence between where he stands in one and where he stands in the other. The operational designations are based on his experience and performance as an operator. His formal rank is largely based on length of service up through major or lieutenant colonel. The chain of command is designated through the operational positions rather than formal rank. For example, a major of State Security from some other part of the KGB might be transferred into the First Chief Directorate under the designation of junior case officer and find himself subordinate to a senior lieutenant who had attained the position of case officer.

The phenomenon of marked disparity between formal rank and operational designation was probably more common during the period of considerable expansion of the First Chief Directorate's personnel ten and more years ago than it is today. At that time officers from other branches of the service were being brought into the First Chief Directorate more frequently than they are now. Nevertheless, the emphasis on operational experience and operational ability continues to be a marked element of the KGB style. The top officers in the service, for example, usually involve themselves directly in operations. They meet and develop agent candidates, they recruit and they handle agents.

In part this is a consequence of the strongly operational orientation of the KGB as a whole. A direct involvement in operations comes naturally to almost everyone in the organization. This operational orientation is manifest also in the concentration of relatively few cases per case officer. Generally, one man may handle four or five agents or targets under development. He is not expected to spread his range of intelligence activities further, although he may well be encouraged to

develop a large circle of casual contacts from whom a relatively small number of serious targets may be selected.

From the foregoing one can see that the typical KGB officer is a man who sees himself in a strict vertical chain of command. He expects to do everything necessary for his operation without much outside help, except in technical matters. Depending upon circumstances, the case officer may be closely guided by the Rezident in a particular operation, but he is not supposed to discuss it with anyone else. (Gossip and shop-talk are endemic, however, in part to overcome the excessive official compartmentation.) Although the case officer is held strictly to account for the results of his actions, he is not expected to report on day-to-day developments to headquarters and in fact the capacity of his communications system is far too limited to permit him to do so. He is street-oriented in the concept of his job and does not put in a lot of time at the desk writing reports, reading guidance from headquarters or maintaining his files. When he has a problem he takes it up with his boss and he is generally not expected to have many problems. He is supposed to know the difference between what he really needs consultation about and what he ought to be able to handle on his own.

His boss in turn has the responsibility of not only guiding the case officers that work for him, but of ensuring that vital information pertinent to the work of one case officer but acquired through another is made available. In both operational guidance and information sharing, the role of the Rezident is crucial. There is virtually no lateral distribution of communications and an extreme emphasis on compartmentation. Although the rigid compartmentation of the system is probably a major vulnerability, superiors both in the field and headquarters are usually able to keep up with each case because they are not overwhelmed with paper. Relatively primitive (in terms of capacity) communications equipment and the custom that each officer prepare his own reports and keep them brief make it possible for such reports as do get written to be read all the way up the chain of command. The general in command of the First Chief Directorate has been reported on several occasions as reading all the incoming traffic. Much of the outgoing traffic is also signed personally by him.

The strictness of the chain of command and the limited amount of communications place a great weight of responsibility on each Rezident and on each case officer. As with all Soviet officials, KGB case officers have a norm to fulfill for the year and are usually called to account for

their activities during part of the annual home leave in the Soviet Union. In a system like that, if something goes wrong, someone must be found to have been responsible. This can encourage an extreme of caution, particularly when the relations between case officer and the Rezident are not of the best or when the headquarters desk officer is not cooperative and understanding of the problems in the field.

Although we are accustomed to think of Soviet organizations as highly impersonal, in the KGB personalities and the private connections of individual officers are often crucial to the success or failure of an operation—or a career. In many ways, the KGB is an organization made to order for the man who wants to claim all the glory for himself and put all the mistakes on the backs of his subordinates. Family connections or other personal contacts have special significance in this sort of an organization because they can provide a secure and effective second channel for communication in a system in which there is otherwise only one narrow route watched over by jealous monitors for all the messages an officer may want to send.

The emphasis on the role of the individual in the organization also has its advantages, of course. A capable officer, particularly one from an influential family, working under a Rezident who knows his business and will accept responsibility is likely to find himself in a stimulating work environment that may compensate very well for shortcomings of the service or the Soviet system as a whole that might otherwise disturb him.

While the KGB style as outlined above is in many ways admirably suited to running operations, it appears to have limitations in the way it makes use of the product of its operations and in evaluating whether the operations themselves are really worthwhile. There are enough instances on record to permit the generalization that in political matters especially Moscow is often reluctant to receive bad news. The ambitious case officer may find himself frustrated by pressure to conform, either from his Rezident or from Moscow, when he tries to report things as he sees them. To a large degree this is probably an inevitable manifestation of the extreme isolation from the outside world in which the Soviet policy makers live and their lack of exposure to unwelcome information. In addition, the emphasis on operations as such and the overall environment of the KGB, which is predominantly an internal security, criminal investigation, and antisubversive organization, probably discourages the kind of critical intellect by whom frank reporting,

regardless of its content, is most prized.

This last consideration, the emphasis on an investigative, operational style at the expense of analytical curiosity, may well be the source of considerable tension within the First Chief Directorate today. Bigoted and inflexible ultimate consumers are problems enough. But also the older generation of KGB officers, including many of today's Rezidenty, was largely trained in war time and internal security operations. Their juniors, speaking broadly, are more academically inclined, more tempted to discourse on their theories, more interested in foreign societies and politics per se and less dedicated to fulfilling the obligations of the party and the state. They are often perceptive and realistic about developments not only abroad, but also in their own country. Bearing in mind the importance of personal relations and the dependence of juniors on seniors in the rigid chain of command, the signs we see these days of tension and cynicism among these younger officers should not be surprising.

As they rise in the KGB, we may see some organizational changes over time. If these changes preserve the laconic style of communication while at the same time do away with some of the most cumbersome and archaic aspects of the communications and records keeping systems, the KGB could become an even more formidable institution than it is today. The problem of encouraging intelligence analysis and imaginative, critical thinking is a problem for Soviet society as a whole. As a part of that society, the KGB shares the problem, but probably not in greater degree than other Soviet institutions and possibly less than many.

Judgments about the influence the KGB style has on KGB officers as individuals, about the implications for KGB operations of the way they do business, about the relevance of the style to Western operations against Soviet targets, and about many other related matters lead us beyond the scope of this note which, as stated in the introductory paragraph, hopes only to raise an interesting topic for further comment. If this piece succeeds in making the point that KGB organizational style is important to Western intelligence and that we should concern ourselves with it more than we have, it will have served its purpose.

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