

Russian Political Police: Immortal Traditions and Eternal Threats

BORIS PUSTINTSEV

No political police can function effectively without constantly resorting to provocation and violence as a working tool. Such methods exert negative influence upon public morals, making any political police necessarily a destructive force. This obvious fact nonetheless needs to be reasserted constantly.

This negative influence dictates the relations between a special police and a society. In a state governed by law, these relations are based on a rather simple scheme: a society tolerates a special police as a necessary evil and tries its best to effectively control it and to direct it toward protecting public interests. But this contradicts the natural instincts of the service, which constantly strives to spread its influence outside these limits, to increase and strengthen its role in the society. The contradiction is permanent, so it also requires permanent effort to suppress dangerous tendencies in the service at every turn and to prevent it from becoming a completely closed corporate body not subject to any kind of parliamentary or civic control.

Any political group that usurps full power by doing away with constitutional norms or that comes to power by illegitimate means creates a repressive mechanism that will secure its safety. Russia's political police, with its hypertrophied functions comprising a strong investigation apparatus and an elite armed force, was formed with a single purpose: to carry out a policy of terror, mostly toward its own people. It is able to work effectively only for this purpose; it is professionally capable of nothing more.

When creating such a service of state terror the dictators are always confident of their ability to prevent it from developing its own interests, believing that the goal of the service will always be the securing of safety and permanence of the ruling group. It must be noted that in conditions of total terror, such confidence is justified more often than not. While names of the dictators may change, most important for the service is that the quality of the regime does not change, that it not assign the service new tasks and roles it was not meant to perform. But any ruler who would wish to drastically modernize his regime, to truly reform it and,

Boris Pustintsev is chairman of Grazhdansky Kontrol, a St. Petersburg-based organization seeking to create civic oversight mechanisms over the police, army, and security agencies.

hence, to liberalize it (the first is impossible without the second), had better start with a complete reorganization of the state security service. And this means not only sacking key persons at the top but also a thorough cleansing of the second and the third echelons, because liberalization means that special services will indeed be put to new purposes that are beyond their grasp. In the new atmosphere, the service will develop a dominating self-preservation instinct that will compel it to try to re-create pre-reform conditions or (at best) to quickly transform itself into a corporation that puts up an all-around defense and pursues mostly self-interest.

Immortal Traditions . . .

For decades, the Soviet political police acted in the conditions of perpetually growing terror and during that period developed stable traditions and working habits. It conscientiously served the ruling elite because the state that carried out the policy of total terror toward its own population was vitally interested in having a state service directed exclusively at implementing this policy and, I stress it once more, unable to do anything else professionally. Naturally, this state of affairs meant blind obedience to party leadership and the absence of pronounced self-interests. But at that time the basic interests of the services and the party/state coincided. Such a regime needed just such a service. Of course, every single member of the service was in constant danger of being degraded or even shot at any moment, but as an organism it did not need to worry about its future; its corporate interests were not threatened.

Stalin's death changed everything. The arrest (and subsequent shooting) of NKVD chief Lavrenty Beria was carried out not by the special services, but by the army. The deployment around Moscow of regular army detachments showed that the political leadership did not consider the special services as an unconditional pillar of support—quite the contrary, they were deeply suspicious of them. Guarantees for the future of the services suddenly vanished. Then the party leaders condemned physical terror as a tool of governance, so that, at least objectively, they no longer needed a strong organization oriented toward terrorizing its people. The future of the whole corporation (but not its individual members) was endangered.

Beginning with the end of the Great Terror, the Soviet political police began working more and more for its own survival rather than for the protection of the ruling elite. The instinct of self-preservation fostered the formation of the KGB's own interests distinct from those of the Bolshevik party leadership. More and more, the service became an independent political force.

At the time of the overthrow of Nikita Khrushchev, the success of the plotters was mainly ensured by the fact that they were joined by the security service. Without its active involvement, the plot would have been impossible. For the first time, the KGB participated in working out very important political decisions as an equal partner. For the first time, the highest party leadership asked it for support, and that was actually the recognition that the KGB had interests of its own. Lending support for Leonid Brezhnev, the service came to a kind of "gentlemen's agreement" with him and his team: in exchange for its participation in the conspiracy, the rulers guaranteed the service the stability of its status, the monopoly

on ensuring political like-mindedness in the country, and its continued access to those at the very top. The twenty years from Khrushchev's downfall to Brezhnev's death constituted the most idyllic period in relations between the ruling Soviet oligarchy and its special services, which, instead of being just a tool, began to become a full member of the political leadership, taking part in formulating decisions at the top level.

The service substantially transformed itself during the three decades after Stalin's death in 1953. This was dictated first of all by the need to do away with much of the old working technique as well as by changes in relations with the ruling party. Nevertheless, all those transformations could well be defined as heavy cosmetics. The quality of the regime remained unchanged: it still existed outside legal frames, and the election procedure remained as fictitious as under Stalin. Having renounced physical terror, the rulers resorted to ideological terror as the only means of forcing the citizens to obey. Hence, like those before them, they needed a service that would ensure their own security, not the security of society as a whole.

It took much effort for the KGB to adapt to new circumstances, but it managed to do so because its functions remained the same: intimidation of the population. The service managed also to adapt to the new system of relations with the party bosses; it constantly proved to them the KGB's undoubted indispensability.

By that time the KGB had already established a practical monopoly of information that Soviet political leaders received about the situation inside and outside the country. This was not always so. Before 1939, when Beria was nominated the head of the NKVD, the foreign intelligence department supplied information gathered abroad directly to the top leadership. But the latter was often indignant when supplied with raw information that did not correspond to its pre-set notions of the world. During World War II, the tendency toward independence of the foreign intelligence branch and, hence, toward the objectivity of the information it provided, naturally increased. But by the end of the 1940s, Beria prevailed.

What little independence the foreign intelligence branch enjoyed was gone by 1952, when during the notorious "doctors case" it was required to supply without fail "evidence" from abroad confirming that the people arrested in connection with that trial were in fact American, British, and Israeli spies. The KGB fabricated the case at the personal behest of Stalin. The foreign intelligence did not refute the falsification; it had to be silent and thus helped the KGB misinform not only the inner circle around Stalin but the country as a whole.

In the years to come, it was the KGB that defined the quantity and quality of the information to be revealed to the public and the government, all the way up to the party leadership. The data collected by the police and other agencies, even by the army intelligence in most cases, were given a final polishing touch by the state security service. Citizens of the Soviet Empire—from the man in the street to the first secretary of the party's Central Committee—lived in a distorted, illusory world and had very confused, chaotic notions of reality. The service bears the main responsibility for the still-deformed state of mind of many Russians.

However, if we are to speak about the top leadership, then the situation described was the result of, so to say, mutual agreement. The party bosses most-

ly received the information they were, consciously or unconsciously, eager to have—for example, confirmation that all their previous decisions were undoubtedly correct and had no negative aftereffects. The service comprehended very well what was demanded of it, and its self-preservation instinct forced it to meet those demands. Besides, the information supplied was meant to maintain the rulers' conviction of the extreme aggressiveness of the Western governments toward the USSR, as well as the fact that only the effective work of the KGB held the mortal enemy in check. It seemed that the ruling party and its “sword and shield” could not exist without each other.

. . . And Eternal Threat

As the Soviet system began to be dismantled, many Russians hoped that the KGB and the party would be destroyed simultaneously. But soon it turned out that the KGB was much more a self-regulating and self-preserving system than the ruling party. By the beginning of 1991 the Communists were actually split into three separate parties: the reformers, the moderates, and the conservatives. All of the state agencies were undergoing visible changes, even the armed forces. Only the KGB still towered over the chaos as a monolith successfully staving off all attacks from the rapidly changing society.

One of the first signs of the change was the openly expressed hunger for information. For several years, we in Russia were greedily devouring everything that contained information uncontrolled by the government. The measure of our situation precisely reflected the progressive loss by the regime, first of all by the KGB, of the monopoly on information throughout the country. But the principle of selection and quality of information supplied to the top remained the same. If the leaders of the abortive coup of 1991 had been informed about the real mood prevailing in the country at the time, they would never have dared to come into the open.

The KGB, then, commanded by Vladimir Kryuchkov—the real trigger of the putsch—proved that it was unable to work effectively under new conditions and was evidently striving to restore the Soviet system and the circumstances that would not threaten its existence. After Kryuchkov's arrest, everyone was waiting (some with hope, others with fear) for the next logical step of President Yeltsin: the abolishment of the political police as an institution inherited from the totalitarian state.

This was the only moment when it was possible to proclaim the KGB a criminal organization as it deserved, without threat of bloodshed. The opponents of reforms were in no position to rally any kind of mass support. Such a move by Yeltsin could well have changed the course of events that were to follow: the 1992 trial of the Communist Party would not have turned into a farce, the base for further consolidation of anti-reformist forces would have been substantially weakened, and today's Russia would not have been covered by the sinister shadow of a future nationalist-Communist president.

Alas, Boris Yeltsin had not been prepared for such a move. All his past experience as a party apparatchik was against it. Periodic attempts at reforming the

service were mostly meant to subordinate it to his own interests. But the next putsch of October 1993, as well as the totally unexpected results of the December 1993 parliamentary elections, demonstrated without any doubt that the KGB, under whatever name of the day at the time, was not in the mood to be reformed. It became obvious that in both cases the president had again received false information about the state of opinion in society and on this base developed a false political prognosis.

A presidential decree of the following year began with words that might have stricken the service with panic: "The system of . . . KGB proved unreformable. The attempts at reorganizing it undertaken in the past years were mostly of a superficial, cosmetic character . . . The political police system was preserved and can be easily reinstated." The decree deprived the service of ministry status, of its own corps of investigators, troops, and prisons. The new agency, named the Federal Counterintelligence Service (FSK), had functions much more limited than its predecessor's. But not for long. Very soon it got back its own investigators and in April 1995, a new presidential decree gave back everything it had been deprived of in 1994. Now it is called the Federal Security Service (FSB).

This happened in the height of the Chechnya campaign, where the service once again proved its complete incompetence: the information it provided helped the hawks in the government to convince Yeltsin that a short, victorious military operation would successfully solve the problem of Chechen separatism. In turn, the president once more proved that he considered personal devotion to him to be the main criterion of the special services' effectiveness. As is to be recalled, Mikhail Gorbachev made the same mistake in his time.

Today, state security is much more confident about its future than at any other moment since the downfall of the Soviet regime. It is headed now by general Mikhail Barsukov, a man very close to Yeltsin and previously responsible for the safety of the Kremlin. But the service still suffers from a lack of respect in society and is obviously longing for its old might and glory. From time to time, it undertakes some initiatives of its own, putting out feelers to test the changes in the political atmosphere. In 1993, it illegally arrested chemist Vil Mirzayanov, who had revealed the facts of the Russian government's violations of international agreements on the destruction of chemical weapons, and charged him with state treason. The public in Russia and abroad reacted very strongly, the government intervened, and Mirzayanov was set free. Then the service initiated several unsuccessful appeals in the Parliament to ban foreign philanthropic foundations from working in Russia on the pretext that their activity was strategically against the interests of the country.

Encouraged by recent political developments, such as last December's elections that gave predominance in parliament to Right and Left extremists, state security is again trying to fully restore the authority it enjoyed not so long ago. In February 1996, it arrested former navy officer Alexander Nikitin, who worked under contract with the Norwegian ecological foundation Bellona and who took part in compiling reports from open sources about the damage to the environment in the Russian north as the result of poor maintenance of the fleet there. Nikitin

was charged with espionage. His arrest means that the FSB is trying to re-create an atmosphere of fear and civic apathy—the only conditions under which it can prosper.¹

It would be unfair to state that the KGB has always reacted negatively to new social tendencies. This is certainly true of such chauvinistic, xenophobic organizations as Pamyat and Zhirinovskiy's party. When it became evident several years ago that the neo-Nazi movement in Russia had strong financial support, Citizens' Control asked the service for information about the participation of the former KGB in instigating the formation of political organizations of the extreme Right on the eve of perestroika. Many of us knew about this involvement but we wanted to know the names and details for possible future law suits. We received a letter stating that no such facts had ever come to the knowledge of the service.

Recently, St. Petersburg was witness to the publication of a book by the local KGB's public relations man, Lt. Col. Yevgeny Lukin. The book, supposedly a new account of the atrocities committed by the NKVD in the 1930s, was nothing but an outrageous piece of anti-Semitic propaganda. The well-respected Nikolai Girenko of the Ethnography Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences opined that:

The main goal of the book is to prove that it was the people of the Jewish nationality who were guilty of the calamities of the Revolution and subsequent Civil War. . . . Many Russian patriots died because people of that nationality took revenge for their pre-revolutionary humiliation upon them. It proves that the Stalinist regime (in the persons of Beria and Yezhov) meted out their justice. Democracy and the Jews were to blame for the appearance of butchers and their ways in the NKVD. That is why the book is meant to bring out not patriotism but anti-Semitism, and contains an appeal to the butchers of the future.

Lukin could have never published this book without the agreement of his superiors. Even a year ago, the publication of such a book from a high-ranking KGB man would have been unthinkable. The St. Petersburg branch of the FSB evidently decided it was time to come out into the open with its real perception of the world. The political evolution of the country allows it to follow such reasoning. In February of this year, FSB chief Barsukov in a TV interview stated flatly that all Chechens are criminals. Citizens' Control tried to sue him and appealed to the procurator-general. The answer was: no corpus delicti.

To add insult to injury, Lukin's book was presented at the Russian-American Press Center; an agency supported by the American taxpayer helped to publicize anti-Semitic material.

Conclusion

The Russian state security corps reveals itself as an aggressive, empire-minded, xenophobic force. Despite the president's advances, his rule offers the service no real guarantees for the future. The internal security organs' corporate interests and its bureaucratic/institutional inertia push them toward supporting the most authoritarian political group possible, that is, the national Communists. If such political forces manage to win the next presidential elections or seize power by other means, they will have ready support in the special services. The KGB will

once again assume the role of one of the main pillars of society for a time—until the next swing of the political pendulum, which this time the KGB will know exactly how to effectively thwart.

If Yeltsin manages to survive and keep the presidency, it may lead to a temporary decline of the totalitarian idea in Russia. So, the service would retract the claws it began to show and again, as in late 1991, start to assure everybody that it has turned into a vegetarian for good. But not for long. It will take quite some time for Russia to be ready again for drastic reform of state security. This means that in the foreseeable future the service will at best remain only a potential detonator of political and social tragedy.

NOTE

1 For details on the Nikitin case, see the Bellona Foundation's site on the World Wide Web at <http://www.grida.no/ngo/bellona/>.