A Comparative Study of US and Soviet HUMINT Tradecraft during the Cold War

*We cannot afford methods less ruthless than those of our opposition.*

– John Le Carre, *The Spy Who Came In From The Cold*

Christina Beasley

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The Craft of Intelligence Supervision: David Gioe
Pembroke College, University of Cambridge
Introduction

In many ways, human intelligence tradecraft during the Cold War varied very little from that which came before, and that which would come after. The operations of Western and Eastern intelligence services both relied upon the same basic tenants of human nature; including the ability to manipulate and to be manipulated, the necessity to empathize with others to earn trust and procure valuable information, and a sense of creativity and curiosity. However, despite these commonalities amongst societies, I hypothesize that disparities between the strategic cultures of the Soviet and American intelligence services—and perhaps more broadly, the nations as a whole—resulted in several significant differences in their approach to human intelligence tradecraft. Within this analysis, I seek to describe just a few of the many techniques employed by each intelligence service during the Cold War era, and to pave the way (or draw the curtain) for future in-depth analysis comparing the tactics of the two organizations. I will focus on the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Soviet Committee for State Security (KGB). Later versions of this paper will include a greater array of primary source documentation, including documents such as The Penkovsky Papers, agent handler guidelines of the period, and personal interviews. I will also organize future analyses on the topic into more thorough assessments of each intelligence collection method: as it stands, this document is a survey of various tradecraft elements employed by each agency, and does not provide in-depth contrasts.

As historian Richard Aldrich explains in The Hidden Hand: Britain, America, and Cold War Secret Intelligence, “Cultural and racial stereotypes served to distort Western intelligence on Soviet capabilities and intentions throughout the war and for many years
thereafter.”¹ Indeed, because of the “cold” nature of the war, much of the violence between Soviet and American forces was of a psychological nature. The physical and ideological distance between the USSR and the US created many strategic uncertainties. Aldrich goes on to describe the Cold War period as a transition from “old-fashioned conflict between states into a subversive competition between societies.”² At the onset of the Cold War, US policymakers, such as President Harry Truman and Director of Central Intelligence Allen Dulles, believed that America had an ideological imperative to uphold liberal and democratic values. They saw the Kremlin as inevitably revolutionary and militant.³ This endowed American intelligence with a “feel good” quality, according to scholar John Ranelagh—the West felt as though it should avoid “KGB activities” such as corruption and killing⁴ to maintain its moral superiority, and could, at least theoretically, avoid these activities through the use of advanced gadgetry.

As such, the United States attempted to enhance its image as the quintessential “off-shore” power of the age: first through use of liaison relationships to procure sensitive information, and then through innovative technologies. One retired CIA officer has asserted that most CIA intelligence collection prior to 1963 was, “carried out through liaison agreements with foreign governments” and that “maintenance of liaison became an end in itself against which independent collection operations were judged.”⁵ This manifestation of America’s ‘intelligence identity’ (or ‘myth image,’⁶ as described by historian Christopher Andrew) first became apparent during the liberation activities of the West in Europe following World War II. In contrast, the internal secrecy of the KGB as well as the USSR’s political suppression of its satellite states

² *ibid.*, p. 643
⁴ *ibid.*, p. 729
⁵ R. Aldrich, *op. cit.*, p.645
caused the Soviets to rely heavily on methods such as reconnaissance and surveillance, blackmail, and interrogation under duress when collecting intelligence. As Aldrich explains, “Stalin’s paranoid vision quickly multiplied the limited range of Western activities into something much larger.” Andrew notes that democratic regimes have an overwhelming advantage in understanding what is going on within their own intelligence systems, perhaps due to the checks and balances present in effective democratic systems. Though the KGB proved more successful at penetrating Western intelligence systems, its inability to sustain its operations internally due to its infringement on the personal liberties of its officers and agents was certainly one of its greatest weaknesses.

In addition to issues with intelligence collection, both intelligence services experienced significant problems with the dissemination of information from intelligence officers to intelligence analysts, and then subsequently to policymakers. In the American case, Directorate of Intelligence analysts argued that they had no capacity to assess the reliability of the raw intelligence that they were provided because of the level of secrecy that the CIA’s Directorate of Plans maintained. Under the leadership of CIA division chiefs such as Allen Dulles and Frank Wisner, the agency favored informal rather than formal operational approaches: this meant that analysts were not always on the same page as human intelligence (henceforth referred to as ‘HUMINT’) collectors, or even up-to-date on their activities. A desire on the part of analysts to have access to a more “complete” body of information was a part of the reason for the transition to more technical HUMINT collection methods during the mid-1960s. Many analysts believed that photographic imagery or recorded communications were more

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7 R. Aldrich, op. cit., p.174
8 C. Andrew, op. cit., The Cambridge Five.
9 J. Ranelagh, op. cit., p.273
objective and detailed methods of collecting intelligence. The KGB also experienced significant issues with its transfer of information from intelligence officer to analyst to policymaker. While the KGB became “pretty smart” at the operational level during the 1950s and 1960s, intelligence reporting at the analytical level and above was manipulated to pacify the concerns of Soviet leadership. The assessments of KGB intelligence analysts were so heavily altered by their ideology that the organization was “rendered incapable of interpreting opposition except in terms of plots and conspiracies.”

It is with these historical elements in mind that I seek to discuss the nature of American and Soviet human intelligence tradecraft during the Cold War. The working definition of HUMINT for the purposes of this analysis will be as follows, “any information that can be gathered from human sources.” This is the definition currently used by the CIA. According to the CIA, HUMINT is predominately collected in four ways: 1) Clandestine acquisition of photography, documents, and other material 2) Overt collection by people overseas 3) Debriefing of foreign nationals and U.S. citizens who travel abroad 4) Official contacts with foreign governments.” I will only discuss analytical tradecraft in this assessment to the extent that I have above, and instead focus on technical tradecraft (such as bugging, use of drop sites and brush passes, and reconnaissance) as well as psychological tradecraft, particularly the social and emotional handling of foreign agents.

10 C. Andrew, op. cit., The Cambridge Five.
11 C. Andrew (1992), KGB: The Inside Story of its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev, Harpeccollins, London. P. 401
13 ibid.
My analysis will focus on the time period spanning 1953 to 1963. I have selected 1953 for a number of reasons, particularly the death of Stalin and accompanying organizational shift in Soviet intelligence operations. In addition, 1953 is considered by many historians to be the height of the “brainwashing scare” in the West, which was a defining moment in Western perceptions of Soviet intelligence. In fact, during this time, US Ambassador to the Soviet Union George Kennan was gravely concerned that he would be brainwashed and subsequently “forced to make statements that would be damaging to American policy” on the radio.\textsuperscript{14} I have selected 1963 as the concluding date due to the escalation of the Cold War resulting from events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, a shift away from human espionage use by the West, and the trial and execution of Soviet defector Oleg Penkovsky.

HUMINT Tradecraft: Where East and West Meet

\textit{Use of Returnees and Emigrants}

The nature of human intelligence tradecraft during this era was intrinsically related to the foreign policy of both the US and the USSR. For example, incorrect political and military assumptions were exacerbated on both sides of the Cold War due to the use of defectors and returnees as the “key currency” to procure sensitive information in Europe following World War II. These sources were often manipulated for political aims by both military and intelligence services. For example, deserters who were compelled to return to the Soviet Union for either familial reasons or monetary reasons were often persuaded to make “wild allegations” about their treatment in the West to discourage the defection of other Soviets.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{14} R. Aldrich, \textit{op. cit.}, p.407

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{ibid.}, p.194
emigrants that remained outside of the Soviet Union provided Western intelligence services with Soviet clothing and documents as well as valuable information. This was an incredibly useful source for American intelligence officers, who were able to produce identity papers based off of these materials that appeared to be legitimate and allowed them passage through Soviet territory—particularly in Germany and Austria.\(^{16}\)

In addition, the sheer multitude of defectors and returnees on both sides of the war provided ample opportunity for intelligence services to experiment with the use of double agents: and for all to realize that, when possible, interrogation was a far less expensive and dangerous method of conducting operations. In spite of this, the use of double agents—particularly by the Soviets—continued with some frequency following World War II, as evidenced by groups such as the Cambridge Five. In fact, in the early 1950s, the Soviet Union was able to recruit almost every Western asset sent into the USSR. Because the CIA’s assessments of success during this time period were predominately action-oriented, rather than results-oriented, the extent to which Western intelligence had been compromised by the Soviets was not fully apparent until the mid-1960s with the introduction of satellite technology and the U-2.\(^{17}\)

HUMINT tradecraft within the Soviet Union was heavily reliant on the KGB’s ability to intimidate. For example, the use of extensive bugging by the KGB has been called a “psychological offensive” by Aldrich as well as an intelligence collection method.\(^{18}\) Because the KGB was able to use bribery and threats to coerce many civilian Soviets into spying on American diplomats in Moscow, the Soviets became highly effective at counterintelligence. KGB officers had no qualms denying American officials regular contact with the local

\(^{16}\) J. Ranelagh, op. cit., p.256  
\(^{17}\) ibid., p.138  
\(^{18}\) R. Aldrich, op. cit., p.406
population, and frequently took measures to make US diplomats as isolated as possible—including aggressive tailing of their vehicles (called “bumper locking”), and regular physical threats. The sheer multitude of personnel that the KGB was able to devote to intelligence collection and counterintelligence operations was also impressive: as author Clarence Ashley has said on the topic, because of this, “everybody in the Soviet Union had a job.” By 1960, over 100 bugs had been found in American diplomatic buildings in the Eastern bloc.

However, the Americans did develop some—albeit unsavory—methods of effective HUMINT collection during the early 1950s, particularly in East Germany (where the American military presence in West Germany gave intelligence officials a convenient starting point for more subtle operations.) Because the Soviet military was not issued toilet paper in the field during their maneuvers, soldiers often used letters and official documents as such after reading them. Western intelligence services found that they could collect these materials from garbage sites and analyze them; often discovering a valuable array of information. This proved far more effective than at least one of the CIA’s other predominant means of spying on the Soviets: parachuting agents deep into the Soviet Union to assimilate with resistance groups. By the mid-1950s, the CIA considered their attempts at penetration of the USSR to be a failure: essentially all agents reporting back to Washington were doing so under duress. However, Operation Tamarisk—the strategic collection of trash—continued to be successful throughout the Cold War.

Defection: Popov and Philby

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20 R. Aldrich, op. cit., p.406

21 R. Aldrich, op. cit., p.415
The Soviet government’s pressure on their intelligence officers and the extent of their internal distrust were not only strengths, but also significant weaknesses. The high quality of material that a number of particularly effective Soviet agents collected made their KGB superiors believe that they were plants. Kim Philby of the Cambridge Five serves as one example of this: though he operated until 1951, which is prior to the purview of this paper, the actions of the Cambridge Five undoubtedly shaped double agent operations throughout the entire Cold War and merit discussion. One US government official during the period recalls that, “Entirely likeable and very much at home… Philby’s surface persona seemed to go right to his core. …the degree of self-control, of self-discipline demanded of Philby to sustain his enormous deception over so long a period of time is immeasurable.”  

Though Philby has become infamous for the incredible harm that he caused Western intelligence services as a Soviet spy through 1951, the KGB never came to fully trust him. The successful use of the Double-Cross System by the British against the Germans during World War II had made Stalin incredibly suspicious of his most effective agents. As such, Aldrich asserts that Philby’s efforts “may have been discounted in Moscow at moments when they were potentially most useful.” The KGB’s suspicions also made Philby’s existence exceedingly unpleasant: he was under constant surveillance, and never rose above the rank of a foreign agent within the Soviet intelligence service. As Andrew asserts of Philby’s career, “Philby achieved what he achieved in spite of how he was run by the KGB; not because of it.”

The poor treatment of KGB officers within the Soviet intelligence service was one of the main reasons why defection became so commonplace. As Dulles once said, “It’s the walk-in

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22 J. Ranelagh, *op. cit.*, p.150  
23 R. Aldrich, *op. cit.*, p.442  
24 C. Andrew (2013), *op. cit.*, _The Cambridge Five._
trade that keeps the shop open.” The defection of Major Pytor Popov in 1952 “set the precedent for American intelligence” according to historian John Ranelagh. Popov’s six-year collaboration with the CIA resulted in the saving of billions of dollars in military research and facilitated much of Washington’s understanding of the organization of the KGB. The care and attention that CIA case officer George Kisevalter provided Popov was one of the many strengths of his handling, though the sincere passion that Popov felt for improving the lives of the Russian peasantry was also an enormous asset. On multiple occasions during their communications, Kisevalter emphasized the possibility of Popov and his family safely traveling to the US. This comforted Popov, though both officers knew how difficult this would be to achieve. Though Popov was eventually executed by the KGB for his work with the CIA, his successful relationship with Kisevalter and the contributions that he was able to make to American intelligence reveal the value of effective HUMINT tradecraft.

The Penkovsky Case

According to former CIA Office of Technical Services Director Robert Wallace, “…the Penkovsky case was a traditional agent operation. Relying more on the professionalism of the agent and handler than gadgets, the tradecraft employed differed little from what was used during World War Two…” Many of the techniques employed within the Penkovsky case continue to be used today: as alluded to at the beginning of this analysis, numerous elements of HUMINT tradecraft have not changed. Penkovsky used silent phone calls as emergency signals, and dead drops and brush passes to transfer his intelligence reports while working in Moscow.

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25 J. Ranelagh, op. cit., p.255
26 J. Ranelagh, op. cit., p.256
27 C. Ashley, op. cit., p. 70
28 R. Wallace (2009), Spycraft: Inside the CIA’s Top Secret Spy Lab, Bantam Books, London, p. 36
By this point, the CIA had realized that attempts to avoid Soviet surveillance only piqued the KGB’s interest in their operations, and so officers such as Penkovsky retained the “expected activity patterns” that Soviets expected to observe on a daily basis. Particularly cautious and attentive CIA operatives were able to succeed within these physical and behavioral constraints, and particularly observant KGB officers noted any deviations in routine in their extensive system of files on people of interest.

The intelligence provided by Penkovsky revealed the extent to which the Soviet Union was not prepared for war with the United States, and as such, proved to be an invaluable tool during the Kennedy administration’s negotiations with President Khrushchev. The information collected by Penkovsky was also particularly valuable during the Berlin Crisis of 1961 and during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Perhaps most useful of all of the information provided by Penkovsky were his assessments of the structure of Soviet power hierarchies and Kremlin politics: for instance, Penkovsky shed light on Khrushchev’s methods of buying loyalty within the Soviet military.

Though this information was invaluable to Western intelligence agencies, their capacity to efficiently circulate the HUMINT had not yet caught up with his ability to provide it. In addition, the equipment that Penkovsky used to collect information from the Soviet government serves as just one example of the ineffective state of Western espionage equipment during this period. For example, Penkovsky used a Minox camera: unfortunately, the device could not be operated covertly, as the shutter function required two hands. As Wallace states,

29 ibid., p. 40
30 ibid., p. 34
31 R. Aldrich, op. cit., p.619
“there were simply no suitable devices on the [Central Intelligence] Agency shelves for this type of operation.”

During this time period, dead drop exchanges were considered to be one of the most secure methods of communication between intelligence officers and spies. However, a major issue with the efficacy of the methods used by Penkovsky included his poor execution of intelligence exchanges while in Moscow, particularly between 1961 and 1962. While the operational plans provided to Penkovsky from the CIA were reasonably thorough, Penkovsky often neglected to follow the protocol that they suggested. Document 0000012390 released under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) illustrates the Agency’s desire for Penkovsky to follow detailed protocol when casing the drop and signal sites, and when loading the pre-selected drop. In the letter, the CIA requests a number of visual details that require walk-by and visual inspection. However, particularly near the end of his service, Penkovsky became careless when completing these and similar tasks. Penkovsky conducted “an excessive number of exchanges” during this time, “eleven of which were in public view.” One such example of a poorly executed exchange was when Penkovsky, dressed as an elderly man, offered a young girl a box of chocolates in a park. Without looking inside of the chocolate box, the girl’s mother accepted it. The KGB found this interaction suspicious, and later used it to help identify Penkovsky.

Penkovsky’s desire for public recognition may also have limited his efficacy as an agent for Western intelligence, and contributed to his eventual capture by the KGB. In Document 0000012410 released under FOIA, Penkovsky emphasizes the manner in which he has “given

32 R. Wallace, op. cit., p. 37
34 R. Wallace, op. cit., p. 36
[himself] heart and soul. All [his] thoughts and feelings [he has] dedicated to this work.” He then states in the same document that, as such, the CIA “should not laugh at [his] request to kiss the Queen’s hand.” Certainly, personal devotion and passion for one’s work is an essential attribute of an effective agent—particularly one wishing to establish a long-term relationship with a foreign government—and should be carefully nurtured by their case officer. However, if the agent’s personality is too eccentric, their desires too extensive, or their hubris too excessive, it can prove difficult for their case officer to advise them and they can put the entire operation at risk, as a number of these case studies indicate.

In the aforementioned report, Penkovsky also states the following, “I do feel, however, that others before me who also did so much to help the West were perhaps shown more appreciation and more encouragement by prominent people personally, purely from a morale point of view.” While Penkovsky’s request to be introduced to the Queen was never met, his case officers thought it important to grant his request for recognition to some extent. SIS and CIA were able to successfully photograph him in the uniform of a British, and then American, colonel. This image has become one of the most famous from the Penkovsky case, and indeed, in the history of modern espionage. Unfortunately, the photograph later served as evidence in Penkovsky’s show trial and helped to facilitate his subsequent execution by the Soviets.

Disguise: Coercion and Cover

Physical disguise and the art of persuasion are two of the most important elements of HUMINT tradecraft. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the isolated nature of the diplomatic post and

36 ibid.
37 R. Aldrich, op. cit., p.620
the amount of pressure felt by American officers, the Soviet use of “swallows” had some success in Soviet HUMINT operations in Moscow. Swallows were women hired by Soviet intelligence to seduce foreign officials and subsequently attempt to recruit them as KGB agents through blackmail. This method of tradecraft worked particularly effectively in 1953, when twelve American embassy personnel were photographed in compromising positions and quickly returned to the United States as a result.\textsuperscript{38} While the aforementioned individuals confessed to the occurrence, one can only assume that some embassy officials did not, and were consequentially recruited by the KGB. Given the moral concerns of US leaders such as President Eisenhower, the use of swallows was not standardized or condoned by the CIA.

Establishing sound credentials and constructing a personal identity for use abroad were often difficult elements of effective espionage for officers within both intelligence services. While diplomatic cover was popular for CIA agents during the early 1950s, non-official cover—such as journalist or commercial positions—became common toward the end of the decade in an attempt to facilitate officers blending into a variety of professional scenarios.\textsuperscript{39} It was during this time that human espionage started to become a less common tool for the CIA against the Soviets. While there were periodically high-level KGB defectors, the CIA found the spy recruitment process to be incredibly difficult in Moscow.\textsuperscript{40} During this time, the use of human intelligence by Western intelligence services became far more popular in developing regions, such as Central America. This shift in intelligence collection methodology and the Soviet’s tight domestic security meant that during the early 1960s, the CIA prioritized improving signals intelligence and satellite technology. While, according to Richard Helms, “gadgets cannot divine man’s

\textsuperscript{38} C. Andrew, \textit{op. cit.}, p.375
\textsuperscript{39} R. Aldrich, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 601
\textsuperscript{40} \textit{ibid.}, p. 695
intentions\textsuperscript{41}, both intelligence services certainly tried their best—resulting in a ‘communications technology’ race akin to the nuclear arms race occurring simultaneously. In addition, the Bay of Pigs as well as the capture of Penkovsky in 1963 fueled the American public’s scrutiny of covert government programs, and increased the media’s willingness to report on intelligence operations.

Conclusion

Given the immense pressure and secrecy associated with the intelligence field, it is perhaps unsurprising that both the American and Soviet intelligence services developed a ‘cult of intelligence’ surrounding their clandestine operations. As William Colby has explained, “the ‘cult’ of intelligence, an inbred, distorted, elitist view of intelligence that held it to be above the normal processes of society…”\textsuperscript{42} became pervasive at the CIA during the 1950s, and could also be observed in the ranks of the KGB throughout the same period. US intelligence officers of the period have spoken of a “the missionary zeal, sense of elitism and marvelous camaraderie among [their] colleagues…”\textsuperscript{43} Effective human intelligence tradecraft evolves in response to the cultural and social context in which it is being employed. The process by which an individual manipulates others and the mechanisms through which information is collected and disseminated are dictated by variables such as their treatment within their intelligence service, the extent of their power, and their government’s strategic imperatives. A more detailed assessment of the human intelligence tradecraft used by the Soviets and the Americans would provide valuable insight into the broader evolution of the Cold War.

\textsuperscript{41} J. Ranelagh, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 274
\textsuperscript{42} ibid., p.198
\textsuperscript{43} ibid., p.198
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