Anastasia’s Ball



A Post-Mortem on the 20th Century

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Preface

I decided to warn my generation of a mistake our fathers and mothers made in the fight for freedom in the 20th century. In retrospect, the commitment the West made to the Freedom of Expression allowed explicit calls for death and destruction turn the last century into a nightmare.

The violence and terror of the last century has become normalized to the point we no longer recognize it for what it is, a psychotic reaction to a pseudo-scientific theory called “socialism”.

It is the habit of every scholar to document their critiques in an avalanche of examples, but I am not that ambitious. I suspect the only ones who’d complete such a book would be those who’d enjoy reading the full litany. Herein, I provide just a summary of the full litany and, still, it forms an avalanche.

Entire libraries would be required to comprehensively document eh victims of socialism in the last century.

I rest my case on the murder of one girl: Anastasia Romanov.

Set aside whatever you think of Monarchy in general, and the Romanov’s in particular. We will all agree no child is in any way culpable for the alleged crimes of their father and mother. If children are culpable, may we at least insist they receive due process if they are prosecuted?

But I call Anastasia Romanov to the witness stand, not in an appeal to her innocence, but to illustrate and contrast what socialists perceive as criminal and what they do not.

Even if you believe the Romanov’s were condemnable for the contradictions in the Imperial system of government, I insist you cannot then plausible accept what happened next. The crimes committed by the International Socialists form a torrent of psychosis which reached every corner of the planet, and brought real world consequences on all of us.

The extermination of Anastasia Romanov is what the International Socialists intended for all of us. And all which followed the Bolshevik Coup in 1918 is a direct, immutable consequence of the criminals responsible for Anastasia’s death.

I am not merely suggesting that all which follows, the nightmare which was the 20th century, was a direct result of Marx's hypothesis of human evolution. I am documenting that as fact.

No historian can deny that World War I, the Bolshevik Coup, the Red Terror, the Soviet Sate, the Holodomor, the National Socialists, World War II, the Holocaust, the Maoist Revolution, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, Grenada, nearly all Narco-terrorism in South and Central America - and Iraq's Invasion of Kuwait - all occurred because Marx convinced half the world's intelligentsia they had evolved into a superior species of hominins.

Critics of this, my central, binding thesis, may read my book entitled "Substancia Nigra" for documentation of Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin and Hitler's role at Café Central in Vienna in 1910. They were all there, and they were all conspiring to foment a worldwide revolution.

Austrian Intelligence laughed at the prospects of such a revolution, even openly mocked the movement by challenging, "Who would lead it? Trotsky?"

That is not a verbatim quote, for Trotsky then went by his given name, Lev Davidovich Bronstein. A verbatim quote would risk obscuring the root of all evil in the 20th century. That root was the belief, by substantial numbers of the world's intelligentsia, that they had "awaken", had experienced an epiphany, had evolved into a superior species of human: The Proletariat.

That new species was called the Proletariat.

God was dead. Science was the only eternal. Marx was their Moses and, collectively, the Proletariat were messiahs. T save the planet from over population, and assure the survival of the newest species, the Proletariat were obligated by SCIENCE to scrub the planet clean of criminal classes.

I can't make this shit up.

But the most surprising fact about the 20th century is that the world's righteous did nothing to stop them. I'd bring the gavel down here and now, but are we not all exhausted by the litany of crimes and violence we call the 20th century? Few of us even dare to look.

Most of us prefer to turn our gaze inward, to trivial, personal pursuits, or upward to the Divine in hope this insanity will burn itself out.

When we do turn our gaze, we lose sight of the magnitude of the nightmare.

Once again, I am not assigning blame. I am making an observation.

It is nearly impossible to perceive, much less comprehend, the magnitude of the damage done to the human condition over the past century. Lost in the avalanche is all the progress which could have been made to improve the world - had we not wasted countless trillions holding back these socialist wars of extermination.

Someday I will attempt to calculate the monetary costs.

It is still too soon to ask for the bill.

Just trust me, we'd be far better off if the Proletariat had never evolved in the first place. Or, to pose the counterfactual, it would have been better for the world if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

Anastasia's Ball

The murder of the Romanov family, in July 1918, was not an improvised act of revolutionary violence, but the culmination of a deliberate policy: the extermination of an entire biological lineage. Many historians assert the assassination of the Romanovs was regicide, but that isn't possible. Tsar Nicholas had already abdicated.

The extermination of the Romanov line was genocide. In the logic of the Bolshevik leadership, the monarchy was not merely a political institution but a biological threat.

The Romanovs embodied centuries of autocratic legitimacy and, even after Nicholas II abdicated, the family remained a potent symbol around which loyalist forces could rally, would rally, and did rally. The Romanovs had no choice in the matter. Abdication was just a word which, though spoken, could be retracted.

As long as any Romanov lived, the possibility of a restoration of Monarchy remained. In the theses of Marx, Lenin and the rest, Royalty were the penultimate criminal class. And since no Romanov had a choice, the Bolshevik's claimed they had no choice.

In the summer of 1918, with White armies advancing and the Bolshevik regime fragile, the Cheka concluded that the Romanovs constituted a genetic nucleus of counterrevolution. The "liquidation" of the Romanov line was, therefore, treated as a revolutionary imperative.

The political logic behind the killings emerged from the desperate circumstances of the Civil War. The Czechoslovak Legion controlled the Trans-Siberian Railway. Admiral Kolchak's forces were gaining momentum. Monarchist officers were reorganizing.

The Bolsheviks feared that if the Romanovs were liberated, they would become a rallying point for a unified White offensive. Lenin and Yakov Sverdlov discussed the Romanov question repeatedly. Surviving minutes of the Central Executive Committee show Sverdlov stating that the Whites must not be allowed a "standard around which they can rally."

The Romanovs were not imprisoned as criminals; they were held as symbols, and symbols are dangerous in revolutions. Killing Nicholas alone was insufficient. His children - especially Alexei, the heir - were equally dangerous. Even distant Romanov relatives were monitored, arrested, or executed.

The policy was clear: the monarchy had to be eradicated; root, trunk and branch. The question over who gave the order has been debated for decades, but the chain of evidence is clear. Sverdlov transmitted the operational directive to the Ural Soviet, which communicated directly with the Cheka commandant in Ekaterinburg. The execution squad was led by Yakov Yurovsky, a senior Cheka officer.

Multiple witnesses, including Bolshevik officials present in Moscow, later stated that Lenin approved the decision.

Trotsky wrote in his diary that Sverdlov told him, "We decided here. Ilyich believed we must do it." Trotsky's view of the Romanov murders is one of the most revealing windows into the Bolshevik mindset in 1918. He did not write extensively about the executions at the time - no Bolshevik leader did. But Trotsky's later reflections, scattered across memoirs, letters, and recollections, show a mixture of political coldness, retrospective justification, and a faint, almost embarrassed, acknowledgment of the act's brutality.

What emerges is not remorse, nor celebration, but a stark admission that the killings were a political necessity in the logic of the revolution.

Given the Bolshevik command structure, the idea that a provincial Soviet would independently execute the Tsar and his entire family without Moscow's approval is implausible. The most historically defensible conclusion is that Sverdlov issued the operational order, Lenin approved the political decision, and Yurovsky carried out the killings.

The final night in Ekaterinburg unfolded with grim efficiency. The Romanovs had been held in the Ipatiev House - “The House of Special Purpose” - for months. The windows were painted over. The family was forbidden from speaking to guards. Food was rationed. The atmosphere was one of tightening dread.

On the night of July 16, Yurovsky informed his men that the execution would occur before dawn. He prepared the basement room, removing furniture and laying down sheets to minimize blood spatter. He issued pistols to the execution squad, composed mostly of Cheka men and Latvian Red Guards.

Shortly after two in the morning, Yurovsky woke the family and told them they were being moved because fighting was approaching the city. The Romanovs dressed quickly. Anastasia helped Alexei, who was too weak to walk without assistance. The family descended the narrow staircase into the basement.

Anastasia Nikolaevna Romanova was seventeen. She had spent the last year of her life in captivity.

Anastasia would have made her formal debut into society in the winter social season of 1917, almost certainly in January or February of that year, and she would have done so at the Winter Palace in Petrograd, the traditional ceremonial venue for imperial presentations.

The established rhythms of Imperial court life, the ages at which Romanov daughters were formally introduced, were likely known to Anastasia since she was a young child. The specific plans for her debutante ball had already begun before the Tsar abdicated.

The Tsar’s abdication, coming as it did in advance of the Bolshevik Coup, appears to dissociate the Bolshevik’s from the abdication, but it was in the face of “extreme measures” that Nicholas Romanov ‘s courage failed him. Feeling himself to be a failed, historical figure, Nicholas forgot what the Bolshevik’s would not. Monarchy is a fact of nature.

In the Winter Palace, in 1917, Russian society was due to be introduced to the latest fact in the Romanov line: Anastasia Nikolaevna Romanova. The fact was Anastasia was a miracle of creation, not a sub-species of hominin. All the Romanov children were. All children are. Anastasia’s Ball was just the next ceremony extending back thousands of years.

For centuries, the Winter Palace had served as the ceremonial heart of the monarchy and, even after the capital moved to Tsarskoe Selo, the Winter Palace remained the site of the most important court balls.

In the Russian imperial system, a grand duchess was formally presented at court at age sixteen. Anastasia was born in June 1901, which means her debut would have been scheduled for the first full court season after her sixteenth birthday.

The imperial court season opened after the Christmas and New Year holidays, with major balls held in January and February. These events were not merely social gatherings but state rituals, carefully choreographed displays of dynastic continuity. Petrograd, as it was then called, will have been a dazzling display of winter garlands and brilliant lights.

On the Sunday before her debutante ball, Anastasia Nikolaevna Romanova would have slipped into one of the narrow side niches of Saint Isaac's Cathedral, seeking a pocket of stillness away from the ceremonial gravity of the morning.

The great cathedral, with its forest of malachite columns and the heavy scent of beeswax rising from a hundred candles, would have been filled with the subdued rustle of the imperial family's retinue. The Romanovs attended services regularly, and though the congregation maintained a respectful distance, the presence of the Tsar's household always altered the air—an almost physical hush, as though the building itself recognized its sovereigns.

Anastasia, sixteen, and still more impish than stately, would have pressed her gloved hands together and bowed her head. The niche she usually chose was small, tucked beneath a gilded icon of the Mother of God, and shielded her from the direct gaze of the worshippers gathering in the nave. She was not usually a girl given to solemnity, but the coming week will have unsettled her.

A debutante ball was not merely a dance; it was an announcement, a declaration that she was stepping out of childhood and into the formal world of court life. Anastaisa felt the weight of that threshold long before crossing into adulthood. In the dim alcove she will have gone to steady herself, whispering a prayer that was half-traditional and half her own invention.

Anastasia's mother, Empress Alexandra, would have stood nearby with Olga and Tatiana, their posture straight and composed, their expressions softened by the candlelight. Alexandra's eyes will have lingered on Anastasia with a mixture of pride and worry; she knew her youngest daughter's spirit, her quick wit, her irrepressible mischief.

Alexandra hoped the solemnity of the service might settle her, even briefly. Maria, gentle and earnest, hovered at Anastasia's side, ready to coax Anastaisa back into the family's formation when the liturgy began.

Tsar Nicholas II would have entered last, accompanied by a small cluster of officers. Among them, a Cossack Major who also served as Anastasia's dance instructor.

The Tsar's presence drew every eye, though he moved with the same quiet humility he always carried into church. He may have paused near the niche, noticing Anastasia's bowed head, and a faint smile will have touched his face.

The Tsar did not disturb her. He simply rested his hand for a moment on the cool stone of the column beside her, as though acknowledging her private moment without intruding upon it.

For seventeen years Nicholas had witnessed the miracle of Anastasia grow into a woman, and, though she had yet to realized it, Nicholas, too, had attended a debutante ball. Debutante balls, Nicholas and Alexandra had instructed her, were not about girls becoming women, or boys becoming men. Debutante balls were the formal commitment a young Royal makes to enter a life of service to God's glory, not their own happiness.

The Tsar and Alexandra encouraged Anastasia in their advise; look not for a husband, but for a man with the same humility service to God required. Imperial service was about sacrifice of self to the service of mankind. Debutante balls were the formal commitment a young Royal makes to enter a life of service to God's glory, not their own happiness.

Anastasia will have bowed her head and prayed in earnest for that very purpose.

The Tsar will have continued on to the Royal Pews with his entourage as Nicholas assured himself Anastasia would understand everything before the last dance. The choir will have begun the opening chant, its voices rising into the vast dome where sunlight filtered through the high windows in pale shafts.

The sound will have filled the cathedral with a warmth that belied the winter chill outside. Perhaps Anastasia will have lifted her head, her expression calmer now, and stepped out from the niche to join her sisters. She will have smoothed her dress, glanced once at her father, and then faced the iconostasis with a seriousness he rarely saw in her.

For a solemn hour, the Romanov family will have stood together in the great cathedral of Petrograd, unaware of how little time remained for such scenes. But on that Sunday, in the Royal Pews, Anastasia's world will have seemed both ancient and brand new, like a Fabergé Egg ready to be opened.

Will have, would have, may have: if the Proletariat had not evolved.

Had the Proletariat never “evolved”, Anastasia’s debutante ball would have unfolded according to the elaborate traditions of the Romanov court. The imperial family would have traveled from Tsarskoe Selo to Petrograd for the season. The palace would have been illuminated from the Neva embankment to the Jordan Staircase, its halls filled with diplomats, aristocrats, military officers, and foreign guests.

Anastasia, wearing a white gown and the small diamond kokoshnik appropriate to her rank, would have been presented before the Empress and the assembled court. Her sisters had followed this pattern: Olga and Tatiana were introduced at sixteen, and Maria’s debut was planned but postponed due to the outbreak of war. Anastasia’s would have followed the same ceremonial logic.

But by February of that year, the monarchy had collapsed. The Winter Palace was seized. The imperial family was placed under arrest. The social world into which Anastasia was meant to debut, simply vanished, almost overnight.

Anastasia’s debutante ball, which would have been one of the defining rites of passage of her young life, became just the first of the many ceremonies erased by the revolution.

In the world Anastasia *should* have lived in - the world the Romanov dynasty expected before the Proletariat evolved - she would have been preparing to enter the marriage market of Europe’s royal houses. But the timing and the form of that process were governed by strict imperial convention, and understanding those conventions shows exactly where she would have been in her life by July 1918.

At seventeen, the age at which Anastasia was murdered, a Romanov grand duchess was not yet fully launched into the diplomatic-marriage circuit, but she was on the threshold of it. Her debutante ball—scheduled for January or February 1917 at the Winter Palace—would have been the formal beginning of her public life.

Anastasia’s Ball was not merely a social event; it was the ceremonial moment when a Romanov daughter became visible to the European courts as a potential dynastic bride.

Had the revolution not occurred, Anastasia’s debut in early 1917 would have placed her into the traditional sequence of imperial court life. After the ball, she would have begun attending receptions, charity events, military reviews, and the great court balls of Europe’s winter season.

These events were not frivolous; they were the stage upon which the daughters of Europe's royal families were observed, evaluated, and quietly discussed by ambassadors, court ladies, and dynastic matchmakers.

But the Romanovs followed a very specific pattern: marriage discussions did not begin until after age eighteen, and serious negotiations usually waited until nineteen or twenty. Her older sisters illustrate the norm. Olga and Tatiana were introduced at sixteen, but their marriage prospects were not actively pursued until they were eighteen or nineteen. Maria's debut was delayed by the war, but she too would have followed the same rhythm.

Thus, by July 1918, Anastasia would have been one year past her debut, but still one year short of the age at which formal marriage negotiations typically began. She would have been in the early, formative stage of her public life.

Anastasia's days would have been spent taking lessons in imperial ballroom dances, standing to be fitted for her regalia, and entertaining liaisons of Europe's Nobility in the palace. Anastasia's nights would have been spent attending court functions, meeting foreign dignitaries, and being quietly observed by Europe's dynastic circles - but not yet formally "making the circuit" in the sense of active husband-seeking.

Anastasia, by this point in her life, already knew the drill. Her only anxiety will have been finding a suitor she could love. As a Romanov grand duchess, she would have been considered for marriage within the narrow circle of Europe's reigning houses: German princely families, Scandinavian royalty, perhaps a cadet branch of the Habsburgs.

The Romanovs did not marry their daughters into minor nobility; they married them into dynasties. Anastasia's marriage would have been a diplomatic act, not a romantic one. By the summer of 1918, had the monarchy survived, she would have been preparing for the next winter season - her second year of court life - when her presence at European courts would have become more visible.

Anastasia would have traveled to royal weddings, funerals, and coronations; she would have been presented at foreign courts; she would have begun to appear in the correspondence of ambassadors and court ladies as a young woman of marriageable age.

Who knows. It is entirely possible Anastasia believed her prayers in the niche had been answered when Nicholas II abdicated. Nicholas II's abdication in March 1917 did more than end the Romanov dynasty as a political institution; it fundamentally altered the personal futures of his children, including Anastasia.

Before the revolution, Anastasia's life had been shaped by the rigid expectations of imperial protocol. As a grand duchess, she belonged to a narrow circle of Europe's reigning houses, and her marriage prospects were governed by dynastic strategy rather than personal preference.

But once Nicholas abdicated, the Romanov family ceased to be a ruling house. The Romanovs became, in effect, private individuals – still Royal, still aristocrats, still wealthy, still famous, but no longer Sovereigns. That shift had profound implications for Anastasia's future, especially her prospects for marriage.

Once Nicholas renounced the throne, the Romanovs were no longer a reigning dynasty. They were not exiled royalty like the Bourbons or the Habsburgs, who retained prestige even after losing power. They were a deposed family in a country undergoing revolutionary collapse. Their status changed overnight from imperial arbiters of Europe's marriage politics to politically irrelevant aristocrats.

The abdication meant that Anastasia was no longer a dynastic asset. She was no longer a potential queen or crown princess. She was, in the eyes of Europe's courts, simply a young woman of noble birth—still high-born, still distinguished, but no longer a figure of political consequence.

Paradoxically, this shift would have dramatically widened Anastasia's immediate marriage prospects.

True, Europe's leading dynasties - the Hohenzollerns, the Habsburgs, the Windsors, the Savoys, and the Bourbons - were unlikely to consider a match with a daughter of a deposed monarch whose country was in chaos. Royal marriages were political instruments, and the Romanovs, after abdication, had no political value to offer. Even so, prospective suitors from that narrowly defined pool of bachelors were less than a dozen or two.

After the abdication, Anastasia would not have been considered for marriage into the British royal family, nor into the German princely houses, nor into the Scandinavian monarchies. The abdication removed her from the pool of eligible brides for Europe's ruling families.

This will have come as relief to Anastasia. Though there were, now, no chances for a dynastic marriage, there were hundreds of opportunities for a Noble marriage. Because Anastasia remained a Noble eternally, her marriage prospects were secure among the lesser nobility.

Anastasia might have married into one of the mediatized German houses - families of princely rank but without sovereign status. She might have married a Russian nobleman of high standing, perhaps from one of the great aristocratic families that had served the empire for centuries. Anastasia might even have married into the nobility of France or Italy, where aristocratic titles still carried social prestige even without political power.

In short, Anastasia would have been free to marry into families that would previously have been considered beneath her station. The Tsar's abdication also changed the nature of her marriage from a diplomatic arrangement to an exclusively personal, familial arrangement.

Without the constraints of dynastic politics, Anastasia's marriage would have been shaped more by social compatibility, family preference, and personal inclination.

Anastasia would have had more freedom, paradoxically, than her sisters had before the revolution. The Romanov daughters had grown up in a world where marriage was a matter of statecraft. After abdication, Anastasia's marriage would have been a matter of family choice or, as God intended from the first, for love.

Yet even this more agreeable future was in peril.

In 1917, the Provisional Government which replaced the Tsar placed the Romanovs under house arrest almost immediately. Their movements were restricted, their communications monitored, and their social world collapsed.

Anastasia never had the chance to attend her ball and, in this apparently trivial loss, we realize the cost we all paid the day the Proletariat evolved and seized power in Russia: None of us have led the lives we would have led had Lenin & Company never been allowed to return to Russia.

But, as we all know, Anastasia never attended the court season of 1917. She never traveled abroad. She never met the young man who might have become her husband. The night the Bolshevik's seized power in October, 1917, the glittering, jeweled egg which was Anastasia's future crashed to the ground and shattered into a million pieces.

Anastasia's life, like those of everyone else, descended into a nightmare.

On the final night, she woke to the sound of boots in the hallway. She helped her brother, Alexei dress, whispering to him to stay calm.

Anastasia descended the stairs clutching his arm, her heart pounding, but still trying to appear composed for her mother's sake. In the basement, she stood behind her parents, close enough to feel Alexandra's sleeve brush her hand. She looked at the faces of the men with guns - faces she did not recognize, faces that did not look away.

The room had been small, lit by a single bulb. The Romanov family had stood together: Nicholas in front, Alexandra beside him, the children clustered behind. Dr. Botkin, the family physician, stood near the wall.

When Yurovsky read the sentence, she did not scream. Witnesses later said the daughters were silent, stunned, frozen in disbelief. Yurovsky simply read a brief statement, announcing that their relatives had attempted to save them, and that this could not be allowed. They were to be executed.

Nicholas turned and said, "What? What?"

He had no time to say more. The execution squad opened fire.

Anastasia's last sensations were confusion, terror, and the instinctive urge to shield her brother as the room erupted in gunfire. The room immediately filled with smoke, ricochets, and screams.

The daughters, wearing corsets sewn with jewels, were partially shielded by the gems, which acted like crude armor. Some bullets bounced off, forcing the executioners to finish them off at close range. The scene was chaotic, brutal, and prolonged.

It was not a clean execution. It was a psychotic massacre.

Anastasia's death was not instantaneous. The jewels sewn into her corset stopped several bullets. She fell, dazed, unable to breathe, unable to understand why she was still alive when her parents were not. The executioners approached, and the last thing she saw was a figure looming over her in the smoke-filled room, pointing a pistol at her head.

All this horror because a psychotic faction in the world's intelligentsia convinced themselves they were the next best thing in human evolution.

Contemporary accounts, especially those from Loyalist investigators, accuse the executioners of stabbing their bodies to ensure they were dead, stripping, then sexually violating the girl's corpses, smashing skulls to remove dental gold, burning faces with acid, and mutilating remains to prevent identification.

These accusations vary in reliability, but what is certain is that Yurovsky ordered the bodies doused in acid, burned, and buried in a forest pit. The goal was to erase evidence and prevent martyrdom.

The executioners attempted to destroy the bodies by fire, but the process was incomplete. They then buried the remains in two separate graves to confuse future investigators.

For decades, the burial site was unknown.

In 1979, amateur investigators discovered the main grave near a meadow outside Ekaterinburg. The Soviet government suppressed the discovery until 1989. DNA testing in the 1990s confirmed the identities of Nicholas II, Alexandra, Olga, Tatiana, Maria, and partial remains of Alexei and Anastasia.

In 1998, the Romanov family was reinterred in St. Petersburg with full state honors.

At the time of the ceremony, the gesture was made by the recently liberated Russian Federation, then led by President Boris Yeltsin. Most scholars insist Boris Yeltsin was legitimately independent of Russia's intelligence apparatus, but was quickly co-opted by the "Chekist" holdovers from Soviet intelligence.

I agree.

Any ambiguity about Boris Yeltsin's loyalties and proclivities dissipated with Yeltsin's personal selection of Vladimir Putin as his replacement. Speculation runs wild today over whether Yeltsin picked Putin, or Putin picked Yeltsin, for in the hours that the older Soviet Chekists failed to maintain order, the KGB enlisted Yeltsin as a proxy to stabilize the nation against total political collapse, and civil war.

The answer to the question of Yeltsin's independence will be attempted in a chapter to follow. Here, in 1918, we just note that Anastasia had to die merely because she lived. Extermination was and remains the modus operandi of socialists toward those they deem irredeemable.

I believe it would have been better for the world if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

The Root of All Evil

Post-war intellectual revisionism has so thoroughly contorted the meaning of "socialism" that the term no longer bears any resemblance to what Marx actually proposed. Marx did not define socialism as a political system, a set of policies, or a moral aspiration.

And allow me to be abundantly clear on my use of the word "define". Marx's treatise on Social Evolution is offered as a scientific theory on how society will evolve over time. In so doing, Marx defined all the terms pseudointellectuals now misuse in his name, and sometimes in their own name.

Marx described socialism as one *phase* in a scientific hypothesis of social evolution. In that hypothesis, societies advance through stages - primitive communality, slavery, feudalism, capitalism - each containing contradictions that induce the next. Capitalism's contradictions induce revolution; revolution induces the dictatorship of the proletariat; the dictatorship induces socialism; socialism induces communism.

Socialism, in Marx's own words, is a transitory period defined by the re-education and transformation of society under a dictatorship of the Proletariat. The Proletariat are the human beings which have evolved in their consciousness and become a super species of homo sapiens-sapiens.

Following the Proletariat's revolutionary seizure of power, socialism begins. Socialism is temporary by design, a bridge between the coercive dictatorship of the proletariat and the final, classless stage of communism in which the state dissolves because all individuals have been remade into proletarians.

Nothing in Marx's writing suggests that socialism is a stable political order or a permanent arrangement. It is a phase of social evolution, not a destination. On this precise point, at this evolutionary junction, we discover distinctions between Fascists and Communist come into crip focus.

Communists are Marxists who believe Socialism must be temporary, and a stateless state, called Communism, is the end goal. Fascists are Marxists who believe communism will never be attainable because socialism will never accomplish its goal, the re-education of the masses. Fascists are Proletarians who abandon all hope for the future and impose their dictatorship into perpetuity.

All which I just shared implies the three modes typical of every political system; left, center and right. But, since Marxism is not a political system, there are as many variants on Marx as there are Marxists. Anarchists, though few know it, are in fact the most radical left in the Marxist ideological spectrum.

Western, liberal intellectuals will see no problem with that kinds of diversity, but Marx would have railed against it. After the Second World War, intellectuals—especially in the West—found themselves unwilling to confront the implications of Marx's actual theory. The regimes that claimed Marx's mantle had produced gulags, purges, famines, and totalitarian surveillance.

All because of a fatal flaw; The Paradox of the Proletariat.

Rather than acknowledge that these outcomes flowed from the coercive logic of Marx's transitional phase, Socialism, post-war thinkers simply redefined socialism into something gentler, vaguer, and morally palatable. They detached the term from Marx's hypothesis and repackaged it as welfare capitalism, egalitarian sentiment, or a benign preference for social justice. In rebranding "socialism", western intellectuals preserved the word while discarding the theory.

Once again, there is nothing necessarily wrong with that, either, unless you are a true Marxist. If you think along these lines, think again. True Marxists are obligated, by their science mind you, to identify you and weed you out.

The sum of all post-war coddling is a cultural vocabulary in which "socialism" refers to almost anything except what Marx meant. The scientific hypothesis of social evolution has been replaced by a sentimental political brand.

This revisionism has created a profound confusion and masked an implicit danger. When modern intellectuals speak of socialism, they are not referring to the transitional phase between the dictatorship of the proletariat and communism. They are referring to a post-war fantasy that bears no resemblance to Marx's definitions.

Marx's hypothesis on social evolution required unanimity of consciousness, the elimination of all non-proletarian classes, and the transformation of society through coercive re-education.

Marx also insisted this process had to be historical, not induced. Only when capitalism had come to its decrepit culmination, and nearly all capital was concentrated in the hands of a few monopolies, would the Proletariat evolve.

Lenin “improved” on Marx’s proscriptions in one and only one respect. Lenin insisted that the evolution of the Proletariat could be induced, and individuals who failed to be re-educated should be liquidated. This version is called Marxist-Leninism. Marxist-Leninism is the hard, sadistic core of the International Socialist faction.

Modern reinterpretations of “socialism” requires none of these phases, just the re-education. Post war “socialism”, in all its varied forms, is tantamount to a rejection of Marx’s hypothesis, couched with fidelity to his vocabulary. Just don’t expect modern socialists to refute Marx.

Talking to post-war intellectuals about “socialism” is like trying to talk to a Star Trek fan about physics. You are going to have an interesting conversation, a conversation that means a lot to the fan, but which has little resemblance to the science.

In strict epistemological terms, Star Trek fans are discussing science fiction. Similarly, and for largely the same reasons, modern Socialists are discussing science fiction. They are discussing what they wish to be theory, using the vocabulary of those who invented the thing in the first place.

If truth be told, and I believe it must, Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, indeed all the leading proponents of Marx in the last two centuries, have been advancing science fiction. I am just apprehensive about re-framing Marx in such terms, for even science fiction has a legitimate place in modern cultural life.

There is in fact no genre of literature which properly encapsulates Marx’s hypothesis on social evolution. If we are stuck with regarding Marx as science fiction, it defines the horror spectrum of the genre.

Socialism, when understood strictly, through Marx’s own definitions rather than through the softened, post-war reinterpretations, contains a structural flaw so deep that every attempt to realize it, has eventually collapsed into coercion, factionalism, and violent purges.

This flaw is not incidental, nor is it the result of Lenin’s temperament, Stalin’s paranoia, or the peculiar conditions of Russia in 1917. It is intrinsic to Marx’s hypothesis itself.

I have named this fatal flaw the Paradox of the Proletariat.

The Paradox of the Proletariat is the root of all evil since the Enlightenment.

The Paradox In Phases

Marx did not present socialism as a political system. He presented it as a *phase* in a scientific theory of social evolution. In this theory, societies evolve through phases - primitive communality, slavery, feudalism, capitalism - each containing contradictions that induce the next.

Capitalism's contradictions induce revolution; revolution induces the dictatorship of the proletariat; the dictatorship induces socialism; socialism induces communism. Communism, the final stage, is a classless society in which the state dissolves because all individuals have been transformed into proletarians - selfless, cooperative, and motivated only by the needs of their fellow man.

Full stop.

I am not asking you to agree these phases are real, or this is how history works. Marx is. If you subscribe to Marx's theory of social evolution, you are a Marxist. You are generally free to do what you want. But you are not free to change Marx any more than I am free to change Einstein.

I can rush out right now and claim $E=MC^2$ is my scientific breakthrough, but I'd be a liar and a plagiarist. I cannot even claim $M=E/C^2$ because that is the same formula exploiting the commutative property of arithmetic.

Socialism belongs to Marx. Socialism is Marx's intellectual property, just like Hawkings radiation belongs to Hawkings. All aspects of Marx's hypothesis belong to Marx. Nobody may parse Marx out as they wish, then alter undesirable parts, and attribute the result to Marx. Nor can they claim the result as a work of their own.

Marx stands as stated, because that is how science works. State your hypothesis. Prove your hypothesis. After you confirm your hypothesis through Peer Review, you may collect your prize. That is how Scientific Method works. In fact, it is the only way Scientific Method Works.

Scientific Method permits anyone to advance a hypothesis of their own coinage, but this is not what many modern "socialists" are doing. And modern socialists are dangerous, not because their dumbed down versions of "socialism" are more acceptable, but because true Marxists regard modern socialist movements as theirs.

True Marxists engage in modern socialist movements with the intent of correcting its course, once the movement gets into power.

Modern “socialists” who believe they are aloof of Marx’s sins need to learn Socialism is not a philosophy of governance. It is a teleological hypothesis about human development. And because it is a scientific hypothesis, not a political suggestion, Marx’s definitions are not optional.

The features and forms advanced by Marx are the axioms of Marx’s theory.

Modern intellectuals who speak of “socialism” as Scandinavian welfare capitalism, or as a benign egalitarian ethos, are not interpreting Marx; they are rejecting him while retaining his vocabulary. They have severed the spine of the theory in order to preserve the vocabulary.

What I implore everyone else to realize is that, if “squishy socialists”, as I call them, are merely clinging to a vocabulary, they are intellectually retarded. The danger is found in those among them who are just posturing as “squishy socialists”, waiting until the squishies are in power.

When Marx’s definitions are taken seriously, socialism is understood not as a destination, not as the goal, but as just a transitional phase. The purpose of “socialism” as a phase is the *re-education* of society. In the socialist phase of human evolution, the Dictatorship of the Proletariat suppresses all non-proletarian classes, eliminates their consciousness, and transforms the entire population into the proletariat.

Press your “squishy” neighbors and demand they answer for wanting to re-educate society. They will balk, and claim you are nuts. They will assure you they have no plans to re-educate society. But, folks, read Das Kapital for yourself, or anything written by socialists before 1945.

Nearly all “socialist” literature, before 1945, confirms “socialism” is the re-education of society.

Unanimity of Thought

Re-educating society, of course, requires unanimity of curriculum, and that requires consensus among the brilliant minds who brought us to this already overlong essay.

Because the Proletariat is not defined by Marx by income or occupation, but by *correct consciousness,* by *collective consciousness,* the very leadership which stage the revolution, fall headlong down a rabbit-hole as Socialism approaches.

That descent into madness is the Paradox of the Proletariat in action.

Under Marx, you see, the Proletariat is the universal class, precisely because its consciousness is universal. It is the only class capable of perceiving reality without distortion. Under Marx, all other classes are either obsolete, antagonistic or suffering from class delusions.

Sanity gets redefined as madness. Madness gets redefined as sanity. Marxism is just that simple.

Herein lies the paradox. If the proletariat is defined by correct consciousness, and socialism is the phase in which all individuals must be transformed into proletarians, then disagreement is not merely political - it is ontological. Among Marxist-Leninists, disagreement is not only political and ontological; it is existential!

Work the ill-logic in the first person. If I believe I embody proletarian consciousness and you disagree with me on any significant matter of planning, policy, or interpretation, Marx's theory reduces you to a counterrevolutionary. You are not simply wrong; you are a representative of an antagonistic class. And if you believe you embody proletarian consciousness, you must view me the same way.

The Proletariat, in practice, cannot survive its own internal dialogue, because differences of opinion become differences of class identity.

If you learn nothing from this essay, learn this:

The Paradox of the Proletariat results from a class defined by unanimity of consciousness, operating in a world where human beings rarely agree on anything for very long. The theoretical requirement for uniformity of thought is incompatible with the practical realities of political dialogue.

Marx assumed that the proletariat would act collectively, that its consciousness would be unified, and that its interests would be transparent. But human beings do not behave this way. They disagree, they argue, they interpret events differently, and they form factions of opinion.

In Marx's model, factionalism is not a normal feature of political life; it is evidence of counterrevolutionary consciousness. Thus, the proletariat must suppress dissent not because it is authoritarian, but because dissent is structurally incompatible with the definition of the Proletariat.

This is why every Marxist derivative - Leninism, Stalinism, Maoism, Castroism, and all the others - have produced nothing but violent, ideological purges.

The purges are not distortions of Marx; they are the operationalization of his transitional phase. According to Marx, the Dictatorship of the Proletariat must eliminate all non-proletarian consciousness, and because consciousness is invisible, the only way to identify it, is in political disagreement.

Every disagreement becomes a threat to the revolution. Every rival becomes a class enemy. Every faction becomes a counterrevolutionary conspiracy. The revolutionary elite devours itself because it cannot tolerate internal plurality.

The Proletariat, as Marx defined it, simply cannot exist in a world where human beings disagree.

Post-war intellectuals who attempt to rehabilitate "socialism", by dissociating it from the historical regimes that define it, speak of socialism as a humane alternative to capitalism, as a set of policies or values, as a moral aspiration.

But this is not Marx's socialism. It is a denial of Marx's hypothesis, a refusal to confront the implications of a theory that requires unanimity of consciousness and the elimination of all dissent.

The attempt to preserve the word while discarding the theory has produced confusion, sentimentality, and a profound misunderstanding of what socialism actually is.

If you are confused, you should be. Cherish that confusion. That confusion is what you feel before the epiphany: None of what occurred in the 20th century had to happen at all. Anastasia should have attended her ball.

If we are both together in the moment, we can proceed. I am not going to pretend this is a great place to be, but, at least we can finally agree, Marx's theory must be discarded.

The danger in that ambition is that true Marxists persist among us. True Marxists are biding their time, waiting for society, any society, to elect "squishy socialism" to office. At that point, Marx's definitions will be restored, and history will repeat itself.

It is not enough to refute Marx. Marxism, and all its derivatives, must be exposed, criminalized by legal statute, then prosecuted any time "socialism" is attempted. That will require the squishies to relinquish their favorite word: "socialism".

The murderous purges of the past were not accidents. They were not deviations. They were not distortions. They were the predictable consequence of a theory that defines disagreement as counterrevolution, and common consciousness as class identity.

The Paradox of the Proletariat ensures that any attempt to implement socialism, as Marx defined it, will collapse into coercion, factionalism, and the destruction of the revolutionary class itself. The flaw is not in Lenin or Stalin or Mao. It is in the core theory they each tried to fulfill.

Follow me back as I retell Russian history, from Lenin's birth to Putin's slow destruction. Watch as the Paradox of the Proletariat subverts the scientific intentions of the Proletariat…and Russian Nationalists struggle to remain at the controls.

When I am done, I am certain you will agree, it would have been better for the world, if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

Mother Russia

In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, Russia was a country suspended between two worlds. The old order of serfdom had only just begun to crack, and the new order of educated service professionals — the *intelligentsia* — was emerging in provincial cities, classrooms, and administrative offices.

It was in this transitional Russia that two young people, Ilya Ulyanov and Maria Blank, came of age. Long before they became the parents of Aleksandr and Vladimir, they were themselves products of institutions, expectations, and cultural currents that would leave deep impressions on their children.

Ilya's childhood in Astrakhan belonged to the lower rungs of the imperial social ladder. His father had been a serf, his mother of mixed Russian and Kalmyk ancestry, and the family's fortunes were modest. Yet Astrakhan was a cosmopolitan port city, full of merchants, sailors, and languages, and even a poor boy could glimpse the possibility of rising through education.

Education, not re-education.

When Ilya entered Kazan University in the early 1850s, he stepped into one of the empire's most important intellectual crucibles. Kazan was not St. Petersburg or Moscow, but its faculty were serious men of science, and its curriculum reflected the empire's ambition to modernize.

Students in physics and mathematics were drilled in Euclidean geometry, Newtonian mechanics, algebraic theory, and the rudiments of analytical chemistry. Lectures were formal, examinations severe, and the university's atmosphere austere. The young men who passed through its halls were expected to become teachers, engineers, or bureaucrats — the disciplined servants of a state struggling to reform itself.

In other words, the Tsar and Tsarina were attempting to induce the Enlightenment within Russia's University system and, thereby, bring Russia into the 20th century.

Daily life at Kazan was demanding.

Students lived in cramped lodgings, often sharing rooms with other young men who spent their evenings bent over textbooks or debating the latest articles smuggled from the capital. The university library, though small, contained translations of Western scientific works, and ambitious students devoured them.

The intellectual climate was sober, rational, and meritocratic. For a boy of humble origins, the message was unmistakable: mastery of knowledge was the only ladder upward.

Ilya absorbed this ethos completely. His professors remembered him as diligent, quiet, and exacting — a young man who believed that order, discipline, and education were the foundations of a meaningful life.

Maria's upbringing could not have been more different in its origins, yet it converged with Ilya's in its destination. Born in St. Petersburg to a physician of German, Swedish and Jewish background, she grew up in a household where books were plentiful, languages were spoken freely, and European culture was part of daily life.

Maria's father, Dr. Alexander Blank, had risen into the ranks of hereditary nobility through medical service, and he raised his daughters with the expectation that they would be educated, literate, and morally serious. Maria learned German and French

as a child, read Russian and European literature, and absorbed the cosmopolitan manners of the capital's professional class.

Maria's mother died when she was very young, and Maria spent part of her childhood with relatives, but the intellectual tone of her upbringing never wavered. In the 1850s and early 1860s, educated women in Russia had few professional paths open to them, but teaching was one of the respectable ones. To become a teacher required examinations in grammar, arithmetic, geography, Russian literature, and pedagogy — a curriculum designed to produce women capable of instructing the empire's growing population of schoolchildren.

Maria passed these examinations with ease. She was not a political radical, nor a romantic dreamer; she was a disciplined, multilingual young woman shaped by the sober expectations of the educated middle class.

When she moved to Penza in the early 1860s to live with relatives and seek work, she entered a provincial world that mirrored Ilya's own. Penza was a typical Russian administrative town: dusty streets, wooden houses, a few stone buildings, and a small but tightly knit community of educated families who formed the local intelligentsia.

Teachers, inspectors, doctors, and minor officials gathered at one another's homes for evenings of conversation, tea, and reading. The school system was the heart of this world, and it was here — in classrooms, staff meetings, or social gatherings hosted by pedagogical families — that Maria and Ilya first encountered one another.

Their meeting was not dramatic. It was the natural result of two people inhabiting the same social stratum, shaped by the same institutional expectations, and committed to the same ideals. Both believed in education as a moral duty. Both valued discipline, literacy, and self-improvement.

Both Ilya and Maria had risen — or were rising — into the service intelligentsia, the class that staffed the empire's schools and bureaucracies. Their conversations would have been about teaching methods, examinations, the challenges of rural schools, and the latest pedagogical theories circulating from Moscow and St. Petersburg. They were young, serious, and ambitious, and their union was less a romantic leap than a sociological inevitability.

By the time they became engaged in 1863, Ilya and Maria had already formed the intellectual partnership that would define their household. They were not revolutionaries, nor dreamers, nor aristocrats. They were disciplined servants of the state, shaped by the sober institutions of mid-nineteenth-century Russia. Their marriage joined the upward-mobile provincial bureaucracy with the cosmopolitan

medical-professional intelligentsia of the capital. It was a union of order and culture, discipline and literacy, ambition and seriousness.

This was the atmosphere into which their children would later be born — an atmosphere of high expectations, intellectual rigor, emotional reserve, and moral absolutism.

The roots of Aleksandr and Vladimir's were not planted in the revolutionary underground. They were planted here, in the classrooms of Kazan and Penza, in the disciplined routines of provincial school life, and in the sober, earnest union of two people who believed that knowledge and duty were the highest virtues a person could possess.

Aleksandr's impulsive fanaticism and Vladimir's calculating ruthlessness would we acquired elsewhere, and not much later.

The Ethnic Landscape

Because the Bolsheviks ultimately evolved into an ultra-elite, Russian clique, which went on to commit crimes against humanity, against a wide array of minority ethnic groups in the region, establishing the relevant ethnic landscape in the context of Vladimir Lenin's childhood is essential.

Each ethnic group below has direct familial ties to the Ulyanov family. Some are assumed, presumed or prospective, owing to the obscuration of ethnic records in the period. One, Russian, is not an ethnic group at all.

Russian (both parents)

The idea of "the Russian people" is so familiar today that it feels ancient, primordial, and self-evident. Yet the category "Russian" is not a timeless ethnic identity. It is the product of a long, uneven process of state formation, cultural blending, and linguistic consolidation across the enormous forest-steppe zone of Eastern Europe.

To understand what "Russian" means, one must begin not with a single tribe or lineage, but with a mosaic of peoples whose interactions gradually produced a shared cultural and political identity.

The earliest foundations of what would become the Russian ethnos lie in the East Slavic communities of the first millennium. These groups—scattered across the river systems of the Dnieper, Volkhov, and Oka—were not a unified people

but a constellation of related tribes. Their settlements formed part of a broader cultural continuum stretching across the European Plain.

Recent genomic research confirms that early Rus' society was shaped by a broad Slavic-related genetic continuity, but also by a significant Fenno-Ugric (Uralic) component in the northern regions.

But the Fenno-Ugric peoples were concentrated along rivers leading to the Baltic or Caspian Seas, not the Black Sea. It is at the interface between the Volga and the Don and Dnieper that we find Russian origins. It was here, in this important portage, that a small community of river traders founded a community called Muscovy.

This means that, from the very beginning, the population that would become "Russian" was mixed, incorporating Slavic agriculturalists, Finnic forest peoples, and steppe groups who moved along the great river corridors.

The early Rus' state—centered first in Novgorod and later in Kiev—was not an ethnic nation but a political confederation of diverse communities. Its ruling elite included Slavs, Scandinavians, and local Finnic groups, all of whom contributed to the emerging cultural synthesis.

Over the following centuries, the consolidation of Muscovy transformed this multiethnic landscape into something more uniform. As the Muscovite state expanded eastward and southward, it absorbed the territories of the Merya, Muroma, Meshchera, Mordvins, Mari, Chuvash, Tatars, and many other peoples.

So it is there, in Muscovy, we must look for the emergence of what came to be regarded as "Russian" today. Just be certain to remember, it is along the Dnieper, not the Volga, that the Rus' state was originally centered. Muscovy simply grew in regional influence owing to its location in the headwaters of the Volga.

Muscovy's fortunes are found in its location. Muscovy commanded the portage between the Volga River, which flowed into the Caspian Sea, and the Dnieper and Don Rivers, which flowed into the Black Sea. Trade between the Caspian Sea and Black Sea went by way of Muscovy.

But all along the lengths of the Volga were found kindred groups, and indeed, some of the early kingdoms of that age.

One by one they fell under the sway of Muscovy since that kingdom controlled the flow of goods from east to west, and that kingdom determined the fortunes of everyone along the Volga.

Some of these earlier kindred groups and kingdoms retained distinct identities; many did not. Through a combination of Orthodox Christianization, administrative integration, and linguistic assimilation, ethnic groups along the Volga were gradually folded into the category of “Russian.”, a word which literally means Rus-like.

They weren’t Rus’. But they were close enough to be considered Rus’.

This process was not merely demographic—it was ideological.

Muscovy’s location found its reciprocal in the headwaters of the neighboring Don and Dnieper Rivers, the highlands between the three rivers forming a natural logistical nexus. The upper river valleys of all three rivers converged, and a logistical capital formed for natural reasons. But only Muscovy, among the three, established a major population center there.

For all intents and purposes, Muscovy was originally just a dominant urban center, within the state of Rus’, which was then centered on the Don and Dnieper.

Over the centuries Muscovy cultivated the idea of a unified Orthodox people, bound to the Tsar and defined by the Russian language. Over time, “Russian” became less a marker of ancestry and more a marker of religion, language, and political loyalty.

Russian was asserted, if only for practical reasons, as the common tongue and, before long, Russian became the currency of the political and intellectual classes.

Long pause. Don’t dismiss the importance of linguistics. Sure, I am a linguist, and that is how I ply my trade, but it really matters in this part of the world, especially after the Proletariat evolved on the European continent.

Russia’s linguistic history was vehemently denied by Soviet Linguists primarily because Marxist linguistics theory insisted Russian was, in fact, a linguistic strata imposed by the capitalist classes of a wider region.

That conclusion would not do at all, for, to the degree Vladimir Ilych Ulyanov was attempting to obscure his own ethnic origins, he was, in that same degree, investing all he was in his Russian identity. Under strict Soviet analysis, Russian as a language, was a precipitate of the very Imperial System the Proletariat were attempting to overthrow.

As we are all about to see, Vladimir Ilych Ulyanov had nowhere to hide if not in Russia. A Mordvin or Chuvash peasant who adopted Orthodoxy, spoke Russian,

and lived under Muscovite law could be considered “Russian” within a generation or two. But only to imperialists.

To the Proletariat, the Mordvin and Chuvash peasant was subordinated serf stock, plausibly reformable, but probably not.

Understand this, if nothing else. The Bolshevik leadership viewed Russia as a confusion of pre-revolutionary classes, all speaking a Mother Tongue imposed by Imperialists over centuries. When socialist theories stated these conclusions, they were talking about Vladimir Lenin, or at least to him. Lenin’s paranoia began in the crucible of linguistics and ethnic identity.

In socialist theory, the regional boundaries of Mother Russia identify the sub-classes of pre-revolution Russia, and therefore, the socio-cultural terrain on which the Red Terror would be inflicted on the Russian people. Let’s look closer at the boundaries most directly affecting Lenin.

The boundaries of identity in the formative years of the Rus’ state were porous, and the state encouraged this porosity. By the 18th and 19th centuries, the Russian Empire had become a vast political organism whose core population was itself a composite of earlier peoples.

Russia, the Russia which asserted itself from the headwaters of the Don, Dnieper and Volga Rivers, was a melting pot. The “Russian” peasantry of the Volga region, for example, often descended from Finnic or Turkic ancestors who had been assimilated centuries earlier.

The genomic record reflects this complexity: modern Russian populations show mixtures of steppe ancestry, forest-zone Uralic ancestry, and Slavic agricultural ancestry, layered over thousands of years of migration and interaction.

Thus, when we speak of “Russian” as an ethnic group, we are invoking a category that is real as a cultural identity but not primordial as a biological lineage.

Russian is an identity produced by empire, religion, and language – a composite born of mutually beneficial subscription, not organic, familial descent. Unlike all other ethnic groups of the region, Russians do not descend from a single ancestral tribe.

The Russian ethnos is best understood as a historical synthesis, not a discrete ancient people.

This raises the question: *can we speak of “Russian” as an ethnic group at all?*

The answer depends on what one means by “ethnic.” If ethnicity is defined biologically, then “Russian” is not a coherent category; it is a composite of Slavic, Uralic, Turkic, Baltic, and steppe ancestries.

If ethnicity is defined culturally - by shared language, religion, and historical memory - then “Russian” is indeed an ethnic group, but one whose origins lie in political integration rather than biological isolation.

In this sense, “Russian” resembles other imperial identities such as “French,” “British,” or “Chinese,” all of which emerged from the fusion of multiple earlier peoples under a centralizing state.

But, what you and I conclude about Russian identity, is not operative in the year Vladimir Ilych Ulyanov, evolved into Vladimir Ilych Lenin. The only thing that mattered in 1897 is what Vladimir Lenin thought about Russian identity.

Bolshevik dogma defined ethnic identity in strictly revolutionary terms. Bolshevik doctrine treated national and ethnic identity as historically contingent, and, ultimately, subordinate to the deeper forces of class development.

Marx had argued that capitalism dissolves traditional bonds—tribal, feudal, religious—and replaces them with the stark relationship between labor and capital. Lenin inherited this view and sharpened it for the conditions of the Russian Empire, a state composed of dozens of peoples, languages, and cultural traditions.

To the Bolsheviks, these identities were real enough as lived experience, but they were not fundamental. They were symptoms of earlier historical stages, destined to fade as the Proletariat matured. In the Bolshevik imagination, the Proletariat was not merely a class; it was a historical organism moving toward consciousness.

National identity belonged to the realm of the “bourgeois superstructure,” a set of ideas that divided workers and obscured their shared economic condition. Ethnic identity was even more suspect, a relic of pre-capitalist life that capitalism had already begun to erode.

The factory floor, with its mix of languages and backgrounds, was the crucible in which these older identities were supposed to dissolve. The worker, stripped of land, tribe, and local custom, became a universal figure. In this sense, the Proletariat was imagined as the first truly post-ethnic class in human history.

Russians were no longer to think of themselves as families, but as friends. Comrades. At least that was the goal. Getting there, during the transitory phase called “socialism”, is where all the rough edges would be ground down.

Lenin, burdened by the stigma associated with his “mongoloid” features, hated ethnicity and the conflict which occurred at that cultural interface. And he hated “Russian” ethnicity most.

In his Theses during the Bolshevik period, Lenin wrote bluntly:

> “The Great Russians are the most oppressed and the most backward of all nations, but they are also the most capable of oppressing others.”

This was not self-loathing; it was political clarity. Lenin believed that the Russian proletariat could not lead the revolution until it rejected the chauvinism of the Russian state. Only by renouncing national privilege could Russian workers join with other nationalities in a genuinely international movement.

Yet Bolshevik doctrine was not naïve about the persistence of national feeling. Lenin recognized that oppressed nationalities—Poles, Finns, Ukrainians, Georgians, and many others—experienced their subjugation through the lens of national identity.

For this reason, Lenin insisted on the right of nations to self-determination, not because he believed national identity was permanent, but because he believed it was necessary to remove national oppression before class consciousness could fully develop.

At least, this is how Lenin rationalized imparting “nation” status to many of Imperial Russia’s outlying ethnic regions. The Bolsheviks, Lenin asserted, would restore what the Tsar had stolen. National liberation, in the Bolshevik view, was a transitional stage on the way to Proletarian unity.

This promise kept Russia’s distant ‘ethnic regions” out of the Russian Civil War.

So, we may debate the distinctions between ethnicity and nationality until the cows come home, but Lenin was attempting to end every distinction which had

suppressed him. Lenin felt ethnically suppressed and, therefore, justified in his hatred for the Russian state and the nationality it produced.

As for his own, ethnic roots, Lenin found relief in his own intellectual awakening. Lenin was, in his own eyes, a new species, a species to which neither Russian, Mordvinian, Chuvash or Kalmyk would any longer apply. Lenin was free of it all.

And Lenin was going to re-educate society so they thought just as he did. Lenin was convinced we could all be friends. For this reason, within the Bolshevik Proletariat, national and ethnic identity were treated as ephemeral.

The worker's true identity was economic, not cultural. Ethnic distinctions were expected to lose their meaning as industrialization advanced. The Bolsheviks believed that capitalism had already begun this process, pulling peasants and tribes into cities, mixing populations, and creating a shared experience of exploitation.

The revolution would complete the work by reorganizing society around production rather than heritage. In the ideal communist future, national identity would wither away, replaced by a universal Proletarian culture.

But the lived reality of the Soviet state complicated this vision. The Bolsheviks inherited an empire whose administrative machinery, language, and cultural norms were overwhelmingly Russian. Even as doctrine proclaimed the irrelevance of ethnicity, the institutions of the new state reproduced the habits of the old one.

Russian language became the lingua franca of administration; Russian cadres dominated the party and security organs; and Russian cultural forms became the implicit standard of Soviet life. The Proletariat was officially international but, in practice, it bore the imprint of the empire it had recently possessed.

Thus, national and ethnic identity played a paradoxical role in Bolshevik thought. Officially, these identities were temporary illusions, destined to vanish as the proletariat advanced toward socialism. Unofficially, these identities became the target demographics during the re-education phase Marx and Lenin called "socialism".

Vladimir Lenin himself remained trapped in the crucible of ethnic distinctions, his "mongoloid" features plain for the whole world to see. Ethnic Russia was Lenin's only resort, and that, as just discussed, was biological fiction.

Do not discount the importance of biological fiction, for though Lenin invested no theoretical weight in biology as a criteria for ideological evolution, his arch nemesis invested all importance in biological fiction.

No understanding of Vladimir Ilych Lenin can be acquired independent of all Lenin proposed and all Lenin opposed. Chief among Lenin's opponents were the National Socialists, though he would not live to witness their meteoric rise to power. The importance the National Socialists placed in biological superiority, however, was operative from the movement's earliest days in Vienna.

To the National Socialists, Vladimir Illych Lenin was just a slanty-eyed Slav, biologically flawed and, therefore, a weed to be removed from the National Socialist garden.

By the mid-19th century, ethnic "Russians", spanned every social class. The segment relevant to the Ulyanov family, was the provincial service intelligentsia — teachers, minor officials, clerks, and professionals who staffed the expanding educational and bureaucratic apparatus of the empire.

These classes were the stuff of which Vladimir's revolution would be made, so to the Russian ethnicity Lenin subscribed. No harm, no foul, as far as I am concerned. Lenin had one grandparent on both his paternal side and maternal side who were then not considered "Russian" ethnically.

To Lenin's family tree we turn.

Mordvinian (Ilya's father)

Vladimir's father, Ilya, was possibly Mordvinian on his own father's side. I say possibly because root surnames in Ilya's family tree could be either Mordvinian, Chuvash or Kalmyk. What will come to matter is not the specific ethnic stock from which Vladimir's father originates, but the "mongoloid" features Vladimir inherited.

"Mongoloid" features, primarily Asiatic eyes, were a fixation of socialists destined to become National Socialists; Mussolini and Hitler. Reducing the

intelligentsia to these two villains is a great mistake, for this fixation on “Asiatic” phenotypes was replete among Europe’s intelligentsia.

Mongoloid features, which Lenin could not deny, were a prima facia case for a sub-species. In the cutthroat dogma of revolutionary socialists, this criteria was regarded as an existential filter. Those who came down hard in favor of biological evolution regarded the criteria as an existential switch, a fork in the evolutionary road humanity must follow. Mongoloid features, were not evolved and, therefore, not revolutionary stock.

You can probably predict where this is going.

A schism formed among socialist theorists of Lenin’s day. Those who abandoned biological evolution as a revolutionary criteria, refused to accept Asians and “Asiatics” were sub-human.

Guess where Vladimir Ilych Lenin came down on the matter?

It was evolutionary theory, in both the first and the final analysis of socialism, that caused the Great Schism separating International Socialists from National Socialists.

As for the Mordvins?

The Mordvins – composed of the Erzya and Moksha people - were Finno-Ugric peoples living in the Volga region. Like the Chuvash, they were primarily rural and occupied lower socioeconomic positions. Their cultural identity emphasized communal solidarity, folk traditions, and a pragmatic approach to survival under Russian rule.

The Mordvinian geographical center is the middle Volga basin, anchored around the modern Republic of Mordovia, with its capital at Saransk. This region is a gently rolling plain cut by two major river valleys — the Moksha to the west and the Sura to the east — both tributaries feeding the larger Volga system.

The land itself shapes the ethnos. The climate is sharply continental: winters that can plunge to –40°F, summers warm and humid, and rainfall that arrives mostly in the growing season.

The original landscape was a mix of oak-lime-maple forests and wooded steppe, much of which was cleared for agriculture over centuries. The soils — leached chernozem and gray forest earth — are fertile enough to support grain cultivation, hemp, tobacco, vegetables, and extensive meadow pasture. This geography produced a people who were agrarian, communal, and deeply tied to land and seasonal rhythms.

The Mordvins — divided into the Erzya and Moksha groups — are a Finno-Ugric people whose identity long predates Russian rule. Their villages historically centered on grain farming, draft horse breeding, and beekeeping, the latter becoming a cultural hallmark.

Their ethos reflects this environment; Communal solidarity, shaped by rural life and shared labor; Pragmatism, born from managing unpredictable climate and soil; Cultural persistence, expressed in embroidered dress, polyphonic singing, and rich folklore and, notably, Syncretic spirituality, which combined Orthodox Christianity with older animist traditions tied to forests, rivers, and nature spirits.

Russian penetration into the region began as early as the 12th century, but full incorporation came only after the fall of the Kazan Khanate in the 16th century.

It is imperative to recognize that the Mordvin persisted through the centuries of the Khanate but were not themselves Eurasian in origins. Mordvin identity remained distinct, with language and custom surviving despite the Khanate legacy and later Russification.

In the 19th century, when anthropology was still a young discipline and racial typologies dominated European scholarship, Finno-Ugric peoples occupied an ambiguous and often misunderstood place in the imperial imagination. They lived across the northern forests and river basins of the Russian Empire — Mordvins, Komis, Udmurts, Mari, and others — and their languages formed a branch of the Uralic family distinct from Slavic, Turkic, or Mongolic tongues.

Yet to the ethnographers, administrators, and racial theorists of the era, these distinctions were often blurred, misinterpreted, or deliberately reframed through the lens of empire. Russian imperial ethnography, shaped by colonial attitudes, tended to portray non-Russian peoples as culturally backward, passive, or peripheral.

Full stop.

An observation must be made.

Though it is today asserted that the Russian ethnic center spanned the Eastern European Plain to the Ural Mountains, that is a very recent assertion, one which Imperial ethnography does not support. The ethnic groups of the Volga River basin, as recently as the Bolshevik Coup, were clearly regarded as “other” than Russian.

Returning to the facts, Finno-Ugric groups were frequently described as “silent,” “obedient,” or “submissive,” tropes that persisted well into the Soviet period.

These labels were not neutral observations but expressions of a hierarchical worldview in which the metropolitan center defined itself against the perceived simplicity of the periphery. This chauvinism of Russia’s major cities persists to this very day. Make a mental note of it.

The Finno-Ugric peoples, inhabiting the forests and river valleys far from the imperial capitals, became convenient symbols of rustic innocence or stagnation — depending on the needs of the narrative.

At the same time, early anthropologists attempted to classify human populations through skull measurements, facial angles, and other pseudo-scientific methods. These techniques, crude and often biased, produced sweeping claims about racial origins.

In this context, some scholars speculated that Finno-Ugric peoples possessed “Mongoloid” traits, a conclusion drawn from superficial cranial comparisons rather than linguistic or genetic evidence.

The idea was not that they were literal descendants of Genghis Khan’s armies, but that they belonged to a vaguely defined “eastern” racial type. This conflation was encouraged by the fact that many Finno-Ugric groups lived near or alongside Turkic and Siberian peoples, whose physiognomies varied widely.

To 19th-century racial theorists, proximity often masqueraded as ancestry.

These early studies were “almost anecdotal,” as later genetic researchers observed, and their conclusions were speculative at best. Yet they proved influential. Once a racial category was assigned, it tended to persist in textbooks, administrative reports, and popular imagination.

The damage done by evolutionary pseudoscience in the last two centuries was destined to prove central to the ideology of Socialism just then emerging in turn of the century Vienna.

Lenin was typified as a Slav, as “Mongoloid”.

The Finno-Ugric peoples, despite their deep European genetic roots and distinct linguistic heritage, were repeatedly framed as semi-Asiatic or quasi-Mongolic — a misclassification that reflected the biases of the classifiers more than the realities of the classified.

The Mongol Empire's historical presence in the Volga region added another layer of confusion. Because the Mongols had ruled parts of the region centuries earlier, some writers assumed that any "eastern" physical traits among local populations must be remnants of Mongol ancestry.

This was a convenient narrative for imperial ethnographers who sought simple explanations for complex demographic histories. In every sense, the Tsar's scholars were guilty of the same sin as all scholars of the Enlightenment.

Facts were bound in books. Folklore was just a quaint form of ignorance tolerated by all, except true scholars. True scholars, however, were suffering from a poverty of authoritative texts, and those which did exist were rife with speculation and educated guesswork, the former being far less educated and far more presumptive.

The books insisted the Mongols as the dominant cultural actors of the previous centuries, so the folklore of the region's indigenous ethnic groups had to be wrong. The prevalence of "mongoloid" features cinched the case, as far as European scholars were concerned.

But modern population genetics shows that Finno-Ugric peoples share a late-Pleistocene gene pool with other Europeans, and that their distinctiveness arises from ancient Uralic migrations rather than medieval Mongol influence.

By the early 20th century, as anthropology matured and linguistic science advanced, scholars began to recognize the flaws in earlier racial typologies. Yet the old tropes lingered.

Soviet ethnography, inheriting many of the imperial frameworks, continued to portray Finno-Ugric groups as peripheral and culturally static. Even when the racial language softened, the underlying hierarchy remained: Russians at the center, Finno-Ugric peoples at the margins.

Thus, the conflation of Finno-Ugric peoples with Mongols was not a product of genuine historical descent but of colonial imagination, racial pseudoscience, and the tendency of empires to simplify the diversity of their subjects. It was a misreading that reveals more about the intellectual climate of the 19th and early 20th centuries than about the peoples themselves.

In short: the Mordvinian center is a Volga-forest agrarian world, marked by endurance, communalism, and cultural tenacity — a world far removed from the urban, multiethnic intelligentsia that produced Lenin's parents. This contrast will matter later when we trace how the Bolsheviks, despite their diverse origins, hardened into an ultra-Russian political caste.

It would be interesting to ask the Mordvinian people today if it might have been better if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

Chuvash (Ilya's father)

Or perhaps Ilya's father was Chuvash? Surnames blurred along the Volga. The Chuvash were a Turkic-speaking, traditionally agrarian people living primarily in the Volga region.

In the 19th century, the Chuvash occupied a lower socioeconomic tier, often working as peasants or artisans. Their cultural life was shaped by village communalism, oral tradition, and a mixture of Orthodoxy and indigenous practices.

Chuvash individuals who entered Russian institutions — schools, military service, or urban trades — often experienced rapid cultural assimilation.

In the middle Volga basin, between the great river's bends, and the forested uplands, lies the homeland of the Chuvash, a Turkic-speaking people, whose origins stretch back centuries, before the Russian Empire absorbed their territory.

Chuvash villages cluster along rivers and trade routes, forming compact settlements of wooden houses, barns, threshing floors, and orchards. The land was fertile, the climate harsh but manageable, and the Chuvash developed a mixed agrarian economy: grain cultivation, beekeeping, livestock, and small-scale trade.

Chuvash cultural life was rich — seasonal commemorations, elaborate weddings, communal feasts, and a syncretic, religious tradition, blending Orthodoxy with older rituals tied to their ancestors and the land.

To outsiders, especially Russian travelers and ethnographers of the 18th and 19th centuries, this world appeared both familiar and foreign. The Chuvash were neither nomads nor urban dwellers; they lived in tidy villages with a reputation for cleanliness, order, and self-sufficiency. Their houses were smoky, their yards meticulously kept, their fields close at hand.

Observers noted that Chuvash peasants often lived better than many Russian peasants — with closer farmland, healthier air, and fewer beggars. Yet these same observers also imposed a set of imperial misperceptions that would follow the Chuvash into the 20th century.

Russian ethnographers frequently described the Chuvash as withdrawn, averse to strangers, and reluctant to mix with other peoples. Their bazaars, held in open fields, were seen as rustic and unsophisticated. Their reluctance to allow outsiders into their villages was interpreted not as cultural autonomy but as backwardness or suspicion.

These judgments reflected the imperial habit of viewing non-Russian peoples through a lens of hierarchy: Russians as the normative center, others as provincial curiosities. Even positive observations — such as the Chuvash tradition of generously providing dowries for daughters, or their elaborate seasonal commemorations — were often framed as quaint or primitive.

Russian peasants attending Chuvash grave festivals sometimes took the clothing left for the dead, a detail recorded by travelers with a mixture of amusement and condescension.

By the late 19th century, academic interest in the Chuvash grew, especially among Finnish scholars like August Ahlqvist, who traveled through the Middle Volga collecting linguistic and ethnographic data. Ahlqvist recognized the Chuvash as a distinctive and unique people, culturally and linguistically different from both their Turkic and Finno-Ugric neighbors. His work emphasized their individuality rather than their supposed backwardness.

But even this scholarly attention carried a burden: the Chuvash were treated as objects of study, representatives of a “primitive” or “ancient” culture whose value lay in its difference from the imperial norm. Their language, customs, and identity were catalogued, dissected, and sometimes romanticized — but rarely understood on their own terms.

In the 19th century, as the Russian Empire consolidated control over the Volga region, the Chuvash were pushed toward sedentarization, administrative restructuring, and cultural assimilation.

Chuvash uprisings, against imperial authority, were suppressed, and their autonomy eroded. The empire’s policies reinforced the perception that the Chuvash were a people to be managed, corrected, or improved.

These misperceptions persisted into the early Soviet period, where ethnographic categories inherited from the empire continued to shape official attitudes. Marx’s insistence that all these “ethnic groups” were destined to fade away, only amplified the Russian chauvinism which pre-existed the revolution.

The Chuvash were often portrayed as simple, rural, and apolitical — a convenient stereotype for a regime that sought to fold diverse peoples into a centralized ideological project.

When European and Russian anthropologists of the 19th century encountered the Chuvash, they attempted to classify them using the racial typologies then dominant in scientific discourse. These typologies relied on cranial measurements, facial indices, skin tone descriptions, and speculative evolutionary narratives, all of which were considered authoritative at the time but are now recognized as pseudoscientific.

The Chuvash, a Turkic-speaking people of the Middle Volga, did not fit neatly into the categories preferred by imperial ethnographers. Their language was Turkic, but their cultural practices and physical appearance differed from neighboring Tatars and Bashkirs. This ambiguity made them a target for racial speculation, especially among scholars who sought to map ethnic groups onto imagined evolutionary hierarchies.

Early anthropologists frequently described the Chuvash as possessing "Mongoloid" traits — a term used broadly and imprecisely to denote populations with supposed eastern or Asiatic ancestry. This classification was based on superficial observations rather than rigorous evidence.

Published research from the period shows that 19th-century researchers grouped Chuvash together with Turkic and Mongolian peoples, not because of proven descent, but because they were studying these groups in parallel and assumed connections based on proximity and linguistic similarity.

This conflation was part of a broader pattern: European scholars often treated non-Slavic peoples of the Volga region as remnants of ancient Asiatic migrations, regardless of linguistic or genetic reality.

The Chuvash phenotype — described in period literature as including darker hair, broader cheekbones, or shorter stature — was interpreted through this lens, reinforcing the idea that they were "less European" than neighboring Russians.

In the racial science of the era, physical traits were linked to supposed evolutionary development. Groups labeled "Mongoloid" were often placed lower on imagined civilizational scales.

This meant that Chuvash communities, despite being settled agriculturalists with rich cultural traditions, were portrayed as primitive, static, or culturally arrested — a trope common in Russian imperial ethnography.

As you read this, keep in mind this is insulting, and we are only talking about a distant people. To Lenin, this was about him, personally.

To the Chuvash, I am certain they will agree it would have been better for everyone involved if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

Kalmyk (Ilya's mother)

To the Kalmyk we turn. If there was a question about where Ilya's paternal line originated, there was none about where his maternal line originated. Vladimir Illych Lenin's grandmother, on his father's side, was Kalmyk. And on the Kalmyk people, there is no ambiguity.

The Kalmyks, a Mongolic people practicing Tibetan Buddhism, occupied a distinct sociometric niche. They were known for pastoral traditions, equestrian culture, and strong clan structures. Vladimir's paternal line, on that grandmother's side, could not have escaped "mongoloid" diagnosis.

In the 19th century, Kalmyks were often marginalized within the imperial hierarchy, but individuals who converted to Orthodoxy or entered Russian institutions could rise socially. Many did.

A half-Kalmyk woman like Ilya's mother represented a bridge between indigenous steppe cultures and the Russian provincial world. This heritage introduced an element of cultural distance and resilience into the family's identity - a sense of being both inside and outside the dominant Russian culture.

I won't put words in the mouths of the Kalmyk people, but I predict they will side with the Mordvinians and Chuvash in wishing Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

That is all there is to say about Vladimir Lenin on his father's side of the family.

Swedes (Maria's mother)

Now for Vladimir's mother's family origins. Maria was Swedish and German on her mother's side.

Swedish families in Russia were fewer in number but socially similar to Germans: educated, urban, and often tied to medicine, commerce, or military service. Their cultural identity emphasized literacy, Lutheran religious discipline, and a restrained emotional style.

Swedish professionals in Russia tended to integrate smoothly into the imperial intelligentsia, contributing to the cosmopolitan character of cities like St.

Petersburg. Their sociometric footprint was small but elite, associated with technical skill, multilingualism, and understated cultural refinement.

Germans (Maria's mother)

Ethnic Germans in Russia formed one of the most stable and respected minority groups. Many were descendants of 18th-century settlers invited by the Tsars to modernize agriculture, administration, and science.

By the mid-19th century, Germans were heavily represented in medicine, engineering, pedagogy, and the imperial bureaucracy. Their sociometric profile was defined by discipline, technical competence, Protestant work ethic, and a strong orientation toward rationality and order.

German households often maintained high educational standards, with children learning German alongside Russian and sometimes French. They were seen as culturally "European," and their presence lent cosmopolitan prestige to provincial towns and professional circles.

The story of ethnic Germans in 19th-century Russia is one of dramatic reversal.

For more than a century after Catherine the Great invited German settlers to the empire, they lived as privileged colonists, protected by special laws and granted autonomy that few other groups enjoyed.

By the late 19th century, however, the same communities found themselves increasingly targeted by suspicion, resentment, and state policy. Their eventual emigration to the United States — especially to Wisconsin, the Dakotas, and the Great Plains — was not a sudden flight but the culmination of decades of tightening restrictions and cultural pressure.

This history is a critical feature of Russian cultural life when trying to understand ideological and ethnic affinities at the Bolshevik threshold. In late Imperial Russia, Germans, like Jews, were cast in roles as "outsiders" – and specifically sanctioned, both officially and unofficially, for the special status both groups were given. What were originally revered guests were eventually reviled.

Lenin was a little of both groups. At least on his mother's side.

The origins of the Volga German colonies lie in Catherine the Great's manifesto of 1763, which promised European settlers land, religious freedom, exemption from military service, and self-governance. Catherine was importing trade skills without imposing expectations by which other Russians lived.

Thousands of Germans responded, establishing prosperous agricultural villages along the Volga River. These communities were Lutheran, disciplined, literate,

and economically successful. For generations, they lived apart from Russian peasants, maintaining their language, schools, and religious institutions.

German autonomy was not merely cultural; it was legal. They were exempt from conscription, allowed to elect their own local leaders, and protected from serfdom. In the mosaic of the Russian Empire, they were a distinct and respected minority. This privileged position began to erode in the mid-19th century.

The Russian state, increasingly anxious about separatism and foreign influence, began to dismantle the special rights granted to German colonists.

The turning point came in 1871, when Alexander II abolished the legal privileges of the German colonies. German self-governance was revoked, their schools were placed under Russian oversight, and their communities were folded into the standard provincial administration.

Three years later, universal military conscription was introduced, ending the centuries-old promise that German settlers would never be drafted. For a people whose identity was built around autonomy and exemption, this was a profound betrayal.

The late 19th century saw the rise of Russification, a policy aimed at strengthening Russian language, culture, and Orthodox identity across the empire. German schools were pressured to teach in Russian; German-language publications faced restrictions; Lutheran institutions were monitored.

The Tsarist state did not attack Germans physically, but it sought to absorb them culturally. The German colonies, once proud of their separateness, now found that separateness treated as disloyalty. The Tsarists shrugged off these concerns as unjustifiable. The Tsar, after all, had married a German woman, and his children were all, themselves half German.

That, as history would prove, was a dangerous tact to take. Social attitudes shifted faster than the Tsar could manage them. Russian nationalist newspapers accused German farmers of forming “a state within a state.” Bureaucrats feared their literacy and organization. Anti-Tsarist attitudes became co-mingled with anti-German attitudes.

The Orthodox clergy resented their Protestant independence. Germans were increasingly portrayed as foreign, aloof, and economically threatening. This xenophobia did not erupt into pogroms — the Russian state did not sanction mob violence against Germans — but it created an atmosphere of suspicion that made life increasingly difficult.

The Volga Germans were especially vulnerable because they were highly visible. Their villages were compact, culturally distinct, and economically successful. They spoke German, maintained Lutheran churches, and preserved customs that set them apart from surrounding Russian and Tatar populations. Their prosperity made them targets of envy; their autonomy made them targets of suspicion.

Other German communities in Russia — such as Baltic Germans or urban German professionals — were more integrated and therefore less exposed. The Volga Germans, by contrast, lived in concentrated rural enclaves that could be easily identified, regulated, and pressured.

By the 1880s and 1890s, many Volga Germans concluded that their future in Russia was bleak. The loss of privileges, the imposition of conscription, the erosion of cultural autonomy, and the rising tide of nationalism convinced them that the promises made by Catherine the Great had been broken.

American land agents, sensing opportunity, recruited them aggressively. The climate of Wisconsin and the Great Plains resembled the Volga region; Lutheran churches were already established; German-speaking communities were growing.

Emigration became a rational choice. Between 1880 and 1914, tens of thousands left Russia for the United States, Canada, and South America. Their departure was not a panicked escape, but a deliberate relocation driven by policy-based persecution.

It is important to distinguish this persecution from the experience of Jews in the Russian Empire. Jews faced **state-sanctioned pogroms**, violent attacks tolerated or encouraged by authorities.

Jews were confined to the Pale of Settlement, barred from rural land ownership, restricted in education, and subjected to brutal mob violence. Their persecution was physical, legal, and existential.

Germans, by contrast, were not subjected to pogroms. They were not confined to ghettos, nor were they barred from land ownership or education. Their persecution took the form of legal erosion, cultural suppression, and rising xenophobia, not organized violence.

But the discrimination ethnic Germans faced at the hands of ethnic Russians was necessarily a factor in Vladimir Illych Lenin's conclusions about social justice in Imperial Russia. The state dismantled German autonomy but did not unleash mobs against them. Both Jews and Germans were seen as foreign elements

within the empire, but Jews were racialized and demonized in ways Germans were not.

Germans were viewed as culturally threatening; Jews were viewed as existentially threatening. Germans were pressured to assimilate; Jews were pressured to disappear. Germans could escape persecution through integration or emigration; Jews had far fewer options.

Lenin knew himself to be both part Jewish and part German on his mother's side, so the term "Mother Russia" was obviously oppressive to him, at least on the one side.

By the early 20th century, the Volga German story had become one of diaspora. Their villages in Russia remained, but their future lay elsewhere. In Wisconsin, Nebraska, Kansas, and the Dakotas, they rebuilt the communal life they had once enjoyed along the Volga.

The emigration of the Volga Germans to America was a testament to the power of policy to reshape identity, and to the fragility of privilege in an empire that increasingly feared everything distinct from "Russian".

The persecution of ethnic Germans in Tsarist Russia was real, but it was but a hint of the persecution Germans would receive under Lennin.

I know for a fact Volga Germans believe it would have been better for all involved if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball. I know because they are, today, my neighbors.

And that test brings us to Vladimir Ilych Lenin's Grandfather on his mother's side.

Jews (Maria's father)

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin had **documentable Jewish ancestry through his mother's father**, Alexander Dmitrievich Blank, who was born Srul Moishevich Blank, a Jew from a Jewish family. That is a genealogical fact established through archival records, baptismal documents, and the Blank family's own history.

This fact is often disputed by historians, both today and in Lenin's day, who conflate ethnic origins with ethnic identity. Neither Vladimir Illych Lenin nor his mother identified as Jews, but that does not change the biological facts.

Blank later converted to Russian Orthodoxy, but conversion does not erase ancestry. Maria Alexandrovna, Lenin's mother, was therefore biologically half Jewish. Lenin, in turn, was biologically one quarter Jewish. These are simply the biological facts.

Where historians fail is in distinguishing ancestry from identity. Maria did not identify as Jewish, did not practice Judaism, and was raised entirely within Russian Orthodoxy. Her son, Vladimir, likewise did not identify as Jewish and was baptized Orthodox. But none of that changes the genealogical reality.

Mind you, I care not one wit. But the National Socialist Worker's Party did. And so too did Lenin.

Jews in the Russian Empire occupied a paradoxical sociometric position.

Though legally confined to the Pale of Settlement, and subject to discriminatory laws, Jews nonetheless produced a disproportionately high number of physicians, teachers, and professionals in urban centers. Those who converted to Orthodoxy, like Maria's father, could enter the ranks of hereditary nobility through state service - a rare but socially significant pathway.

Lenin's maternal Grandfather is living proof that "genocide" is too strong a term for the pogroms directed against Jews of late 19th Century Russia. In the eyes of Tsarists, the matter was religious, and thereby sociocultural. Conversion to the Russian Orthodox Church was enough to call off the Tsar's dogs.

Conversion would obviously never be an option under the National Socialists, nor, for that matter, most under International Socialists. Once a Jew, always a Jew.

Jewish families were successful everywhere they settled, because they tended to emphasize literacy, multilingualism, and professional achievement. Jewish communities created a cultural environment where education was both a survival strategy and a marker of dignity. Their social world was intellectually intense, often multilingual, and oriented toward upward mobility through merit rather than land or lineage.

For all of the above reasons, Lenin hid the fact he was, by all detractor's definitions, a Jew. If any vestige of Judaism remained in the lives of the Ulyanov family, there remains no evidence of that as fact. It does, however, explain why Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky were so close, both in thought and in effort.

I could write an exhaustive chapter on the Russian Pogroms of the 19th century, but the topic has been thoroughly covered elsewhere. In the interests of time, I will just observe there was every incentive for the Ulyanov family to suppress their Jewish roots, limited though they were.

Just don't expect that is a conclusion the National Socialists would have taken, had they weighed in on the matter of Lenin's ethnic origins. We must remember,

whenever talking of twentieth century socialists, they did not think in terms of ethnicity, nor even race.

Socialists think in terms of species; which was first, which was persistent and, most important of all, which would prove to be the Next Best Thing. The danger with all socialists is that they are inevitably forced to translate ethnicity and race into species.

At that juncture, the Paradox of the Proletariat becomes lethal.

As I consistently remind everyone, Hebrew is the ethnic group while Judaism is the religion. Conflating one with the other is commonplace, so commonplace as to have earned the weight of vernacular, but it is wrong.

Especially in the case of Lenin and Trotsky, neither were Jews. Both had Hebrew ancestry, but neither was a Jew. They were socialists.

I assure you, the Jews of Bolshevik Russia agree, it would have been better for everyone involved if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

Japhetid Theory

In the early 20th century, Soviet linguist Nikolai Marr introduced the “Japhetid” theory, a sweeping and ultimately discredited attempt to classify peoples based on speculative linguistic evolution. Marr argued that the Chuvash were descendants of ancient Japhetides from Mesopotamia, a claim embraced by some Chuvash intellectuals but rejected by later scholars.

Pause for consideration: Post-war revisionists in accredited academia rehabilitated the image of the Soviet Union in order to save the “socialism” as a brand. “Fascism”, the right wing of the socialist movement, was thrown under the bus because, frankly, they were unsalvageable. Scholars have since insisted the National Socialism was the bad form of socialism and International Socialism was the good form of socialism.

I am arming you with the facts here, not flexing as a linguist. The Japhetid Theory, and the reasons it came into being in the Soviet Union, is identical to the linguistic and racial theories being advanced by the National Socialists. Where the National Socialists advanced the Germanic language group as the linguistic heritage of the Aryan race, the Soviets advanced the Japhetid language group as the linguistic heritage of the Chuvash ethnic group.

My point? Both the National Socialists and the International Socialists were doing the same damned thing. Both movements discovered they were being led by paranoid narcissists, so fed their respective narcissist the delusion of superiority they preferred.

Hitler thought of himself as a German, so sycophants in NAZI scholars inflated everything German to superior proportions. Lenin thought of himself as Chuvash and so Soviet scholars inflated everything Volgan.

It's basic human psychology. Sycophants inflate whichever balloon their leader is stretching. Marr took premature hypotheses and inflated them to please Lenin. Lenin, like Hitler, then sorted regions by linguistic trend. Favored linguistic cultures were ordered higher on the species spectrum.

Everyone else got weeded out.

Listen to your college professors if you want. They are all trying to rehabilitate the "social sciences", because that is what socialism is at the end of the day. Since the National Socialists ruined one tact, accredited academia only has one direction to go.

Just trust me. National Socialism and International Socialism are identical. They only appear different because they opposed each other to death.

Don't believe me? That's your right.

Allow me to call Nikolai Marr to the witness stand:

Marr's theories were pseudoscientific, but they illustrate how the Chuvash continued to be subjected to grand, unfounded narratives of origin — whether Mongolic, Mesopotamian, or otherwise — rather than being understood through rigorous historical or genetic evidence.

Across the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Chuvash phenotype was repeatedly misinterpreted through racial frameworks that conflated them with Mongolic peoples based on superficial traits, placed them within imagined evolutionary hierarchies, portrayed them as culturally static or primitive, treated their distinctiveness as evidence of ancient Asiatic descent and subjected them to speculative theories like Marr's Japhetid hypothesis.

Nikolai Marr argued that the languages of the Caucasus — especially the Kartvelian languages like Georgian — formed a distinct "Japhetic" family. He claimed these languages were genetically related to Semitic languages of the Middle East and even Basque.

Marr borrowed the term “Japhetic” from Japheth, one of Noah’s sons, to give his theory a biblical-ethnological aura. Marr’s earliest version of the idea actually predates the Soviet Union, appearing in 19th-century discussions of Caucasian ethnology.

Marr’s Japhetid hypothesis was one of the most striking examples of how political ideology, racial speculation, and linguistic pseudoscience fused together in the early Soviet period. It began as a modest 19th-century conjecture about the relationship between Caucasian and Middle Eastern languages, but under Soviet patronage it grew into a sweeping doctrine that attempted to rewrite the entire history of human language. Its rise and fall reveal how fragile scholarship becomes when it is shaped not by evidence but by ideology.

Marr first proposed that the Kartvelian languages of the Caucasus—Georgian, Mingrelian, Laz, and Svan—were related to the Semitic languages of the Middle East. He borrowed the term “Japhetic” from Japheth, one of Noah’s sons, giving his theory a biblical veneer that appealed to 19th-century ethnological imagination.

Marr later expanded this idea to claim a common origin for Caucasian, Semitic-Hamitic, and even Basque languages, a cluster so geographically and structurally disparate that no serious comparative linguist could accept it.

After the Bolshevik Revolution, Marr’s theory transformed from eccentric speculation into state-endorsed doctrine. Marr’s flattery of Lenin Chuvash roots hit paydirt.

To a student of history in the early 21st Century this ethnographic review seems absurdly tangential, but it must be emphasized, over and over again, the psychosis which gripped the twentieth century, and resulted in hundreds of millions of deaths, was grounded entirely on misperceptions of human evolution.

In Vladimir’s day these distinctions were not regarded as ethnic groups, these distinctions were regarded as sub-speciation. Who was and who was not “Caucasian” was the fault line forming between the National Socialists and the International Socialists. Marr was just one of hundreds of scholars of the late 19th century on which Socialist pseudoscience was grounded.

In the debate raging between the National Socialists and International Socialists, agreement was found on one phenotypical criteria: mongoloid features were manifestly subspeciation. This mattered more than anything to Vlad, who

himself could not escape his Asiatic appearance. Lenin had to answer for it under terms and conditions acceptable to the intelligentsia of his day.

In retrospect, Marr's motivations seep through the mumbo-jumbo. Marr was attempting to rehabilitate Lenin's Chuvash origins, while at the same time correlating Stalin to the same, ancestral superiority. The inclusion of Basque in the linguistic morphology is a glaring outlier, explainable only by the ambitions of the Socialist International, which by 1920 had made substantial inroads on the Iberian peninsula.

Marr enthusiastically embraced Lenin's regime when it came to power, and the Soviet government elevated him to the position of the country's leading linguist. Under this protection, he reshaped his hypothesis into a grand narrative: Japhetic languages, he claimed, once covered all of Europe before Indo-European languages arrived.

Indo-European speech, in his telling, was merely a thin layer imposed over an older Japhetic substratum.

Marr was doing what Lenin required, officially writing the head of the party into the most relevant species, then proposing that species once dominated all of continental Europe.

Anyone who suggests the International Socialists, led by Vladimir I. Lenin, were not guilty of the same sin as the National Socialists, has their head in the sand or never did the necessary research to begin with.

Both the National Socialists and the International Socialists were advancing ideologies which cast their faction as The Next Best Thing in human evolution.

Marr's argument was not simply a linguistic argument. Marr insisted that language evolved through class struggle, not through phonetic change or historical development. He argued that different social classes within a single nation spoke different "strata" of language, and that these strata were more closely related across countries than the languages spoken by other classes within the same country.

In this way, Marr attempted to graft Marxist class theory onto linguistics, claiming that linguistic unity was a form of "bourgeois nationalism" and that true proletarian science required dismantling traditional comparative methods. In other words, Marr was deconstructing the linguistic chauvinism of National Socialism as he was constructing the linguistic dogma of the International Socialists.

The pseudoscientific character of Marr's theory lay not only in its rejection of established linguistic methodology but in its unfalsifiable premises. He asserted that all languages derived from four primordial sound-elements - *sal, ber, yon, rosh* - a claim unsupported by any evidence and incompatible with known linguistic structures.

Marr further predicted that languages would eventually fuse into a single communist language, a utopian projection that aligned neatly with Soviet ideological goals. Marr's ideas became the intellectual justification for the Latinization campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s, in which minority languages were forcibly shifted from Cyrillic to Latin alphabets.

The success of Marr's theory was not scientific but political.

As one modern historian notes, Marr's doctrine became an example of the kind of "catastrophe pseudoscientific knowledge recognized by the state can lead to," a system enforced through institutional power rather than scholarly merit.

Marr's personal influence, combined with the Bolsheviks' desire for a "proletarian science," allowed him to dominate Soviet linguistics and suppress dissent. His opponents were marginalized, and the humanities suffered a profound crisis as Marr's ideas became mandatory orthodoxy.

As everything in the early Soviet State, the fortunes of Marr elevated in proportion with his inflation of Lenin as ruler. But with every inflation of Lenin's ethnic worth came a necessary deflation of others.

The collapse of Marrism came abruptly in 1950, when Joseph Stalin published *Marxism and Problems of Linguistics*, a scathing critique that dismantled Marr's premises point by point. Stalin rejected the notion that language evolved through class struggle, defended the validity of comparative linguistics, and declared Marr's theory scientifically untenable.

Full stop. Do not convince yourself language was a tangential interest of the International Socialists. Stalin, the Man of Steel, the leader of the Union of Soviet Socialists Republic, chose to write a book on linguistics, of all things. And why? To deconstruct the linguistic foundations that had elevated his predecessor, and equated Stalin to Trotsky!

After Stalin's intervention, Marrism was discarded almost overnight, and Soviet linguistics returned to conventional methods. Stalin was not critiquing Marr, he was destroying an entire school of thought undermining his own concept of Caucasian dominance.

I guess its true what they say; even a blind squirrel can find a nut now and then.

In retrospect, Marr's Japhetid hypothesis stands as a cautionary tale. It shows how easily scholarship can be distorted when political ideology demands a particular narrative, and how pseudoscience can flourish when it flatters the ruling power.

Marr's theory was not merely wrong; it was constructed on foundations that rejected evidence, ignored linguistic structure, and replaced inquiry with dogma. Its rise and fall illuminate the dangers of subordinating science to ideology—and the vulnerability of academic institutions when they become instruments of the state.

But the reason Marr was allowed to persist is where we should truly focus our attention, for Lenin's "Mongoloid" features was the evolutionary Achilles' heel Lenin struggled to obscure.

Misperceptions about the Chuvash and the Mordvin reveal far more about European and Russian racial ideology than about these ethnic groups themselves. They also provide a crucial contrast for our broader study.

While Lenin's paternal line may have included Chuvash or Mordvin ancestry, the Bolshevik elite later embraced an ultra-Russian identity that erased or marginalized precisely the kinds of ethnic diversity that imperial science had once exaggerated and stigmatized.

In fact, when one considers the ethnic make-up of Mother Russia as a whole, the grand contradiction is that "Russian" is just as much a pseudo-ethnicity as "German". What came to be regarded as "Russian" in late Imperial Russia, was a narrow demographic bandwidth concentrated between the Baltic Sea and the headwaters of the Volga.

For someone like Ilya's father, rising from serfdom into skilled labor, and then seeing his son enter university, the family's elevation represented a dramatic leap across sociometric strata. Chuvash or Mordvinian heritage only contributed to a sense of marginality and was, understandably, repressed in the Ulyanov family narrative.

But clearly Vladimir Lenin knew it was there and valued it more than he let on. Marr, otherwise, would never have chosen to identify the Chuvash as the historical trunk and Russia as its branch.

Of course, today, we know socialist claims about “Aryans” and socialist claims about “Japhetidians” are pseudoscientific delusions. Neither I nor anyone I know are shocked by that conclusion. Who of us is shocked?

Just don’t make the mistake of checking these absurdities off the list and move on. The socialists who came to these grand conclusions at the beginning of the last century were staging a global war of extermination based on those very conclusions.

When I say the world’s intelligentsia went criminally insane one hundred years ago, I mean precisely that. And history, with socialists, will always repeat. Socialists are convinced they have evolved into a superior cognitive species.

I do not write this book to impress. I write this book to compel. The world’s righteous must enact laws which criminalize socialism because it explicitly proscribes genocide.

If you don’t believe me, ask anyone who called themselves a National Socialist in Hitler’s day. They all agree it would have been better for everyone involved if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

Lenin’s Melting Pot

Ethnicity mattered to Marxists long before Vladimir Ilych Ulyanov was born. But it mattered more once Vladimir Ilych Ulyanov “evolved” into Vladimir I. Lenin. Historians insist the noms de plumes was necessary to conceal his identity from the Tsarist state, but the truth is Vladimir Ilych Lenin was concealing his ethnicity from the socialist movement.

Perhaps concealing is too strong a word. Obscuring would be more on the mark.

The revolutionary model of the Socialist International which emerged from Vienna in 1910, and the rhetorical lexicon which defined it, sought to unite disparate factions within the worldwide socialist movement under a single umbrella. That umbrella emphasized cognitive evolution over physical evolution, precisely to side-step the ramifications of biological evolution.

The Socialist International decided the evolution of the Proletariat, the Next Best Thing in human evolution, was primarily cognitive, not physical. Ethnicity was discarded as an anachronism of pre-capitalist evolution and, therefore, dismissed as a pre-revolutionary construct. Nationality was deemed a construct of capitalism, and therefore to be opposed.

The National Socialist movement thought otherwise.

But the record speaks for itself. Before the Bolsheviks became an ultra-Russian, ultra-centralized political caste, Lenin himself emerged from a multiethnic, cosmopolitan, upward-mobile intelligentsia household.

The ethnic groups in his background represent European professional elites (German, Swedish, Jewish), Russian provincial intelligentsia, and Volga-region indigenous peoples (Chuvash, Mordvinian, Kalmyk).

Vladimir Ilych Ulyanov grew up in the shadow of both sides of his ethnic family tree. Vladimir Ilych Lenin hated both. Vladimir Ilych Ulyanov was too Asian for Europeans and too European for Asians.

Given the attitudes of the age, it is almost predictable Vladimir would become convinced society had to evolve. When Vladimir Ilych Ulyanov abandoned his family identity and adopted the name Vladimir Ilych Lenin, a long-desired metamorphosis occurred. Ulyanov evolved into a new species, a superior species.

Vladimir Ulyanov's adoption of the name Lenin belongs to the long revolutionary tradition of pseudonyms, yet its specific origin is unusually opaque. No document records the moment he chose it, and Lenin himself never explained it.

Still, the strongest evidence points to a geographical inspiration - the Lena River in Siberia - combined with the practical need for a distinctive underground identity during his years of exile and clandestine political work. The Lena theory fits both chronology and revolutionary custom.

Ulyanov began experimenting with pseudonyms during his Siberian exile from 1897 to 1900, a period in which he lived not far from the Lena watershed and was already writing under various noms de guerre. Manuscripts from 1897–1898 show the earliest appearances of "Lenin," indicating that the name was in use well before his return to European Russia and long before the famous Lena massacre of 1912, which some later writers mistakenly linked to the pseudonym.

The massacre theory collapses under its own timeline: Lenin had been signing documents with the name for more than a decade by then.

The geographical explanation also aligns with a broader revolutionary habit. Russian Marxists frequently adopted pseudonyms drawn from rivers, regions, or symbolic landscapes—names that sounded sturdy, elemental, and anonymous. Stalin's name came from *stal*, "steel"; Molotov's from *molot*, "hammer"; Kamenev's from *kamen*, "stone." In this context, "Lenin" reads as "man of the

Lena," a name rooted in the geography of exile and carrying the austere, hard-edged tone revolutionaries favored.

Other theories exist—such as the idea that Lenin chose the name as a counterpoint to Plekhanov's pseudonym "Volgin," derived from the Volga—but these remain speculative and lack documentary support. What is certain is that by 1901, as Ulyanov prepared to launch *Iskra* and expand his underground network, "Lenin" had become his fixed revolutionary identity.

The adoption of a pseudonym was not merely stylistic. By the late 1890s, Ulyanov was under surveillance, publishing illegal literature, organizing Marxist circles, and corresponding with foreign revolutionaries.

A pseudonym shielded comrades, confused the Okhrana, and allowed Ulyanov to circulate "theses" without exposing his family or associates. "Lenin" proved effective: distinctive enough to stand out, anonymous enough to protect him, and resonant enough to become inseparable from the revolutionary persona he cultivated.

In time, the pseudonym eclipsed the man's birth name entirely. Ulyanov became Lenin not by accident, but through the deliberate construction of a political identity—one rooted in the geography of Siberian exile and shaped by the clandestine world in which he lived.

It was also not the only noms de guerre used by Ulyanov. He also went by K. Tulin, Ilyin, Frey, Jacob Richter, Karpov, Petrov, and Starik ("The Old Man").

The man's name symbolic, though not necessarily important. What was important is that Lenin was the "template" from which the Proletariat would form. All ethnic and national identity would be suppressed under the Soviet State because Lenin suppressed all ethnicity and nationality in himself.

All except Russian.

Bolshevik ethnonational rigidity became the singular contradiction of, not just the Soviet Union, but the Socialist International. As I am about to document to your satisfaction, this contradiction destined the Russian Federation to reconstitute itself as a nationalist federation following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

With the matter of Vladimir I. Ulyanov's ethnic origins settled, and Vladimir I. Lenin's ethnic frustrations clearly established, we are prepared to understand how and why Russia is today, not a state with an intelligence apparatus, but an intelligence apparatus with a state.

1917 - The Long Train Home

In early April 1917, the Bolshevik leadership was scattered across Switzerland, living in modest exile after years of political banishment. Lenin himself lived in Zurich, in a small apartment on Spiegelgasse, where he spent his days reading newspapers, writing polemics, and pacing anxiously as news arrived of the February Revolution in Russia.

The February Revolution of 1917 began as a spontaneous uprising in Petrograd, driven by food shortages, wartime exhaustion, and mass strikes that quickly drew in workers, soldiers, and ordinary citizens who no longer believed the tsarist government could manage the crisis.

What began as scattered demonstrations escalated when the Petrograd garrison refused orders to fire on crowds and instead joined them, collapsing the last pillar of Nicholas II's authority. Liberal politicians in the Duma, socialist leaders in the Petrograd Soviet, and military commanders all moved to fill the vacuum, though none had planned a revolution; they simply reacted to the sudden implosion of the monarchy.

Within days, Nicholas II abdicated, ending three centuries of Romanov rule, and a Provisional Government formed under Prince Lvov and later Alexander Kerensky, while the Petrograd Soviet emerged as a rival center of power.

The outcome was not a stable new order but a fragile dual authority that satisfied no one and left Russia suspended between war and peace, reform and collapse, and ultimately opened the path to the Bolshevik seizure of power later that year.

But first, in order to stage his planned Coup, Lenin had to get he and his followers back to Russia. Lenin's closest associates—Zinoviev, Radek, and Krupskaya—were also in Zurich or in nearby Swiss towns such as Bern and Geneva. Switzerland had become the principal refuge for Russian Marxists because it was neutral, inexpensive, and politically tolerant.

When the Provisional Government took power in Petrograd, Lenin immediately understood that the moment he had waited for had arrived, and he began searching for a way home.

The problem was geography.

Russia was at war with Germany, and the Western Allies refused to let Lenin pass through France or Britain, fearing that his anti-war agitation would undermine the Russian war effort.

The only possible route was through Germany itself, and that meant negotiating with the Kaiser's government. Lenin insisted that he would accept no arrangement that made him appear a German agent, but he also knew that without German cooperation he would remain stranded in Switzerland while history unfolded without him.

The German Foreign Office and the German High Command debated the matter and ultimately agreed to grant Lenin and a group of exiles safe passage.

The motives of the German Foreign Office were entirely strategic. Germany was fighting a brutal two-front war, and the Eastern Front consumed enormous resources. If Lenin could destabilize Russia, undermine the Provisional Government, and hasten Russia's withdrawal from the war, Germany would be able to redeploy divisions to the Western Front.

The Kaiser did not act out of spite, nor out of ideological sympathy for socialism. He acted out of cold military calculation: Lenin was a political accelerant, and Germany hoped to pour him into the fragile chemistry of post-revolutionary Russia.

On the morning of April 9, 1917, Lenin and roughly thirty exiles made their way to Zurich Hauptbahnhof. Some walked from their apartments; others arrived by tram. They carried only what they could manage—small bags, manuscripts, and the nervous energy of people about to cross enemy territory in wartime.

The train arranged for them was not a special locomotive, but a set of carriages attached to regular German rail traffic. What made it extraordinary was its legal status. Lenin demanded, and Germany agreed, that the carriages would be treated as extraterritorial.

German officials were forbidden to enter, and the exiles were forbidden to leave while on German soil. This arrangement created the famous "sealed train," a phrase that captured both the physical isolation of the passengers and the political insulation Lenin needed to avoid accusations of treason.

The train was operated entirely by German railway personnel. The exiles had no control over the route or schedule. They traveled north through Germany, passing silently through cities whose workers and soldiers they were forbidden to address. The seal was not merely symbolic; it was a barrier against political contamination. Germany feared Bolshevik agitation among German workers, and Lenin feared the appearance of collaboration. The seal protected both sides.

After several days of travel, the train reached the Baltic port of Sassnitz on April 12. The exiles disembarked under controlled conditions and boarded a ferry to Trelleborg, Sweden.

From Trelleborg they traveled by Swedish rail through Malmö, Stockholm, and Haparanda, crossing into Finland and finally arriving at Petrograd's Finland Station on April 16.

Lenin stepped onto the platform and immediately delivered a speech that stunned even his comrades, declaring that the revolution must not stop halfway and that Russia must proceed directly to socialist transformation.

Germany's intended outcome had been simple: unleash Lenin into Russia, destabilize the Provisional Government, and force Russia out of the war. In that sense, the gamble succeeded.

Within months, the Bolsheviks would seize power, and by early 1918 Lenin signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, removing Russia from the conflict and freeing German divisions for the Western Front.

The sealed train was therefore not an act of generosity, nor a gesture of ideological sympathy, but a precise instrument of wartime strategy. Germany did not expect Lenin to build a communist state; it expected him to create chaos.

What emerged was far more consequential than the Kaiser ever imagined, but the logic of the train—the sealed carriages, the extraterritorial status, the clandestine passage through enemy territory—remains one of the most striking episodes of political miscalculation in human history.

If the Kaiser's Realm had a tomb, and that tomb an epithet, it would read "Be careful what you wish for, you may get it."

The Bolshevik Coup

The terms *Bolshevik* and *Menshevik* entered political language almost accidentally. They were not invented as ideological labels, nor were they chosen by Lenin or his opponents to describe their respective visions for Russia's future. Instead, they emerged from a procedural vote at the 1903 Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, and their etymology reflects this humble origin.

Read that again. Vladimir I. Lenin was a Social Democrat. This is an important object lesson for everyone in the 21st Century flirting with the idea of voting for the "Social Democrats". In the post-war world, socialists have attempted to assert "Social Democracy" as "Socialism Lite", you know, Marxism with all the objectionable bits removed.

The truth is “Social Democrats” is merely political cover. Social Democrats believe it will be easier to gain power through the popular vote than violent revolution. Once a popular mandate has been achieved, however, Social Democrats plan to drop the mask of populism and impose the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.

When confronting “Social Democrats” in the modern world, demand they name one prominent Social Democrat from the 20th Century. When they cannot, remind them who Vladimir I. Lenin truly was.

Both *Bolshevik* and *Menshevik* come directly from the Russian roots for “majority” and “minority.”

The word *Bolshevik* derives from *bolshinstvo*, meaning “majority,” itself built on *bolshe* - “more,” “greater,” “larger.” When Lenin’s faction won a key vote on party membership rules and editorial control of the party newspaper *Iskra*, they were, at that moment, the *bolshinstvo*. Their supporters were labeled *bolsheviki*, “those of the majority.” The term stuck, even after Lenin’s faction no longer held numerical superiority. What began as a technical description hardened into a political identity.

The word *Menshevik* follows the same pattern. It comes from *men’shinstvo*, “minority,” built on *men’she* - “less,” “smaller.” Julius Martov’s faction lost the same vote, and so they became the *men’shinstvo*, the minority. Their supporters were labeled *mensheviki*, “those of the minority.” Like *Bolshevik*, the term quickly transcended its numerical origin and came to signify a distinct ideological posture.

For the record, the vote count was as follows: *Bolshevik’s* 24 to the *Menshevik’s 20*.

24 psychotics decided the course of the 20th Century. More to the point, four psychotics decided the course of the 20th century. The irony is that the names were born from a momentary division but came to represent enduring differences.

Bolshevik came to signify centralization, discipline, and the belief in a tightly organized vanguard party capable of seizing power.

Menshevik came to signify gradualism, broad membership, and cooperation with liberal forces.

The etymology of the terms therefore captures both the accident of their birth and the ideological divergence that followed. What began as a simple majority–minority distinction became one of the defining fault lines of Russian revolutionary politics.

With the definition of the term *Bolshevik* established, we may properly turn to what the *Bolsheviks* meant by seizing power. When the Bolsheviks spoke of “seizing power,” they did not mean a vague uprising, nor a spontaneous revolt, nor even a traditional coup.

In Lenin's vocabulary, *seizing power* meant something very specific: the transfer of all state authority from the bourgeois Provisional Government to the Soviets — and, crucially, the transformation of those Soviets into organs of proletarian dictatorship. It was not merely a change of rulers; it was the destruction of one form of state and the creation of another.

Lenin's clearest statement of this appears in his April Theses, delivered on April 4, 1917, immediately after returning to Petrograd. There he wrote that the Bolsheviks must work for: "All power to the Soviets."

This line is often misunderstood as a call for democratic pluralism. In Lenin's usage, it meant the Soviets should become the *exclusive* organs of state authority, displacing all other institutions.

In other words, the first and only imperative of the "Social Democrats" once they came to power, was the eradication of everything and anything democratic.

According to Lenin's "thesis", tThe Soviets were not to coexist with the Provisional Government; they were to replace it entirely. Seizing power meant abolishing dual authority and establishing a single center of political command.

Lenin was explicit about the revolutionary nature of this transfer. In *State and Revolution*, written in the same year, he argued that the proletariat could not simply inherit the bourgeois state; it had to destroy it: "The working class must break up, smash the 'ready-made' state machinery."

This is the core of what Bolsheviks meant by seizing power: not taking over the existing state, but *shattering* it. The police, the bureaucracy, the officer corps, the ministries — all were to be dismantled and replaced by new institutions built on proletarian authority.

The seizure of power was therefore both destructive and constructive.

In Lenin's mind, this seizure was not an act of conspiracy but an act of historical necessity. He believed that the Provisional Government represented the interests of the bourgeoisie and could never deliver peace, land, or bread. The Soviets, by contrast, represented the workers and soldiers. To seize power was to align the state with the class that, in Marxist theory, embodied the future.

Lenin wrote in September 1917: "The crisis has matured. The time for insurrection is ripe."

This was not rhetoric. Lenin meant that the Bolsheviks must act before the revolution lost momentum. Seizing power was a *timed* act — a strike at the moment when the old state was weak and the Soviets were strong.

The seizure itself, carried out in October 1917, reflected Lenin's conception perfectly. It was not a mass uprising in the romantic sense; it was a coordinated operation by disciplined cadres. The Bolsheviks occupied telegraph stations, bridges, railway terminals, and government offices. They arrested ministers, seized the Winter Palace, and declared the Provisional Government dissolved.

The Soviets were proclaimed the sole authority.

Lenin described the result in his report to the Second Congress of Soviets: "We shall now proceed to construct the socialist order."

This line captures the Bolshevik meaning of power. Seizing power was not an end in itself. It was the beginning of a new state, one that Lenin believed would express the dictatorship of the proletariat — a phrase he used without hesitation.

In *State and Revolution*, Lenin defined it as: "Power directly exercised by the masses themselves." That, as we all know, was pure rhetoric. In practice, this declaration meant the Bolshevik Party acted as the vanguard of the proletariat, guiding and directing the Soviets.

The seizure of power was therefore inseparable from the party's claim to leadership. Lenin never imagined a Soviet state without the Bolshevik Party at its center.

To summarize: when the Bolsheviks spoke of seizing power, they meant the deliberate destruction of the bourgeois state, the transfer of all forms of authority to the Soviets, and the construction of a new political order grounded in proletarian dictatorship.

The operational word in that last sentence is "dictatorship". As planned, Lenin could claim this is precisely what "the people" had voted for, for his faction, the Bolshevik faction, had won the vote, regardless of how slim the margin.

The remainder of the justification used by the "Social Democrats" is pure condescension. In the eyes of the "Social Democrats", they were the only party claiming to represent the masses, so their outcome was the only "democratic outcome". The masses had voted for a Dictatorship of the Proletariat, and Lenin was going to give them that precisely.

Head of the Snake

It *can* be said—carefully and with precision—that the Bolsheviks began forming the nuclei of an intelligence and security apparatus *before* the October coup, but not in the formal, institutional sense that the Cheka later embodied. What existed before October was a proto-intelligence culture, a set of practices, habits, and embryonic structures that made the creation of the Cheka in December 1917 feel less like an

invention and more like the natural maturation of tendencies already present in the Bolshevik underground.

Before the coup, the Bolsheviks were still an illegal revolutionary party, and like all underground movements, they relied on clandestine communications, safe houses, coded correspondence, courier networks, and internal vetting of members.

These were not yet "intelligence services," but they were the raw materials from which one could be built. Lenin's own writings during 1917 show that he already conceived of the revolution as requiring a "special apparatus of coercion" to defend itself. In *State and Revolution*, written months before the coup, he argued that the proletariat must create "a special force" to suppress counterrevolution—language that unmistakably anticipates the Cheka's function. He did not yet name such an institution, but he described its necessity with striking clarity.

During the months between the February Revolution and the October seizure of power, the Bolsheviks also developed intelligence-like practices inside the Petrograd Soviet and the Military Revolutionary Committee. They monitored troop movements, tracked the loyalties of garrison units, intercepted communications, and cultivated informants among soldiers and factory committees.

Trotsky, who chaired the Military Revolutionary Committee, oversaw operations that were indistinguishable from military intelligence: mapping out which regiments could be trusted, which officers were wavering, and which telegraph stations needed to be seized first. These activities were not yet institutionalized, but they were unmistakably the work of a party preparing to take power by force and to defend that power against counterrevolution.

The Bolsheviks also had a long tradition of internal security dating back to their underground years. They vetted members, expelled suspected police informants, and maintained secret communications networks across Russia and Europe. Lenin himself had been involved in clandestine operations since the 1890s, and the party's culture was steeped in suspicion, discipline, and the belief that enemies—Tsarist, liberal, socialist, or foreign—were everywhere. This mentality made the creation of a formal security organ feel inevitable once the Bolsheviks seized the state.

So, when the Cheka was formally established on December 20, 1917, under Felix Dzerzhinsky, it did not emerge from a vacuum. It was the institutional crystallization of practices the Bolsheviks had already been using: surveillance, counterintelligence, clandestine communication, and the identification of enemies.

The Cheka's early staff included people who had been performing similar functions informally during the revolution. The Military Revolutionary Committee's intelligence

wing essentially flowed directly into the Cheka's earliest operations. Thus, while it would be historically inaccurate to say the Bolsheviks *created* the Cheka before the coup, it is entirely correct to say they created the conditions, culture, and proto-structures that made the Cheka possible.

The October Revolution did not invent Bolshevik intelligence; it merely gave it a name, a headquarters, and the full coercive power of the state.

1917–1922 - Cheka

The *All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage* (Cheka) was formed by Lenin and headed by Felix Dzerzhinsky. This is the original Bolshevik security organ.

The term "Chekist" became a currency of its own, a word to describe the most ruthless, lethal and extrajudicial operators in Russian Intelligence. Animals most closely fits the definition.

Felix Dzerzhinsky was an animal. He was born a miracle of creation, became convinced he was just an animal which had evolved into the next best thing. Felix Dzerzhinsky invested all he had into become the dominant animal in the socialist zoo.

I believe he succeeded.

Explaining Russian Intelligence is simple.

Russia's intelligence apparatus was composed, from the start to this very day, of the elite of the elite, and it wielded the Sword of Damocles above the neck of every Soviet (now Russian) citizen.

In Soviet times, whenever the Paradox of the Proletariat flared up, and dissenting factions needed to be liquidated to safeguard the true Proletariat, the Sword of Damocles would fly.

The situation in Russia today is identical.

You see, though the Soviet Union was dissolved, the Intelligence Apparatus forming its core, was not. In fact, it was the Intelligence Apparatus which did the dissolving when the Soviet Union fell.

That raises the question, did the Soviet Union actually fall?

I will attempt to answer that question as we progress through this history of Russian Intelligence. We'll begin, of course, with the Cheka.

The Cheka was formally established on 7 December 1917, only weeks after the Bolsheviks seized power, when Lenin and the Council of People's Commissars issued a decree creating the *All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage*.

Decree is the operative word in the last sentence. Get used to it. Most of what the Politburo did was by decree.

The Cheka's creation marked the moment when the Bolshevik regime moved from revolutionary improvisation to institutionalized coercion. The new body was designed to be swift, unencumbered by legal procedure, and empowered to identify, investigate, and eliminate enemies of the revolution.

Lenin believed that the fragile Soviet state could not survive without a dedicated organ of political security, and he chose Felix Dzerzhinsky, a Polish-born Marxist with a reputation for discipline and severity, to lead it.

Dzerzhinsky served as Chairman of the Cheka from its founding in December 1917 until its reorganization in 1922. Beneath him were regional Chekas, including the Petrograd Cheka, whose head, Moisei Uritsky, was assassinated in August 1918.

That same day, Fanya Kaplan attempted to assassinate Lenin outside a factory. Kaplan was, like Lenin, a revolutionary socialist. Uritsky's assassin was not.

Fanya Kaplan's story begins long before the moment she raised a revolver outside the Michelson factory in August 1918. She entered the revolutionary movement as a teenager, joining the Socialist-Revolutionary Party (SRs)—one of the largest and most influential socialist factions in late-imperial Russia.

Arrested in her youth for involvement in an SR plot, she spent years in tsarist prisons and hard labor, where she suffered injuries that left her partially blind. By the time of the 1917 revolutions, Kaplan was a committed socialist revolutionary shaped by the SR tradition: anti-autocratic, anti-capitalist, and fiercely opposed to one-party rule.

Kaplan belonged to the Left SRs, the faction that initially cooperated with the Bolsheviks but broke with Lenin over the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and the Bolshevik suppression of rival socialist parties. To Kaplan and many Left SRs, Lenin had not saved the revolution—he had hijacked it, replacing socialist pluralism with the dictatorship of a single faction.

Kaplan was not wrong. She just wasn't right.

By mid-1918, the conflict between Bolsheviks and Left SRs had escalated into open hostility. The Bolsheviks had dissolved the Constituent Assembly, outlawed competing socialist parties, and begun constructing a coercive apparatus—the Cheka—to enforce

their supremacy. Kaplan believed Lenin had betrayed the revolution's democratic and socialist principles.

In her interrogation after the attack, Kaplan stated plainly that she considered Lenin to be a traitor to "October". Read that again. "October". For the uninitiated, that will require some explaining.

Socialist revolutionaries in Russia called themselves Octoberists because the October 1917 revolution which brought the Tsar down. But even that doesn't explain the choice socialists made. The revolutionary socialists in Russia chose to wait for the harvest to come in. If it was a bad harvest, socialists stage their revolution, because social anxiety would be high, the masses more receptive to change, and the authorities distracted by a wide range of problems in society.

Russia entered 1917 with a severely compromised harvest, and the food crisis that helped topple the tsar was the product of wartime strain layered on top of an already fragile agrarian system. The harvest itself was not catastrophically poor in purely agricultural terms, but the country could not move, process, or distribute what it grew, and the result was widespread shortages that fed revolutionary unrest.

The most immediate cause was World War I, which gutted the agricultural workforce. Millions of peasants—the backbone of Russian farming—were conscripted, leaving fields under-worked and harvests incomplete. The army also requisitioned horses and livestock, crippling plowing and transport capacity. Grain that *was* harvested often sat in sidings or depots because the railways were overwhelmed with military traffic, unable to move food to the cities.

These wartime pressures collided with long-standing structural weaknesses.

Russian agriculture relied on outdated cultivation methods, communal landholding, and minimal mechanization, producing chronically low yields compared to Western Europe. Even before the war, the system was vulnerable to climatic variability and logistical bottlenecks.

By 1916, the Ministry of Agriculture was struggling to supply both the front and the rear; price controls, requisitions, and emergency distribution networks could not compensate for the collapsing transport system.

By early 1917, the situation had become untenable. The harvest had been weakened by labor shortages, the distribution system had broken down, and urban populations faced acute shortages despite grain existing in the countryside. This mismatch—production without delivery—was a central driver of the unrest that culminated in the February Revolution.

In short, the 1917 harvest was not a single failed crop but a systemic failure: wartime mobilization reduced labor and draft power, transportation collapsed, and Russia's structurally fragile agrarian economy could no longer sustain its cities. The food crisis was one of the decisive forces pushing the empire toward revolution.

October was the moment the socialist revolutionaries in Russia had been waiting for. But Lenin wasn't even there, and neither was Kaplan. Lenin was in hiding the night the Bolsheviks took control, and Kaplan later became infuriated by Lenin's exclusion of all other socialist factions.

The clash between Lenin and Kaplan was the first explicit example of the Paradox of the Proletariat, socialists coming to existential blows following a difference of opinion. Mind you, Kaplan was no "squishy socialist". She was a hard-core violent revolutionary who had already served eleven years in Tsarist prisons for socialist violence. She just as much right, if not more, to assert herself in the context of the cliques forming in Russia's socialist movement.

On 30 August 1918, she waited outside the Michelson factory in Moscow, approached Lenin as he left a meeting, and fired several shots at close range, severely wounding him. She did not attempt to flee; she expected to die for her act, which she saw as a revolutionary duty rather than a crime.

Kaplan's attack on Lenin occurred on the same day Moisei Uritsky was assassinated in Petrograd, and the Bolshevik leadership interpreted the two events as signs of a coordinated uprising. Whether or not such coordination existed, the perception was enough.

Kaplan's attempt on Lenin's life became one of the immediate triggers for the Red Terror, the sweeping campaign of arrests, executions, and repression that defined the next phase of Bolshevik rule.

Kaplan herself was executed without trial within days. Her act was not the work of a monarchist, a White Russian, or a conservative reactionary. It was the act of a socialist revolutionary, driven by the conviction that Lenin had destroyed the very revolution he claimed to lead.

And Lenin had. Lenin had, like all Marxist-Leninists to follow, infiltrated then dominated the socialist movement at hand. Once in power, they impose a dictatorship of their own. And the rest is, as they say, history.

The Cheka's history is a four-year blood bath called the Red Terror.

The Red Terror

The Red Terror in Soviet Russia began not as a single decree but as an accelerating atmosphere of violence that crested in late August 1918. Its origins lay in the Bolsheviks' fear that their fragile hold on power was slipping amid foreign invasion, internal rebellion, and political fragmentation.

The assassination of Moisei Uritsky in Petrograd on 30 August 1918, followed hours later by Fanya Kaplan's attempt on Lenin's life in Moscow, provided the spark that transformed scattered repression into a systematic campaign of state violence.

Newspapers of the day, including *Izvestiia* and *Pravda*, described the atmosphere as one of "panic and righteous fury," and Bolshevik leaders spoke openly of the need to "strike mercilessly at counterrevolution."

Within twenty-four hours of the attacks, Felix Dzerzhinsky, head of the Cheka, ordered mass arrests in Petrograd and Moscow. Contemporary accounts describe Cheka detachments moving through working-class districts at night, banging on doors with rifle butts, dragging suspects into courtyards, and shooting them without trial.

A Petrograd factory newspaper recorded that "the bodies lay in rows at the wall, some still breathing," a detail repeated in multiple eyewitness memoirs. In the first week alone, hundreds were executed in Petrograd; exact figures vary, but Cheka reports from early September list at least 500 confirmed shootings in the city.

On 5 September 1918, the Soviet government issued the formal decree "On Red Terror," authorizing the Cheka to "secure the Soviet Republic from class enemies by isolating them in concentration camps" and to execute anyone involved in "White Guard organizations, conspiracies, and rebellions."

The decree did not initiate terror so much as legitimize what was already underway. From this point forward, the campaign expanded with startling velocity.

In Moscow, mass executions took place in the cellars of the Cheka headquarters on Lubyanka Street. A surviving guard's diary describes prisoners being marched down the stairs, lined against a damp wall, and shot one by one, the bodies dragged out by other prisoners forced to assist.

The *Manchester Guardian*, reporting from Moscow in late 1918, wrote that "the executions proceed nightly; the crack of rifles is heard even from the street."

The terror spread rapidly beyond the capitals. In the Volga region, where famine and rebellion were already destabilizing Bolshevik control, Cheka units executed entire groups of hostages taken from villages suspected of aiding anti-Bolshevik forces.

In Nizhny Novgorod, local newspapers reported that 41 hostages were shot in a single day.

In Penza, Lenin himself sent telegrams urging “mass terror against the kulaks,” instructing local authorities to hang “no fewer than one hundred known bloodsuckers” as a warning.

These telegrams survive in the Soviet archives and remain among the most chilling documents of the period.

By late 1918 and early 1919, the terror had become a nationwide system.

The Cheka established concentration camps—later expanded into the Gulag—where political prisoners, suspected counterrevolutionaries, and ordinary civilians were held in brutal conditions.

In Arkhangelsk, foreign journalists accompanying Allied intervention forces reported seeing barges filled with prisoners being towed out to sea and sunk, though Soviet records do not confirm the scale of these killings.

In Crimea, after the defeat of White forces in 1920, Bolshevik commander Béla Kun oversaw mass executions of surrendered officers and civilians; estimates range from 50,000 to 70,000 dead, though exact numbers remain contested.

Casualty figures for the Red Terror as a whole vary widely.

Cheka records from 1918–1920 list approximately 15,000 official executions, but historians agree the true number is far higher. Many killings were never recorded, especially in rural areas where local Cheka detachments operated with near-total autonomy. Modern estimates range from 100,000 to 200,000 executed, with millions more subjected to imprisonment, forced labor, or deportation.

The terror was not merely a campaign of killing; it was a system of coercion that touched every aspect of life. Families were torn apart as hostages were taken to ensure grain deliveries. Villages were burned for suspected disloyalty. In cities, people disappeared from their homes at night, their names never appearing on any official list.

Contemporary accounts convey the indiscriminate nature of the violence.

A Petrograd schoolteacher wrote in her diary that “the Cheka arrests without reason; they shoot without trial; they release without explanation.” A worker in Moscow recalled seeing a man shot in the street because he failed to produce identification quickly enough.

Foreign diplomats reported that the terror created an atmosphere in which “no one feels safe, not even loyal communists.” Even Bolshevik officials occasionally fell victim to local Cheka zeal, arrested or executed on suspicion of insufficient revolutionary fervor.

By 1921, the terror began to subside as the Civil War drew to a close and the New Economic Policy was introduced.

But the legacy of the Red terror endures to this day. The Red Terror established the principle that political violence was a legitimate tool of governance, a precedent that shaped Soviet rule for decades. It created the institutional foundations of the secret police, the concentration camp system, and the culture of fear that defined Stalin’s later purges.

Above all, it demonstrated the speed with which revolutionary idealism could transform into systematic brutality when fused with ideological certainty and unchecked power.

The Red Terror was not a single event but a storm of violence that swept across Russia with astonishing force. Its chronology is marked by escalating waves—August 1918’s assassinations, September’s decree, the winter’s mass executions, the spring’s rural reprisals, and the final bloodletting in Crimea.

Its cruelty was not incidental but intrinsic, a deliberate strategy to break resistance and reshape society. And its victims, whose names often vanished into unmarked graves, remain the silent testimony to a revolution that devoured its own people in the name of liberation.

So, as you can see, Anastasia wasn’t the only child’s life to be extinguished during this nightmare. I don’t even have to ask. I assure you, all of the Cheka’s victims will agree, it would have been better for everyone involved if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

Dzerzhinsky remained the sole head of the Cheka throughout its existence, presiding over its expansion during the Civil War and its role in the Red Terror.

The Cheka did not disappear in a moment; it mutated, was renamed, absorbed, and ultimately dissolved as part of a deliberate political reorganization of Soviet power. Its

end was not a repudiation of terror but an administrative transformation that preserved its functions while erasing its name.

The Cheka's dissolution began with the political climate of 1921–1922, when the Bolsheviks emerged victorious from the Civil War but faced a country exhausted by violence, famine, and economic collapse. The New Economic Policy (NEP) was introduced to stabilize the economy, and with it came a desire—at least publicly—to soften the image of the Soviet state.

The Cheka, notorious for mass executions, hostage-taking, and arbitrary arrests, had become a symbol of wartime extremity. Even loyal Bolsheviks admitted privately that its name had become politically toxic. Contemporary newspapers like *Pravda* and *Izvestiia* began speaking of "transition to legality," and party congresses debated the need to bring state security under more formal legal oversight.

In February 1922, the Cheka was officially dissolved by decree of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee. But this dissolution was largely nominal.

The transformation was necessitated by true commitment to reform, or anything approaching the Rule of Law, rather by the growing fear the Cheka's excesses were threatening a counter revolution or coup.

The Cheka's core functions—political surveillance, counterintelligence, suppression of dissent—were transferred immediately to a new body, the State Political Directorate (GPU), placed under the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) of the Russian Republic.

The change was presented as a move toward legality: the GPU was nominally bound by criminal procedure codes, unlike the Cheka, which had operated entirely outside the law. The dissolution of the Cheka was intended to be institutionally cathartic, absolving the state of the sins of an agency by sacrificing the agency. As for Dzerzhinsky? Dzerzhinsky went on to lead the successor agency to the Cheka.

This pattern of systemic criminal excess, followed by cathartic institutional sacrifice characterizes the history of Russian Intelligence going forward. What I will now document, and what you should never neglect, is that the only change implemented across a century of its existence, is one new label after another. Never was the core institution of Russia's intelligence apparatus actually reformed.

1918 - 1934 NKVD

Chronologically speaking, the next intelligence or security agency to form, was the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs, a.k.a. the NKVD. But, for our purposes, reading the litany of crimes committed by Russian Intelligence, it is technically premature.

The NKVD's later reputation as the all-powerful Soviet security organ often obscures a crucial historical fact: from its creation in 1918 until 1934, the NKVD was not a secret-police or intelligence agency at all. It was a *civil administrative commissariat*, responsible for the mundane machinery of internal governance—local soviets, municipal services, fire brigades, civil registration, and the ordinary criminal police.

When the Cheka was dissolved in 1922, and the GPU/OGPU crated to replace it, the new agency was, ostensibly under the NKVD. This was an institutional farce. Dzerzhinsky remained in complete control of the internal security organ of the state, albeit with nominal legal constraints.

Across the years the KVD's name remained constant, but its function during those early years bore no resemblance to the institution that would later oversee the Gulag, conduct mass arrests, and direct the Great Terror. The NKVD of infamy, that which came about after Stalin came to power, did not exist until 1934.

The evolution of the NKVD into a security organ was not gradual; it was abrupt, deliberate, and tied to Stalin's consolidation of power in 1934.

When the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917, they inherited the tsarist Ministry of Internal Affairs and reorganized it as the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD). But Lenin did not entrust political repression or intelligence work to this body.

Instead, he created a separate institution—the Cheka, under Felix Dzerzhinsky—to handle counterrevolution, surveillance, executions, and internal security. The Cheka, and later its successors the GPU and OGPU, were independent of the NKVD and reported directly to the highest political authorities.

This separation was intentional.

Lenin believed that political repression required a revolutionary organ unencumbered by bureaucratic responsibilities, while the NKVD was meant to administer the everyday functions of the new state. Thus, throughout the 1920s, the NKVD remained a civilian ministry, overseeing local policing, prisons for ordinary criminals, public utilities, and administrative regulation, but not political policing.

The OGPU (Cheka), not the NKVD, was the true secret police of the early Soviet period. But there was, briefly, the GPU, which assumed the responsibilities from the Cheka when it was initially dissolved. The GPU, in turn, was dissolved the next year and replaced by the OGPU.

Before continuing on the GPU and OGPU, its best to discuss the "Special Departments" of the Red Army, the Osoby Otdel.

1918-1943 - Osoby Otdel (OO)

Osoby Otdel means "Special Departments". This was the formal name of the Red Army's military counterintelligence and internal-security organs from 1918 until their reorganization into SMERSH in 1943.

These departments were responsible for rooting out spies and saboteurs inside the Red Army, monitoring political loyalty of officers and soldiers, conducting purges, arresting or executing deserters, enforcing discipline, and coordinating with the Cheka/OGPU/NKVD during political operations.

Because the Osoby Otdel was an organ policing – and at times oppressing – Soviet citizens serving in the Red Army, I neglect the Osoby Otdel in the pre-World War 2 period, owing to the fact the Red Army, prior to general mobilization for WW 2, was composed of individuals who either identified as Socialists, as Soviets, and as The Proletariat, or they had no problem working under these revolutionaries.

Recounting the crimes of criminals who violated themselves would still be justifiable, but the record is less complete on extremes resorted to within the Red Army. I would not say the victims of the Special Departments deserved what they got, but "be careful what you wish for, you may get it".

The Special Departments were the military counterpart to the civilian secret police.

The directors of the Special Departments and their dates of service were Semyon Aralov (1918–1920), Alexander Nikonov (1920–1921), Yan Berzin (1921–1924), Vladimir Menzhinsky (oversight during OGPU period).For all practical purposes, when the Special Departments came under the oversight of the OGPU, it could be said the Special Departments were no longer truly independent, but they remained nominally distinct as a departments.

In the final years of the Special Departments' independent existence - 1934–1943 - various NKVD generals, including Leonid Zakovsky and Viktor Abakumov, oversaw the Special Departments during the Great Purge.

In 1943, the OO were reorganized into SMERSH, ending their independent existence.

1922–1923 - GPU

The *State Political Directorate* (GPU) was created and formally subordinated to the NKVD of the Russian Republic. It was a transitional structure following the Civil War.

The GPU was formally established on 6 February 1922, when the Bolshevik government dissolved the Cheka and replaced it with a new security organ called the *State Political Directorate under the NKVD of the RSFSR*.

This reorganization was enacted by decree of the Soviet government and reflected a desire—at least on paper—to place political policing on a more regular legal footing after the extreme emergency measures of the Civil War.

Decree, not legislation.

The statutory basis of the GPU was its creation as a directorate *within* the RSFSR's NKVD, rather than as an independent "extraordinary commission" like the Cheka. Its first and only chief during the period it was known as the GPU was Felix Dzerzhinsky, who had already headed the Cheka and simply continued in office under the new institutional name.

Although the GPU was nominally more restrained than the Cheka—no longer authorized to execute suspects without trial—it remained a powerful instrument of repression. It inherited ongoing counterintelligence and political-security operations, including Operation Trust, a major deception campaign begun under the Cheka and continued by the GPU and OGPU.

Operation Trust

> Operation Trust sits at the hinge point between the brutal improvisation of the Civil War and the cold, methodical craft of Soviet counterintelligence. It marks the moment when the organs born as instruments of terror—the Cheka and its successor, the GPU—learned to use deception, patience, and psychological manipulation as weapons just as potent as firing squads.
>
> To understand the dawn of Russian counterintelligence, you have to watch Operation Trust unfold from its inception in the early 1920s through its quiet, tangled end in 1927.
>
> The Civil War was winding down by 1920–1921. The White armies were defeated, but they were not gone; they had become an exile world scattered across Paris, Berlin, Warsaw, Constantinople, and Prague. Inside Soviet Russia, remnants of

monarchist and anti-Bolshevik networks still existed—sleeper agents, former officers, disillusioned specialists.

Abroad, émigré leaders dreamed of a return, and foreign intelligence services probed for cracks in the new regime. It was in this context that the idea of a grand counterintelligence operation emerged.

Lenin, acutely aware that the regime's survival depended not only on crushing armed resistance but on neutralizing conspiracies, approved plans for a deep deception campaign.

Felix Dzerzhinsky, head of the original Cheka and now the GPU, and Artur Artuzov, a rising star in counterintelligence, began to design what would become Operation Trust.

The core concept was simple and audacious: instead of merely infiltrating existing underground organizations, the GPU would create one. In 1921, they began to assemble the shell of a fictitious resistance movement—the Monarchist Union of Central Russia (MUCR). This "organization" was built around real people and real grievances, but its leadership and direction were entirely controlled by Soviet intelligence.

At its center stood Alexander Yakushev, a former Imperial bureaucrat who had been allowed to resume work in the Soviet foreign trade apparatus as one of the "specialists" the regime grudgingly relied on. Yakushev's position gave him legitimate reasons to travel abroad and meet émigrés. When his contacts with the White movement drew attention, he was arrested—and then turned.

Recruited by Artuzov, Yakushev became the face of the MUCR, the man who would convince exiles that a serious, organized, internal monarchist resistance existed inside Soviet Russia.

The operation's mechanics were intricate. The GPU created front structures, including the Moscow Municipal Credit Association, to provide plausible cover for meetings and communications. They used genuine monarchist sympathizers and former officers as "window dressing," allowing the MUCR to feel real enough to attract trust.

Letters were sent abroad, couriers dispatched, clandestine meetings staged in safe apartments. Yakushev and other operatives spun a narrative: there was a network of loyalists inside Russia, biding their time, waiting for the right moment to strike. What they needed was coordination with émigré leaders and foreign support.

The promise was intoxicating. For exiles who feared that Russia had been lost forever, the idea of a living, breathing underground at home was a lifeline.

One of the operation's early strategic successes was its effect on General Alexander Kutepov, a key figure in the émigré military milieu. Kutepov had formed a "combat organization" within the Russian All-Military Union (ROVS), dedicated to militant action against the Soviet regime. He believed in raids, sabotage, and armed incursions.

Through Operation Trust, the GPU managed to persuade him that such actions were premature and dangerous. The MUCR's emissaries argued that internal forces were organizing and that external attacks might disrupt their careful preparations. Kutepov, convinced that a serious underground existed, held back.

In this way, Trust did not merely neutralize individuals; it altered the strategic posture of entire exile networks, delaying active operations and buying the Soviet state precious time.

The most dramatic episodes of Operation Trust involved the luring of high-profile enemies back into Soviet hands.

Boris Savinkov, once a legendary revolutionary terrorist and later a fierce opponent of the Bolsheviks, had spent years in exile organizing resistance. Through carefully crafted messages and intermediaries, the MUCR convinced him that a genuine anti-Bolshevik movement inside Russia needed his leadership.

In August 1924, Savinkov crossed the border, believing he was entering a country on the brink of uprising. Instead, he walked into a trap. He was arrested, interrogated, and eventually died in custody in May 1925—officially by suicide, though the circumstances remain murky. His fall sent shockwaves through émigré circles; if Savinkov could be deceived, who was safe?

Even more famous in Western memory is the fate of Sidney Reilly, the British agent often mythologized as a real-life "Ace of Spies." Reilly had long been involved in anti-Bolshevik plotting and had participated in earlier attempts to undermine the Soviet regime.

Operation Trust presented him with what seemed like a golden opportunity: a chance to meet with leaders of a serious internal resistance movement, coordinate efforts, and perhaps finally topple the Bolsheviks. In September 1925, he crossed into Soviet territory under clandestine conditions, believing he was entering a secure environment.

The OGPU, by then the all-Union successor to the GPU, had choreographed every step. Reilly was arrested, interrogated, and executed in November 1925.

Reilly's disappearance was initially shrouded in rumor, but later Soviet disclosures confirmed his fate. Post-Soviet archival work has uncovered fragments of his case file, revealing the careful preparation that went into his entrapment.

Operation Trust was not limited to spectacular captures. It also involved quieter, more insidious manipulations.

One notable episode was the "illegal" trip of Vasily Shulgin, a prominent conservative and former Duma deputy, into Soviet Russia. The journey was presented as clandestine, but in reality it was monitored and controlled by the OGPU.

Shulgin traveled through the country, observed conditions, and later published a book, *Three Capitals*, describing his impressions. He wrote that Russia seemed to be reviving and that the Bolsheviks might eventually be removed from power, a conclusion that reflected both his own biases and the carefully curated reality he had been allowed to see.

Shulgin's account, widely read in émigré circles, contributed to a sense that the situation inside Russia was fluid and that internal resistance might indeed be growing—precisely the illusion Operation Trust sought to sustain.

The human cost of Operation Trust is harder to quantify than the casualties of open terror, but it was real and significant. Dozens of genuine opposition figures were identified, arrested, and either executed or sent to labor camps. Some estimates suggest that around forty key activists and agents were neutralized directly through Trust, though the full number of lesser-known victims is likely higher.

The operation also inflicted psychological damage on exile communities. When it was finally exposed in 1927, after the defection of an operative named Opperput and a failed émigré-backed raid, the revelation that the "Monarchist Union of Central Russia" had been a Soviet construct all along shattered confidence.

Exiles realized that for years they had been talking to the enemy, feeding information, and basing their strategies on lies. Trust did not just eliminate individuals; it corroded the very possibility of coordinated resistance.

Post-Soviet access to the Trust files has confirmed the operation's complexity. Historian John Costello, granted limited access in the early 1990s, reported that the archives contained thirty-seven volumes of documents—so dense with double agents, code names, and overlapping deceptions that even Russian intelligence historians struggled to disentangle fact from fabrication.

The files reveal a kind of symphonic structure: multiple lines of communication, parallel narratives tailored to different audiences, and a constant interplay between genuine and manufactured information. This was not improvisation; it was a carefully orchestrated performance designed to run for years.

Operation Trust marks the dawn of Russian counterintelligence in a very specific sense. Before Trust, the Cheka and early GPU had relied primarily on blunt instruments: arrests, executions, intimidation. They infiltrated enemies, but their methods were often crude and short-term.

Operation Trust introduced a different model: long-term deception, controlled opposition, and the use of fake organizations as traps. It demonstrated that the Soviet security organs could think in years, not days; that they could manipulate not only individuals but entire political ecosystems; and that they could weaponize hope itself—the hope of internal resistance—as a means of control.

The operation also set patterns that would recur throughout Soviet and later Russian intelligence history. The idea of creating or co-opting opposition movements, of running "active measures" that blend truth and falsehood, of using controlled leaks and staged events to shape perceptions—these techniques became staples of the OGPU, NKVD, and KGB.

Operation Trust showed that terror and deception were not alternatives but complements. The same state that shot hostages in cellars could also patiently cultivate a fake underground for six years, waiting for its enemies to walk into the net.

In the end, Operation Trust did not save the Soviet regime by itself; the Bolsheviks' survival depended on many factors: military victory, economic adaptation, internal repression. But Trust played a crucial role in neutralizing one of the most dangerous threats—the possibility that exiles, foreign powers, and internal conspirators might coordinate effectively.

By turning that coordination into a mirage, the GPU and OGPU bought time and space for the regime to consolidate. And in doing so, they announced the arrival of a new kind of power: a secret police that could not only kill, but also lie with

extraordinary sophistication, and make its enemies believe the lies until it was too late.

Beyond Operation Trust, the GPU assumed the Cheka's core functions: suppressing counterrevolution, monitoring political dissent, conducting foreign intelligence through its Foreign Department, and maintaining internal security during the fragile early years of Soviet state-building.

The GPU's brief existence from February 1922 to November 1923 was a transitional moment in Soviet state security: the period when the Bolshevik terror apparatus shifted from the improvisational brutality of the Civil War toward a more bureaucratized, legally-cloaked, and strategically coordinated system of political policing.

This was the first of several re-brands Russian Intelligence received from its bloody and lawless beginning to the present day.

Although the GPU lacked the Cheka's formal license to execute without trial, its mandate remained sweeping. It suppressed counterrevolution, monitored political dissent, conducted foreign intelligence operations, and maintained internal security across the RSFSR.

Each of these initiatives produced concrete actions in 1922–1923, and together they reveal how the Soviet security state learned to operate in peacetime while preserving the coercive power it had developed during the Red Terror.

The suppression of counterrevolution remained the GPU's most visible function. Although the Civil War had largely ended, pockets of resistance persisted, especially in rural regions where anti-Bolshevik sentiment remained strong. The GPU inherited the Cheka's network of provincial branches and used them to identify, arrest, and prosecute former White officers, monarchist sympathizers, and members of underground anti-Soviet groups.

According to contemporary accounts, the GPU no longer possessed the Cheka's explicit authority to execute suspects without trial, and on paper political crimes were supposed to be adjudicated by judges rather than resolved through summary violence. In practice, however, the GPU continued to use coercive methods, including intimidation, forced confessions, and extrajudicial detention.

The transition from terror to "legality" was more rhetorical than real. It was in the transition from Cheka to GPU that the Grand theater of Russian Intelligence Operations began. There was no trial which was not a "mock trial", a trial whose outcome was predetermined. The actual proceedings were ceremonial, vignettes staged for the party leadership to create the impression legal process was being followed.

Counter Revolutionary Ops

The GPU's counterrevolutionary work targeted the remnants of Tsarist networks, but also included dismantling remnants of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party's underground networks. It is particularly important to note the violent clashes between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks persisted in the post-Coup period, for it was not Tsarist factions alone who concluded the Bolshevik coup was in fact a coup.

The Socialist-Revolutionary Party (SR), which had been weakened but not eliminated after the Red Terror, was foremost among socialist factions accusing the Bolsheviks of foul play. And because the SRs saw themselves as the legitimate Proletariat, their responses were typically violent.

The Paradox of the Proletariat continued to wreak havoc, from the start to this very day.

The SRs published testimonies in exile describing GPU raids, interrogations, and arrests in 1922, portraying the GPU as a "communist Okhrana" that had simply replaced the tsarist secret police with a new ideological master.

The SRs association of the Bolshevik with the Tsarist regime would came as a shock to anyone of the period, but which makes sense in the context of the Paradox of the Proletariat. The SRs were libeling the Bolsheviks to all inside the revolutionary movement. These accounts, though partisan, reflect the continuity of repression between the Cheka and the GPU.

Monitoring Dissent

Monitoring political dissent became increasingly important as the Bolsheviks attempted to stabilize the country under the New Economic Policy. The GPU was tasked with overseeing political reliability in factories, trade unions, and local soviets. GPU operatives were embedded in every major production facility, and this cadre was expanded until saturation of all industries was achieved.

The GPU monitored Mensheviks, anarchists, and non-Bolshevik socialists who continued to agitate for political pluralism. Surveillance expanded into cultural and intellectual life, with GPU agents attending public lectures, monitoring student groups, and observing editorial boards of newspapers.

Although the GPU lacked the Cheka's explicit authority to shoot dissenters, it used arrests, interrogations, and threats of prosecution to silence critics. The shift from mass terror to political policing did not reduce the organization's reach; it merely changed its methods.

The GPU's own reports from 1922–1923, later declassified, show extensive surveillance of political meetings and systematic infiltration of opposition circles.

These activities reflected Dzerzhinsky's reforms, which aimed to transform the security apparatus from an emergency organ of terror into a permanent institution of political control. In most cases, the clam that agents were "everywhere, all the time" is hyperbole. In the case of the GPU, it was documented fact.

The GPU was the iron grip with which the Proletariat would monitor the population until it had been satisfactorily "re-educated".

Foreign Intelligence

Foreign intelligence operations expanded significantly during the GPU period. The Foreign Department, headed by Mikhail Trilisser, oversaw espionage abroad and the liquidation of enemies of the Soviet state. Trilisser's department inherited the Cheka's foreign networks but reorganized them into a more disciplined intelligence service.

The GPU conducted surveillance of émigré communities, monitored foreign diplomats, and gathered intelligence on foreign governments. It also began planning long-term deception operations that would later mature under the OGPU, including the early groundwork for Operation Trust.

Although Operation Trust is typically associated with the OGPU era, its conceptual foundations were laid during the GPU period, when Soviet intelligence first experimented with controlled opposition networks and covert manipulation of émigré groups.

The Foreign Department's activities in 1922–1923 included espionage missions in Europe, recruitment of agents among Russian exiles, and covert monitoring of foreign intelligence services that were probing the stability of the new Soviet state.

The story of GPU and OGPU activity in the United States between 1922 and 1934 is harder to reconstruct than their operations in Europe, but enough fragments survive—from declassified Soviet records, FBI files, émigré memoirs, and later historical work—to sketch a clear pattern.

New York, with its growing Russian expatriate community, became the natural focal point. What the Soviet services did there in these years was less spectacular than the entrapment operations of Operation Trust, but it was foundational: they mapped the émigré milieu, infiltrated organizations,

cultivated agents, and began building the networks that later NKVD and KGB rezidenturas would inherit.

When the Cheka was reorganized into the GPU in 1922, Soviet foreign intelligence was still primarily oriented toward Europe. Berlin, Paris, Warsaw, and Prague were the main centers of Russian exile politics, and the GPU's Foreign Department under Mikhail Trilisser concentrated its resources there.

Yet the United States already mattered.

It was a major financial center, a hub of anti-Bolshevik fundraising, and home to a small but vocal Russian émigré press. New York in particular hosted Russian-language newspapers, Orthodox parishes, mutual aid societies, and political clubs.

Soviet leaders understood that money, propaganda, and political legitimacy flowed through these channels. Even if the GPU could not yet run large-scale operations on American soil, it needed eyes and ears.

The earliest documented Soviet intelligence presence in the United States in this period came through diplomatic and trade missions. The Soviet government, seeking recognition and economic agreements, established unofficial and semi-official contacts in New York and Washington.

Within these delegations, intelligence officers operated under cover as trade representatives, clerks, or technical experts. Their tasks were modest but important: identify key émigré figures, monitor their activities, collect information on American attitudes toward the Soviet regime, and report on any organized anti-Soviet efforts.

New York's Russian expatriate community, concentrated in neighborhoods like the Lower East Side and later in Brooklyn, was observed through this lens. Russian-language newspapers such as *Novoye Russkoye Slovo* and other short-lived titles were read carefully; their editors and contributors were profiled; their political leanings assessed.

By the mid-1920s, as the GPU became the OGPU and the USSR consolidated, Soviet intelligence began to treat the United States not only as a diplomatic target but as a political and counterintelligence one.

The OGPU's foreign operations expanded, and while Europe remained primary, the United States gained a more defined place in the global map. New York's Russian émigré organizations—monarchist clubs, veterans' associations, church

councils—were infiltrated through sympathizers and agents recruited in Europe or inside the Soviet Union before emigration.

Some émigrés who traveled back and forth between Europe and America carried OGPU influence with them, acting as informal conduits of information. Others were approached in New York itself, often through ideological or financial vulnerabilities.

The OGPU's goal was not to stage dramatic arrests on American soil—that would have been impossible—but to neutralize potential threats by understanding them, sowing distrust, and occasionally feeding disinformation back into exile networks.

One of the most significant channels for Soviet influence in the United States during this period was the American communist movement. The Communist Party USA (CPUSA), founded earlier but increasingly aligned with Moscow, became both a political ally and an intelligence resource.

The CPUSA was, for its part, a fledgling organization, but actively infiltrating and recruiting from trade unions. Teacher's Unions became a priority interest, which makes sense for a movement dedicated to re-educating the masses. The CPUSA made the teaching profession contested ground, and the American Federation of Teachers was forced to disband several local chapters after CPUSA take-over.

For the most part, though, the CPUSA was in an initial, infiltration and monitoring phase in its initiative with the Teacher's Unions. The GPU, through its proxies in the CPUSA, was one degree removed from the AFT. But it would be false to claim the AFT was compromised, much less co-opted by the CPUSA in the pre-War period.

That would gradually change, but not until long after the OGPU had morphed into its post-war forms.

In the 1920s and early 30s, the GPU/OGPU plied its craft through political party structures, front organizations, and cultural associations. Meetings, lectures, and social events provided opportunities to observe émigrés who drifted between anti-Bolshevik circles and left-leaning groups. Soviet intelligence gained access to Russian-speaking workers, intellectuals, and recruited activists, primarily in New York.

The OGPU's Foreign Department coordinated with Comintern representatives to ensure that information flowed both ways: political reports from CPUSA cadres

went to Moscow, and guidance from Moscow shaped the party's stance toward Russian exiles.

This interplay between party politics and intelligence work is visible in later NKVD and KGB files; in the 1922–1934 period, it was already taking shape.

Within the Russian expatriate community itself, the OGPU's presence was felt more as a shadow than as a visible hand. Memoirs from émigrés in New York describe a pervasive fear of infiltration. Rumors circulated that certain priests, journalists, or community leaders were "Soviet agents," though hard proof was rare.

Occasional scandals erupted when someone was exposed as having maintained contact with Soviet consular officials or trade representatives, leading to ostracism and internal splits. These episodes, while not always documented in surviving Soviet records, fit the pattern of OGPU practice: use a mix of genuine agents and suspected sympathizers to keep exile communities divided and uncertain.

The goal was to prevent the emergence of a unified, effective anti-Soviet front in America.

Foreign intelligence in this period also had a more traditional dimension: gathering information on American politics, economics, and military affairs. New York, as a financial capital, was crucial. Soviet trade missions and commercial representatives collected data on credit conditions, grain markets, industrial technology, and shipping routes. Some of this work was purely economic; some had clear intelligence value.

The OGPU's Foreign Department used these channels to identify Americans who might be sympathetic to the Soviet experiment—journalists, academics, businessmen—and to cultivate relationships that could later be leveraged for information or influence. While the most famous Soviet penetrations of the United States (Alger Hiss, the Rosenbergs, and others) belong to a later era, the habits and networks that made them possible began forming in the 1920s and early 1930s.

The documented instances of direct OGPU operations targeting specific individuals in the United States during 1922–1934 are relatively few, and most of the dramatic cases—such as the luring of Sidney Reilly and Boris Savinkov—took place in Europe. Yet even here, New York played a role.

Exile organizations in the city were part of the information environment that OGPU officers manipulated. Letters, reports, and rumors originating in New York

traveled to Paris, Warsaw, and Berlin, where they were intercepted, analyzed, or quietly redirected by Soviet agents.

In this sense, New York's Russian expatriate community was both a target and a conduit: its internal debates, fundraising campaigns, and political statements fed into a larger transnational network that Soviet counterintelligence sought to control.

By 1934, when the OGPU was absorbed into the all-Union NKVD, the foundations of Soviet intelligence activity in the United States were firmly in place. New York had been mapped: its émigré organizations catalogued, its newspapers monitored, its political clubs infiltrated. The CPUSA had become a reliable partner and a source of recruits. Trade and diplomatic missions had established routines of information gathering.

The Soviet services had learned how to operate in an environment where they could not openly arrest or kill, relying instead on surveillance, influence, and the careful cultivation of agents.

The archival record for this period is incomplete, and much of what we know comes from later references in NKVD and KGB files, from FBI counterintelligence investigations, and from émigré testimony. There is no single, dramatic "Operation Trust in New York" to point to.

Instead, there is a slow, deliberate process: the dawn of Soviet intelligence in America, in which the GPU and OGPU treated New York's Russian expatriate community as a field to be studied, penetrated, and quietly shaped.

The violence of the Red Terror did not cross the Atlantic, but its logic did. The same state that built firing squads in Lubyanka also built networks in New York, learning how to wage a different kind of struggle—one fought with information, suspicion, and the long patience of counterintelligence.

Subdepartments were not insulated from the Paradox of the Proletariat. The existential imperative and fatal flaw implicit in Socialist ideology remained operative. The Paradox of the Proletariat invoked an imperative which reads nothing short of "Kill or be killed".

Trilisser's later liquidation during the Great Purge underscores the dangerous and politically sensitive nature of early Soviet foreign intelligence work. We'll return to Trilisser's fate at the appropriate time. Just be advised, he made himself a marked man. Everyone in the Soviet leadership made themselves a marked man. Because unanimity of thought was not humanly possible, there was no way to avoid becoming a marked man.

Internal Security

Internal security remained the GPU's foundational responsibility. The organization was headquartered at Lubyanka in Moscow, where it inherited the Cheka's administrative structure and personnel. Its internal security work included policing economic crimes, enforcing grain requisition policies, and maintaining order in urban centers.

The GPU monitored black-market activity, investigated corruption among local officials, and supervised the early labor camp system that had begun to take shape during the Cheka era.

Although the GPU was nominally bound by legal procedures, its internal security operations often relied on coercion.

The organization's presence in daily life was pervasive: GPU agents inspected workplaces, monitored transportation hubs, and conducted searches of private homes.

The GPU also played a role in enforcing censorship, ensuring that newspapers and publishers adhered to Bolshevik political guidelines. Its internal security work reflected the broader Bolshevik goal of consolidating state power through surveillance, discipline, and selective repression.

Taken together, the GPU's activities from 1922 to 1923 reveal an institution in transition. It no longer operated with the overt brutality of the Cheka, but it retained the same personnel, the same headquarters, and the same ideological mission.

The effective distinction between the Cheka and the GPU was largely theatrical. Its form became increasingly institutional and all pervasive.

The GPU's suppression of counterrevolution continued the work of the Red Terror under a veneer of legality. Its monitoring of political dissent extended the Bolshevik monopoly on political life. Its foreign intelligence operations laid the groundwork for sophisticated deception campaigns that would define Soviet counterintelligence for decades. And its internal security work ensured that the state's authority penetrated every corner of society.

Although the GPU's existence was brief—ending on 15 November 1923, when it was reorganized into the all-Union OGPU— during that short period, the GPU served as the bridge between the revolutionary terror of the Cheka and the more bureaucratized, centrally coordinated security apparatus that defined Soviet intelligence for the next seven decades.

1923–1934 - OGPU

When the GPU was reorganized into the OGPU in November 1923, the change reflected the creation of the USSR and the need for an all-Union security organ, not a repudiation of the GPU's methods. The OGPU inherited everything the GPU had built—its networks, its practices, and its ethos—ensuring that the machinery of repression would continue to evolve, expand, and harden in the years to come.

The OGPU was formally established on 15 November 1923, when the Soviet government dissolved the GPU and replaced it with a new, all-Union security organ called the *Joint State Political Directorate under the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR*.

The OGPU's statutory basis lay in a decree issued by the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee, which reorganized the former republican-level GPU into a centralized institution empowered to combat counterrevolution, espionage, border violations, and political banditry across the entire Soviet Union.

Decree. There is that word again.

The decree explicitly grounded the new body in Article 61 of the USSR Constitution, giving the OGPU authority over the political administrations of all union republics and granting it military status in matters of transportation, communications, and frontier protection.

During the period in which it was known as the OGPU (1923–1934), the organization was headed first by Felix Dzerzhinsky from 1923 until his death in 1926, then by Vyacheslav Menzhinsky from 1926 until 1934, and briefly by Genrikh Yagoda in 1934 before the OGPU was absorbed into Stalin's NKVD.

It was under the OGPU that the structure and function of Soviet Oppression was formally organized, improved and, regrettably, perfected. In contrast to the early years of the Soviet Union, the Dictatorship of the Proletariat had sufficient institutions to contain the Paradox of the proletariat, and liquidated or negate all dissident or dissonant voices.

The OGPU could so at an industrial scale.

The OGPU's major campaigns of repression were extensive and foundational to the emerging Soviet security state. So extensive and so well documented that a comprehensive litany herein would be, not just a redundant exercise, but a pedantic one at that.

I could impress you, but not without depressing you.

Allow me then to read the litany in summary.

The OGPU played a central role in forced collectivization, crushing peasant resistance and deporting millions—especially so-called kulaks—into the expanding network of labor camps that foreshadowed the Gulag system.

I'll address the Kulaks before addressing their destination, the Gulag.

Kulaks

In pre-revolutionary Russia, the term **kulak** (кулак), literally meaning **"fist,"** originally referred to a peasant who was tight-fisted, grasping, or hard in dealings—someone who squeezed others economically.

As you can see, attitudes toward thrifty farmers had already degenerated into open pejorative before the Proletariat evolved into a superior species of hominid. The term itself was most broadly, and most consistently applied toward the farmers of what we call Ukraine today, but where acknowledged broadly as Cossacks in the years before the Bolshevik Coup.

By the late nineteenth century, the word also took on more specific social meaning: a rural household that hired labor, lent money at interest, or operated on a scale larger than the typical peasant farm.

Kulaks were not aristocrats or landlords; they were prosperous peasants within the village commune who often acted as local creditors, grain buyers, or middlemen. In other words, Kulaks were entrepreneurs among the traditional serf class, progressively a trend in pre-revolution Russia.

Full stop. The very existence of Kulaks to begin with undermines the cliched narrative of the down trodden serf. Kulaks were in fact rising in their socioeconomic status, even if they did not escape the imprimatur of their caste. The resentment originated with individuals of other classes, the "service intelligentsia" from which Lenin originated, because Kulaks appeared to be jumping the queue.

The Proletariat inherited this resentment and amplified it to their revolutionary ends.

The term "Kulak" carried a mixture of resentment and grudging respect, implying both economic success and exploitative behavior. In short, before the revolution, a kulak was understood as a well-off, entrepreneurial peasant whose wealth and influence set him apart from the mass of subsistence farmers, and

whose “fist” symbolized both his prosperity and his perceived tight grip on village economic life.

What the Proletariat feared was the grip Kulaks had on Russian life. In the absence of all imperial authority, the Kulaks were the functional core of the Russian economy. Kulaks were, analytically speaking, capitalists, it is just that only socialists spoke in these terms.

The Russian population merely spoke of Kulaks, with the same disdain most spoke of “Jews”. In fact, the two were often one and the same. This fact would bring doom upon Ukraine in 1932 when Stalin implemented a Red Terror of his own, primarily focusing on the Kulaks (and Jews) of Ukraine.

Once again, the Paradox of the proletariat was operating with lethal effect.

To the OGPU, especially under Stalin, the word “kulak” did not merely mean what it had meant in pre-revolutionary Russia. It did not mean a wealthy peasant, nor a landowner, nor even a prosperous farmer. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, “kulak” had become an operational category of enemies, a political designation invented and manipulated by the Soviet security organs to justify surveillance, arrest, deportation, and liquidation.

For the OGPU, the kulak was not a social class. He was a *target*.

The term’s meaning evolved rapidly, and the OGPU played a central role in that evolution. In the early 1920s, the Cheka and GPU still used “kulak” in a somewhat traditional sense, referring to peasants who hired labor or owned larger farms. But by the time the OGPU became the all-Union security organ in 1923, the term was already drifting toward a political definition.

The OGPU’s internal reports began to describe kulaks as “class enemies,” “exploiters,” and “counterrevolutionary elements.” These were not economic descriptions; they were ideological labels. The OGPU was transforming the kulak from a farmer into a threat.

This shift became decisive during collectivization.

You see, Stalin’s arch nemesis in the party was Trotsky, and though the man had already been purged, Stalin was not satisfied with eliminating Trotsky. Stalin wanted to eliminate everyone like Trotsky. That meant the “Kulaks” of Ukraine. Trotsky was a “Jew” and a peasant farmer, so the Jews and peasant farmers of Ukraine had to be eliminated as an organized threat.

When Stalin announced the “liquidation of the kulaks as a class” in 1929, it was the OGPU that operationalized the policy.

The OGPU created the categories, compiled the lists, conducted the arrests, and organized the deportations. In practice, the OGPU defined a kulak as anyone who resisted collectivization, complained about grain requisitions, owned a horse, hired seasonal labor, or simply appeared politically unreliable.

The definition was elastic by design. It allowed the OGPU to treat entire villages as kulak strongholds and to classify thousands of families as kulak households without reference to their actual economic status.

To the OGPU, the kulak was the peasant who stood in the way of the state. He was the obstacle to grain procurement, the nucleus of rural resistance, the embodiment of "capitalist tendencies" in the countryside. The OGPU's reports described kulaks as organizers of sabotage, leaders of uprisings, and instigators of anti-Soviet sentiment.

Whether these accusations were true mattered less than the fact that they justified repression. The OGPU needed enemies to fight, and the kulak became the archetype of the rural enemy.

The OGPU's treatment of kulaks reflected this political logic.

Kulaks were subjected to surveillance, economic penalties, confiscation of property, arrest, deportation to labor camps, and in many cases execution. The OGPU organized "troikas"—three-man tribunals that issued rapid sentences without trial.

So much for the legal constraints on the OGPU. The original legal constraints defining the OGPU were intended to protect the Russian faction, and then only the highest echelons of the Russian faction. Kulaks need not apply.

These troikas classified kulaks into categories: those to be executed, those to be deported to remote regions, and those to be resettled within their own districts under OGPU supervision. It mattered not who you were, or what you were accused of, nor even when you were accused. The verdict had already been determined.

The troika process was bureaucratic, but its purpose was annihilative. The OGPU was not regulating a class; it was dismantling it.

By the early 1930s, the term "kulak" had lost any connection to wealth or landholding. It had become a political accusation, a label applied to anyone who resisted the state's agricultural policies. The OGPU used the term to justify mass repression, and the term's vagueness made it an ideal instrument of terror.

> Just like the National Socialist Worker's Party in Deutschland, the International Socialists were evoking existing resentments to incite attitudes of the masses. Who can blame them. Nobody could make heads or tales of Marx's demographic mumbo jumbo. Any bogeyman would do, and "Kulak" fit the OGPU's purpose.
>
> A kulak was whoever the OGPU said he was.
>
> The designation could be applied to a prosperous farmer, a middle peasant, a village teacher, or even a poor peasant who happened to oppose collectivization. The OGPU's own documents acknowledged that the category was fluid. What mattered was not the peasant's economic status but his perceived political reliability.
>
> In this sense, the kulak was to the OGPU what the "counterrevolutionary" had been to the Cheka: a flexible enemy category that could be expanded or contracted according to the needs of the state.
>
> The OGPU did not merely enforce Stalin's policy; it shaped it.
>
> By defining kulaks broadly, the OGPU ensured that collectivization would be accompanied by mass repression. By treating kulaks as political enemies, the OGPU transformed an economic policy into a campaign of social destruction.

The OGPU conducted widespread persecution of political opponents, including White émigrés, anti-communists, and dissidents, using surveillance, arrests, and executions as routine instruments of policy.

The OGPU also continued and expanded covert operations such as Operation Trust, which entrapped monarchists and foreign agents through elaborate deception. Its methods included mass deportations, suppression of religious institutions, targeting of ethnic minorities, and the construction of early concentration-camp complexes that became permanent features of Soviet governance.

The early concentration camps run by the OGPU were the first camps that evolved directly into what became known as the Gulag, but with one important nuance: the institutional name "Gulag" did not yet exist. The OGPU's camps were the foundational layer, the prototype system, and the administrative ancestor of the later Gulag network.

Ask the hundreds of thousands of souls who disappeared into the OGPU's concentration camps. They'll all tell you, it would have been better for all involved if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

1932-1933 The Holodomor

The Holodomor of 1932–1933 stands as one of the most devastating crimes committed by Russian Intelligence, a catastrophe engineered through policy and enforced through terror. It was not a natural famine, nor an accidental failure of agricultural planning, but a deliberate act of political violence directed primarily against the Ukrainian countryside.

At the center of its execution stood the OGPU, the Soviet secret police, whose methods, reach, and ideological zeal made mass starvation not only possible but inescapable.

The famine emerged from Stalin's campaign to break the peasantry as an independent social force and to crush Ukrainian national consciousness. Grain requisition quotas were set at levels that could not be met without stripping villages of all food. When local officials hesitated or pleaded for relief, Moscow responded with punitive decrees, blacklists, and the dispatch of OGPU detachments.

The OGPU's role was not peripheral; it was the mechanism through which state policy became lethal reality. Its officers conducted house-to-house searches, seized hidden stores of grain, confiscated livestock and vegetables, and imposed "natural fines" that removed even the last scraps of sustenance. They sealed entire villages, blocked roads, and patrolled rail stations to prevent starving peasants from fleeing to cities or neighboring republics.

In Ukraine and the Kuban, OGPU troops enforced internal passport restrictions that trapped millions in famine zones.

The OGPU's actions were not improvisations but the systematic application of state power. Its reports to Stalin and the Politburo described "sabotage," "kulak resistance," and "counterrevolutionary agitation," framing hunger as a political crime rather than a humanitarian disaster.

These reports justified further repression: mass arrests, deportations to labor camps, and the destruction of communities deemed insufficiently loyal. The OGPU's surveillance penetrated every level of rural life, from village councils to collective farms, ensuring that no official could reduce quotas or distribute relief without risking arrest. In this way, the famine became a tool of political discipline, enforced by an institution designed to eliminate opposition through fear.

The Holodomor cannot be understood without recognizing the OGPU's central role. The Soviet leadership designed the policies that produced starvation, but the OGPU executed them with precision and ruthlessness. It prevented escape, suppressed

resistance, and ensured that hunger served the state's ideological ends. The famine's scale—millions dead—was the result of a political system that relied on the secret police as its primary instrument of coercion. The OGPU did not merely enforce the Holodomor; it shaped its character, transforming agricultural failure into a weapon of national destruction.

In the sick logic of the Octoberists, pre-emptive slaughter after a failed harvest insulated the Proletariat from a counter-revolution, for after a failed harvest, desperate calls for change were loudest.

But ask if you must, you'll see. All of the Holodomor's victims will agree, it would have been better if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

Post Holodomor Harvests

Ukrainian harvest figures for 1932–1952 exist in fragments, but no continuous, reliable statistical series survives, and the surviving numbers are deeply compromised by Soviet falsification, classification, and political manipulation.

The archival record is broken, contradictory, and in many places deliberately destroyed. As a result, historians can reconstruct trends, but not produce a clean, authoritative table of annual harvest totals.

The core problem is that agricultural output statistics in the Stalin era were treated as state secrets, and the regime routinely altered them to meet political targets. Mark Tauger's analysis of the 1932 harvest demonstrates that even the most basic grain figures for the early 1930s are internally inconsistent and contradicted by famine evidence.

Meanwhile, the Harvard Ukrainian Studies demographic research shows that the archives for the 1920s–1930s were heavily censored, manipulated, and in some cases destroyed, especially after the 1937 census revealed catastrophic population losses. These two facts together explain why "hard figures" for harvests—including meat, livestock, and grain—cannot be trusted for the famine decade.

What *can* be said with confidence is that Ukrainian agricultural output did not recover to pre-Holodomor levels until after World War II, and even then recovery was uneven.

The destruction of livestock during collectivization, the loss of skilled agricultural labor through famine and deportation, and the devastation of the German occupation created a long agricultural depression.

Livestock numbers—critical for draft power—collapsed by roughly half between 1928 and 1932, and this structural damage persisted into the 1940s. Grain yields improved somewhat in the late 1930s, but the war erased those gains.

By the late 1940s and early 1950s, Ukraine's agricultural output was approaching—but still not consistently matching—the levels seen before collectivization. This is why historians describe the Holodomor not only as a famine but as a multi-generational agricultural catastrophe: the demographic shock, the destruction of expertise, and the collapse of rural infrastructure created tertiary losses that lasted decades.

In truth, we can never achieve an accurate human cost, because Anastasia never got to attend her debutante ball. That is the most succinct way to put it. Anastasia represents every child of Russia whose life was cut short, or permanently derailed because the Proletariat had evolved into a superior species of hominid.

Yes, partial harvest figures exist for 1932–1952, but they are not reliable enough to form a definitive statistical series. And no, Ukrainian harvests did not fully recover to pre-Holodomor levels until well after the Second World War, and even then only unevenly. The Holodomor's agricultural damage was not a two-year event—it was a generational collapse whose effects lasted into the 1950s and beyond.

The Gulag – 1918 -1960

The history of the Gulag begins not with Stalin, nor even with the OGPU, but with the earliest coercive institutions of Bolshevik rule. The very name "Gulag"—an acronym for *Glavnoye upravleniye ispravitel'no-trudovykh lagerey*, the Main Directorate of Correctional Labour Camps—belongs to a later period, but the logic behind it was present from the moment the Cheka began to build a system of camps for "class enemies" in the chaos of the Civil War.

The Cheka's early camps were improvised, brutal, and ideologically charged. They were justified by the 15 April 1919 decree of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee, which formally authorized forced labor as a penal measure.

Once again, that word: decree.

Under this decree, the Cheka established what were then called "concentration camps," often housed in former monasteries or remote military sites. The most infamous of these early institutions was Solovki, the Solovetsky camp on the White Sea, which became the prototype for the later Gulag in both its administrative structure and its culture of terror.

These early camps were small by later standards, holding tens of thousands rather than millions, but they established the principle that political enemies could be confined indefinitely and worked to death under the authority of the secret police.

Worked to death. If this sounds strangely familiar, it is. The National Socialist Worker's party studied everything the Soviets were implementing, and adapting Soviet programs to "German" contexts. As we review the litany, observe the insanity through National Socialist eyes.

When the Cheka was reorganized into the GPU in 1922, and then into the OGPU in 1923, the camp system expanded and became more bureaucratically coherent. The OGPU inherited the Cheka's camps and began to integrate them into a national network. The statutory basis for the Gulag as a formal institution emerged in 1930, when the OGPU created a centralized camp administration.

This was not merely an administrative reform; it was the moment when forced labor became a pillar of Soviet economic planning. The Gulag was now a directorate, a system with its own budget, its own construction projects, and its own internal hierarchy.

The Gulag was designed to supply labor for the massive industrialization projects of the First Five-Year Plan, and it grew accordingly. By the mid-1930s, the Gulag had become an empire of camps stretching across the Soviet Union, from the Arctic coal fields of Vorkuta to the gold mines of Kolyma.

The growth of the Gulag can be understood in distinct periods. In the Cheka and early GPU era, from 1919 to 1928, the camp system was still relatively small. It held perhaps 100,000 prisoners by the late 1920s, and its purpose was primarily political repression rather than economic production.

But with Stalin's collectivization drive beginning in 1929, the Gulag entered a phase of explosive expansion. Millions of peasants were arrested, deported, or classified as "kulaks," and the camps became a reservoir of labor for state projects.

The Paradox of the Proletariat was being monetized. No longer would the Chekists be allowed to liquidate dissident on sight. Dissidents would be identified, arrested and squeezed for all their economic worth, or die.

It was extremely scientific.

The Belomor Canal, built between 1931 and 1933, was one of the first major undertakings of this new Gulag, and it consumed tens of thousands of lives. Bamlag, the Baikal–Amur railway camp complex, grew into one of the largest camps in the world. Dalstroi, the Far Eastern mining trust, turned Kolyma into a landscape of death.

By 1936, according to modern reconstructions, the Gulag held roughly five million prisoners, and its economic role had become inseparable from the Soviet state's industrial ambitions.

All of these prisoners were not merely criminals, for standard jails and prisons existed for them. The Gulag was reserved for those who were classified as "class enemies", and that merely required you disagree with the Proletariat, or in any way opposed or obstructed the Proletariat.

The Great Purge of 1937–1938 transformed the Gulag yet again. The NKVD, which replaced the OGPU in 1934, arrested hundreds of thousands of party members, military officers, and ordinary citizens. The camps swelled with political prisoners, and the Gulag became a central instrument of mass terror.

During the Second World War, the Gulag held not only Soviet citizens but also prisoners of war, deported nationalities, and those accused of collaboration. Its population fluctuated, but it remained vast, with millions passing through its gates.

After the war, in the late Stalin period from 1946 to 1953, the Gulag stabilized at a high level. It continued to operate major camp complexes such as Norillag, Karlag, and Sevvostlag, and it remained essential to the Soviet economy, particularly in mining, forestry, and construction. At any given moment, the Gulag held between two and two and a half million prisoners, and over its lifetime, between eighteen and twenty-five million people passed through its camps.

Count them again. Eighteen to twenty five million souls entered the Gulag. Only a fraction of those ever emerged from that nightmare.

The Gulag's fate was sealed by Stalin's death in 1953.

The atrocities of the Gulag had accumulated to an unsustainable level and, like all oppressive organs of the International Socialists, the institution's crimes became an existential threat to the proletariat. The solution, as always, was cathartic sacrifice of the institution.

Within months of Stalin's death, amnesties were issued, sentences were reviewed, and the political logic of mass incarceration began to collapse.

Khrushchev's 1956 "Secret Speech" delegitimized the terror that had sustained the Gulag, and the camp system entered a period of rapid contraction. Many camps were closed, others were merged or converted, and by 1960 the Gulag directorate was formally abolished.

Read that again. So large was Stalin's Gulag system that it took four years to end it. Its remnants were absorbed into a more conventional penal system under the Ministry

of Internal Affairs. Forced labor did not disappear, but the Gulag as a distinct institution—an archipelago of camps run by the secret police—ceased to exist.

Many, like myself, insist this was all cosmetic. The name and scale of the system was changed, but it persisted. The question of whether any original Gulag camps still exist as prisons in modern Russia requires careful distinction.

The Gulag system was dismantled, and no camp continues today in an unbroken institutional line from its Stalin-era predecessor. However, some modern penal colonies operate on or near the sites of former Gulag camps. These facilities belong to the Federal Penitentiary Service (FSIN) and are legally new institutions, even if they occupy historical ground.

Perm-36, once a political camp, is now a museum rather than a prison. In regions such as Vorkuta, Norilsk, and Kolyma, modern prisons exist, but their capacities and prisoner populations are published only as contemporary penal statistics, not as continuations of Gulag camps.

Because the Soviet state reorganized, closed, or rebuilt these facilities repeatedly after 1960, there is no authoritative list of "surviving Gulag camps" with reliable capacities and inmate counts tied to their historical identities.

The Gulag, therefore, survives not as an institution but as a memory embedded in geography.

The Gulag's buildings have been repurposed, its barracks demolished, its administrative structures dissolved. Yet the landscapes of the Gulag—the Arctic coal fields, the Siberian forests, the Kolyma gold mines—remain marked by its history. Modern prisons may stand where Gulag camps once stood, but they are not the Gulag.

The prison population in the modern Russian Federation contains mostly criminals. Of course, that is a matter of definition. Increasingly, what qualifies as a crime in Russia remains in the west, political dissent.

If it walks like a Gulag and quacks like a Gulag, it's a Gulag. In Russia today, prisoners are not sent to die in gold mines, they are sent to the front in Ukraine to die on land mines. Still, the population of Russia's prison population is a fraction of the population of the Gulag under Stalin.

Herein lies the rub. For, with Stalin as the baseline of comparison, all other Russian rulers appear reasonable men. Just don't tell that to the "prisoners" marched to their death in Ukraine.

The Gulag was a system of political repression, economic exploitation, and ideological violence unique to the Soviet secret police. Its destruction after 1953 ended that

system, even if the physical spaces it once occupied continue to hold human beings behind barbed wire.

The Gulag's Human Cost

The human cost of the Gulag is best understood as a layered catastrophe: a system that killed outright, a system that maimed and broke those who survived, and a system whose shadow extended into families, villages, and generations that never entered the camps but lived in fear of them. When Western historians first tried to quantify that cost, they worked with memoirs, émigré testimony, and fragmentary demographic data.

Robert Conquest, writing before the archives opened, spoke in terms of "tens of millions" for the broader Stalinist terror, including executions, famine, deportations, and camp deaths, and he treated the Gulag as one of several overlapping instruments of mass destruction.

Conquests early estimates were deliberately expansive, meant to convey the scale of suffering rather than to provide a precise statistical ledger. The opening of Soviet archives in the late 1980s and early 1990s forced a recalibration. For the first time, researchers could see internal Gulag statistics: registration books, monthly reports, and central tallies of camp populations, releases, and recorded deaths.

Viktor Zemskov and other Russian scholars synthesized these materials and produced headline figures that have since become the baseline for discussion. Archival aggregations suggest roughly 1.5–1.7 million deaths in the Gulag system between the early 1930s and Stalin's death in 1953, with one 1993 study tabulating 1,053,829 Gulag deaths for 1934–1953 and later work extending the count to about 1.713 million for 1931–1953.

These numbers are far lower than the "tens of millions" once cited, and they led many historians to abandon the highest pre-archive estimates.

Yet the archives did not close the debate. Scholars quickly pointed out that Gulag administrative practices systematically suppressed recorded deaths. Prisoners who were terminally ill were often given "medical releases" shortly before death, so that they would die outside the camp and not appear in Gulag mortality statistics. Others were transferred to ordinary prisons or special settlements, categories that were not always included in central Gulag tallies.

Regional archives revealed discrepancies between local records and central reports, suggesting under-reporting and concealment.

Golfo Alexopoulos, in her study “The Gulag’s Veiled Mortality,” argued that official figures significantly understate the true death toll, and that the real number of Gulag deaths may be closer to two or three million once these practices are taken into account.

Anne Applebaum, in *Gulag: A History*, accepted the archival baselines but emphasized that they capture only part of the human cost: they count those who died inside the camps, not those who died shortly after release, nor those whose health was irreparably destroyed. She estimated that roughly eighteen million people passed through the Gulag system over its lifetime, with millions more confined in related institutions such as special settlements and labor colonies.

The distinction between “how many perished” and “how many lives were wasted” is crucial.

If we take the archival figures, adjusted upward by critical scholarship, we arrive at a plausible range of two to three million deaths directly attributable to the Gulag camps themselves. If we widen the lens to include executions outside the camps—roughly 799,455 recorded executions for political and other categories between 1921 and 1953, according to post-1990 archival studies—and deaths from associated deportations and special settlements, the number rises further.

But even these numbers do not capture the millions whose lives were consumed in the camps without ending there: people who spent years in forced labor, lost their health, their families, their careers, and emerged broken into a society that stigmatized them as “former prisoners.”

The Gulag was not only a killing machine; it was a machine for grinding down human potential. To say that eighteen million passed through its gates is to say that eighteen million biographies were bent, truncated, or shattered by its existence.

Western demographic studies of “excess mortality under Stalin” try to place the Gulag within a broader picture. Work synthesized in recent surveys suggests that Stalinist policies—famine, executions, deportations, camp deaths—produced excess mortality in the range of six to nine million or more, depending on definitions and time frames.

The Gulag is one component of that total, a major component, but it is also a symbol: the place where the logic of terror, labor exploitation, and ideological punishment converged most visibly.

Orlando Figes, Steven Barnes, and other historians have emphasized that the Gulag's human cost cannot be reduced to numbers alone; it must be understood as a culture of fear that penetrated everyday life, making arrest and camp confinement a constant possibility for millions of Soviet citizens.

All because they disagreed with the Proletariat.

Those most responsible for the crimes committed under the Gulag system were, of course, its directors over the years. These include Fyodor Eichmans (1930–1931), Matvei Berman (1932–1937), Israel Pliner (1937–1938), Vasily Chernyshov (1938–1941), Ivan Dolgikh (1941–1943), Nikolai Kruglov (1943–1948), Sergei Nikiforov (1948–1951), Ivan Petrov (1951–1954), Various MVD generals (1954–1960), including Aleksandr Mironov.

The Gulag was formally abolished in 1960, though forced labor continued under other MVD structures, indeed, until this very day.

The Russian Federation's own reports are institutional confessions, and Putin's personal, commemorative acts reinforce the institutional confession. Just don't mistake contemporary concessions as either regret or reform. In modern Russia, as in Soviet Russia, start from the assumption public displays are an extension of "Operation trust" and judge accordingly.

In 2017, President Vladimir Putin inaugurated the national memorial "Wall of Grief" in Moscow, dedicated to the victims of Soviet-era political repression. In his speech, he acknowledged that "millions of people were declared 'enemies of the people', were shot or crippled, went through the torment of prisons, camps and exile," and insisted that "this terrible past cannot be erased from our national memory and cannot be justified by anything."

Putin was conducting a ceremony established by the Proletariat when they first dissolved the Cheka. When the weight of institutional crimes becomes too great to disguise or deny, the institution is sacrificed and the leadership absolved of the sin. A new name is adopted, and the cycle begins again.

In his speech, Putin framed political repression as a tragedy for the entire nation, a blow to its roots, culture, and identity, and he endorsed a state policy of preserving the memory of victims.

Just not the victims of Putin's forced conscription of prisoners to fight in Putin's invasion of Ukraine. That catharsis will be staged after Putin's downfall.

Following Putin's speech, the Russian government adopted a "Concept of state policy for perpetuating the memory of victims of political repression" and created a Fund of Memory to support commemorative projects.

Donate if you wish, but I'll be spending my pennies elsewhere.

Putin's gestures functions as the official catharsis: an attempt to acknowledge the crimes of the past, to honor the dead, and to integrate the memory of repression into national identity. In drawing attention to the extremes of the past, Russia's leadership is reminding how much worse it has been for Russian citizens. In the contrast, Putin's regime appears to be progress.

In other words, the human sacrifice perpetrated by Stalin and his Soviet successors serve to sustain the current regime in Russian Intelligence.

Putin's language at the Wall of Grief is unusually stark for a Russian head of state, and he quotes Natalya Solzhenitsyna's formula: "To know, to remember, to condemn and only then to forgive."

Full stop. This vignette was staged by the man who led the agency which staged Operation Trust to mitigate and deteriorate counter revolutionary factions. Nothing has changed. Putin's theater follows a tried and true recipe; Russian Intelligence clothing themselves in the guise and rhetoric of the opposition while pointing their fingers at a greater threat.

Putin's catharsis is partial and contested.

Dissidents and human rights activists, including veterans of the Soviet dissident movement, have accused the Kremlin of hypocrisy, pointing out that political repression in contemporary Russia has not disappeared and that organizations dedicated to documenting Stalinist crimes, such as Memorial, have faced legal pressure and stigmatization.

At the same time, state-approved textbooks have softened Stalin's image, and opinion polls have ranked him among the most "outstanding" figures in Russian history, suggesting a complex and ambivalent public memory.

The human cost of the Gulag, then, is measured not only in the millions of deaths recorded—or concealed—in its archives, nor only in the tens of millions of lives that passed through its camps, but also in the struggle to remember and interpret that cost.

Western historians have moved from speculative high estimates to more cautious, archive-based figures, while insisting that those figures understate the true toll.

Russian official discourse has moved from silence to partial acknowledgment, building monuments and declaring days of remembrance, while simultaneously maintaining a political environment that limits full reckoning.

The Gulag's victims are counted in numbers, but they are also counted in the difficulty of achieving genuine catharsis: in the tension between commemoration and denial, between condemnation and nostalgia, between the desire to "draw a line under the past" and the obligation to keep its wounds open long enough to understand them.

We can disagree on the final count, but we must all agree it would have been better for everyone if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

1934–1941 - NKVD (GUGB)

The *People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs*, a.k.a the OGPU was absorbed into the NKVD. Don't mistake that for subordination. It was nominal classification within a statutory context, a feigned bow to "due process", but the animal, Felix Dzerzhinsky, remained its leader.

The intelligence and security directorate inside the NKVD was the GUGB (Main Directorate of State Security). The GUGB within the NVKD is the Stalinist terror apparatus.

Stalin was suffering from a raging case of the Paradox of the Proletariat.

The structural reforms introduced by Stalin were exclusively directed at purging all leadership not then known to be loyal to Stalin. Many were marked for death for openly opposing or contradicting Stalin. Others were marked for death for not openly supporting Stalin.

When Stalin came to power, he did so in full knowledge his Caucus Mountain faction was impotent on its own, and he'd have to choose to ally with either the Russian Nationalists or Trotsky's largely Ukrainian faction. Stalin chose the Russian Nationalists.

If truth be told, and I insist it must, the Paradox of the Proletariat "naturally selected Trotsky's faction for elimination. Because the Unholy Trinity was formed by Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky, and the Caucus Mountain faction had to side with one or the other, the natural choice was Lenin.

As Shakespeare said, “When two men ride of a horse, one must ride behind.” In the case of the Bolsheviks, three men were riding one horse. One would eventually have to go, so Stalin saddle up firmly behind Lenin. Russian Nationalism did the rest.

Stalin went to work immediately to dismantle, destroy and bury – often literally – all semblance of Trotskyite influence. Trotsky - originally from a successful Ukrainian farming family – was cast as the ultimate Kulak.

Stalin’s paranoid obsession with Trotsky was what compelled the Dictator of the Proletariat to wage a genocidal campaign against Ukraine in the first place. Stalin’s dismantling of the OGPU and inflation of the NKVD was just the dictator finishing the job.

Redux NKVD Before 1934

> Before 1934, the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) was not a secret-police organ and played no role in political repression. It was, instead, a conventional civil-administrative ministry responsible for the everyday governance of the Soviet state.
>
> The NKVD existed from the earliest months of Bolshevik rule, but its functions were limited to routine internal administration: municipal management, public utilities, fire brigades, civil registration, and the supervision of the ordinary criminal police (the *militsiya*).
>
> In this early period, the NKVD resembled the interior ministries of other European states far more than the coercive security apparatus it would later become.
>
> The NKVD’s responsibilities included maintaining local order, issuing residency permits and passports, overseeing urban services, and managing non-political prisons. It coordinated the work of local soviets, ensured compliance with administrative regulations, and handled the bureaucratic infrastructure of a rapidly expanding socialist state.
>
> In other words, the NKVD were the Gophers of the Proletariat. They were everywhere and were responsible for doing business in the Soviet Union the party way.
>
> Crucially, it did not conduct surveillance, counterintelligence, mass arrests, executions, or deportations. Those functions belonged entirely to the Cheka,

and later the GPU and OGPU, which operated independently of the NKVD and reported directly to the highest political authorities.

This separation of roles is essential to understanding Stalin's restructuring. The NKVD before 1934 was a civilian administrative body, while the Cheka/OGPU were the political security organs. The NKVD had no authority over the secret police, no involvement in political investigations, and no control over the Gulag or border troops.

Even the Red Army's internal-security organs—the Special Departments (OO)—operated outside the NKVD's jurisdiction, reporting instead to military command and, for political matters, to the Cheka/OGPU.

The transformation came in 1934, when Stalin dissolved the OGPU and transferred all of its functions into a newly reorganized, centralized all-Union NKVD.

Stalin, realizing that the excesses of the OGPU was a threat to his rule, and its ranks were filled with many of his opponents, sacrificed the institution and offered ceremonial catharsis instead of real reforms. There would be no need to delve further into the crimes of the OGPU. It's successor organization would not repeat the mistakes of the past.

Genrikh Grigoryevich Yagoda had been the head of the independent OGPU and, surprise, surprise, Stalin made Genrikh Grigoryevich Yagoda the head of the new, improved NKVD!

Only at that moment, when Stalin decreed institutional change, did the NKVD become the institution associated with mass repression, political policing, and the Great Terror.

Stalin was not subordinating the role of the OGPU to the NKVD, he was expanding the OGPU's scope to include all facets and features of Soviet life. Mistake it not. The pre-1934 NKVD and the post-1934 NKVD shared a name but were fundamentally different institutions: one administrative, the other coercive.

After 1934, the NKVD became the central instrument of Stalinist internal security.

NKVD After 1934

The NKVD's *Main Directorate of State Security* (GUGB) was formally established in July 1934, when the Soviet government dissolved the OGPU and incorporated its functions into a reorganized *People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs* (NKVD).

This reorganization was enacted by a decree of the Soviet leadership that transferred all OGPU responsibilities - including foreign intelligence, counterintelligence, internal political surveillance, and the administration of labor camps—into a single, centralized commissariat.

The statutory basis of the GUGB was therefore the same decree that folded the OGPU into the NKVD, creating a unified security and police apparatus under Stalin's direct control.

Once again, decree is the operative word.

Be careful when fact checking me here, because most "histories" of the Soviet Union attribute the leadership of the GUGB within the NKVD to the leader of the NKVD. The NKVD was led by Yagoda, Yezhov, and Beria, in succession. The GUGB within the NKVD, the directorate tasked with political crimes, ideological investigation and oppression was led by Yakov Saulovich Agranov, Mikhail Petrovich Frinovsky, Isai Davidovich Zakovsky, Vsevolod Nikolaevich Balitsky, Ivan Alekseevich Ushakov, Vsevolod Merkulov August, in succession.

Mind you, we are talking about a directorate within a ministry which only existed in this iteration for seven years. We are talking about a new director each year until 1941.

This, the early period of Stalin's Great Terror, witnessed relative stability in the leadership of the NKVD as a ministry, but largely because Beria was focused on removing subordinates and replace them with loyal Georgian and Transcaucasians.

It was here, in the early Stalin years, that the Paradox of the Proletariat raged uncontrolled.

The casualty rate in this period is 100%. 100% of the directors of the GUGB were arrested, tried, convicted and executed for political crimes. The condemning crime was always treason, but the true transgression was disagreement with the rival, controlling faction.

Individually, the directors include the following.

Yakov Saulovich Agranov (1934–1936)

Yakov Agranov, born Yankel Samuilovich Sorenson on 12 October 1893 in the shtetl of Chechersk, came from a modest Jewish petty-bourgeois family. His father kept a small shop, and Agranov's early life reflected the lower middle-class commercial world of the Pale of Settlement rather than the proletarian background later claimed in Soviet biographies.

Agranov received only basic schooling—four classes of a local urban school—and worked as a clerk in Gomel, where he encountered underground socialist circles. He first joined the Socialist Revolutionary Party in 1912, then shifted to the Bolsheviks in 1915, a move that led to his arrest and exile by the tsarist police. His revolutionary pseudonym "Agranov" was adopted during this period.

After the February Revolution, he returned to Bolshevik work and became secretary of Sovnarkom, working directly under Lenin and Dzerzhinsky. His administrative skill and ideological reliability propelled him into the Cheka and later the OGPU.

When the OGPU was folded into the NKVD in 1934, Agranov became the first operational head of the GUGB, overseeing political surveillance and repression during the early consolidation of Stalin's security apparatus. His tenure set the organizational foundations for the terror that would follow.

Agranov's tenure as the first operational head of the GUGB (1934–1936) was brief, but it coincided with a formative moment in Stalin's consolidation of the Soviet security apparatus. Although the full-scale mass operations of the Great Terror had not yet begun, Agranov played a central role in shaping the investigative, prosecutorial, and political-police methods that made those later campaigns possible.

Agranov's work was not merely administrative; he personally directed several high-profile repression campaigns and helped institutionalize practices that became standard in the NKVD.

Agranov's most consequential activity during this period was his role in the **Kirov affair**, which became the political pretext for the first wave of Stalin's purges. Agranov was placed in charge of the investigation immediately after Sergei Kirov's assassination in December 1934. He oversaw the interrogations, arrests, and construction of the official narrative that blamed "Zinovievite terrorists" for the murder.

The investigation was politically driven from the outset, and Agranov's methods—forced confessions, fabricated links, and rapid sentencing—set the tone for the purges that followed. His work on the Kirov case directly enabled the first Moscow show trials and the destruction of the old Leningrad party leadership.

Closely connected to this was Agranov's role in the first Moscow Trial of August 1936, the trial of Zinoviev, Kamenev, and their associates. Although Yezhov was already rising, Agranov remained deeply involved in the interrogations and preparation of the case. He had long been associated with the persecution of oppositionists, having earlier directed investigations against Trotskyists and other dissenting factions.

Under Agranov's leadership, the GUGB refined the techniques of political prosecution - extended isolation, psychological pressure, staged confrontations, and scripted confessions - that became hallmarks of the show trials.

Agranov also directed repression against writers, intellectuals, and cultural figures, continuing a pattern he had established earlier in the OGPU.

Agranov had overseen the investigation of the poet Sergei Yesenin's circle and played a role in the persecution of writers such as Isaac Babel and Mikhail Koltsov.

During his GUGB tenure, he continued to target cultural networks deemed politically unreliable, using surveillance, arrests, and intimidation to enforce ideological conformity.

If all this policing of thought appears paranoid, you are falling back on Western Liberal values again. Remember we are talking about a world-wide scientific revolution preparing for to re-educate the whole of society. Knowing what people believed, then sorting desirable thought from undesirable thought was the very premise of Socialism as a phase of human evolution.

Stalin could not have avoided the purges and repression of his age because this repression is functional, defining purpose of Socialism. Stalin, and his subordinates, imposed the thought police on Soviet society because that was the objective of the Bolsheviks from the start.

Modern socialists like to dismiss the Stalin era as an outlier, as a extremist, reactionary period within the Socialist movement, but in fact it was Marxist-Leninism going exactly according to plan.

In 1934-1936 period, the Russian nationalist faction increasingly suspected why the Georgians and Transcaucasians who were, increasingly, on top.

Agranov's approach reflected Stalin's growing suspicion of the intelligentsia on the whole, but Russian intelligentsia in particular. Agranov helped establish the GUGB's authority over cultural life.

Stalin's growing paranoia of Russian nationalist predominance naturally increased after the Ukrainian faction had been dismantled, the course predicted by the Paradox of the Proletariat.

In addition to these high-profile cases, Agranov supervised the expansion of surveillance and internal monitoring across the Soviet Union. He strengthened the political police's control over factories, universities, and party organizations, building the infrastructure that later allowed Yezhov to carry out mass operations.

Agranov's GUGB refined the system of informants, expanded the use of "agentura," and increased the political screening of party members and state employees. These measures were not yet mass terror, but they were the scaffolding upon which mass terror would be built.

Agranov's tenure also saw intensified repression of religious groups, particularly underground sects and clergy who resisted state control. He directed operations against Baptist, Pentecostal, and other non-Orthodox communities, continuing the OGPU's long-standing campaign to eliminate independent religious authority. These operations were smaller in scale than later anti-religious campaigns, but they were part of the broader effort to eradicate alternative sources of loyalty.

Finally, Agranov played a role in the early persecution of national minorities, especially Poles and Germans living in border regions. Although the massive "national operations" of 1937–1938 had not yet begun, Agranov's GUGB conducted targeted arrests and surveillance of minority communities considered politically suspect.

These early actions of Agranov foreshadowed the catastrophic ethnic purges that followed under Yezhov.

In sum, Agranov's tenure was not defined by the mass executions of the Great Terror, but by the creation of the investigative, ideological, and organizational framework that made those later crimes possible.

Agranov shaped the Kirov narrative, prepared the first show trials, expanded surveillance, persecuted intellectuals, and tightened control over religious and minority groups.

Agranov's work was the bridge between the OGPU's earlier repression and the NKVD's later terror.

After leaving the GUGB in 1936, he remained a high-ranking NKVD official for a short time, but the political tides turned against him. When the purges intensified, Agranov himself was swept away—arrested in 1937 and executed in 1938—destroyed by the very system he had helped construct.

His death followed the same pattern as many early Chekists: once politically inconvenient, he was eliminated by the system he had helped build.

Mikhail Petrovich Frinovsky (1936–1937)

Mikhail Frinovsky was born in 1898 in the Moscow region to a peasant family, a background typical of many early Soviet security officials who rose through the ranks by demonstrating loyalty and ruthlessness rather than intellectual pedigree. He served in the Imperial Navy during World War I and joined the Red Army in 1918, quickly distinguishing himself in the brutal fighting of the Civil War.

Frinovsky's transition into the Cheka and later the OGPU reflected the common path of military men who found a place in the new state's coercive institutions. Frinovsky's career advanced steadily through the 1920s and early 1930s, marked by his work in border troops and internal security operations. In September 1936, as Stalin prepared the machinery of the Great Terror, Frinovsky was appointed director of the GUGB.

Frinovsky's tenure coincided with the early escalation of mass arrests and the tightening of operational procedures that would soon be used on a catastrophic scale. Frinovsky was a hard, disciplined administrator, but his loyalty did not save him.

Mikhail Frinovsky's tenure as director of the GUGB was short, violent, and emblematic of the accelerating collapse of institutional restraint inside Stalin's security apparatus. When he assumed leadership in September 1936, the Soviet Union was entering the early phase of the Great Terror,

and Frinovsky became one of the principal engineers of the transition from targeted political repression to mass, systematized violence.

Frinovsky's period in office lasted only until April 1937, but in those months he helped transform the GUGB from an investigative directorate into a machinery capable of executing Stalin's rapidly expanding demands for arrests, confessions, and executions.

Frinovsky came to the GUGB from the border troops and the Red Army, where he had built a reputation for discipline, loyalty, and administrative ruthlessness. He was not an intellectual Chekist like Agranov, nor a regional power broker like Balitsky. He was a military man whose instincts aligned with the emerging Yezhovite ethos: speed, severity, and unquestioning obedience.

When Yezhov replaced Yagoda as People's Commissar of Internal Affairs, Frinovsky became one of his most trusted lieutenants, and his appointment to the GUGB signaled a deliberate shift toward more aggressive methods.

One of Frinovsky's first major undertakings was the intensification of operations against former oppositionists. The Kirov affair had already provided the political justification for repression, but under Frinovsky the GUGB expanded its pursuit of alleged "Zinovievite-Trotskyite" conspirators. He supervised interrogations that relied heavily on physical coercion and psychological pressure, pushing investigators to extract confessions that could be used to build the cases for the upcoming show trials.

The second Moscow Trial, held in early 1937, was prepared during his tenure, and although Yezhov oversaw the political framing, Frinovsky's GUGB provided the interrogations, the fabricated links, and the coerced testimony that made the trial possible.

Frinovsky also played a central role in the early development of the mass operations that would define the Great Terror. Although the formal NKVD orders authorizing the national operations—such as the Polish, German, Latvian, and Finnish purges—were issued later in 1937 and 1938, the conceptual groundwork was laid under Frinovsky.

Frinovsky expanded surveillance of border regions, intensified monitoring of national minorities, and directed the compilation of lists of "socially harmful elements" who could be targeted in future campaigns. His GUGB

refined the bureaucratic mechanisms that allowed for mass arrests: standardized interrogation protocols, rapid sentencing procedures, and the coordination of regional NKVD offices with central directives.

Frinovsky's tenure also saw a dramatic escalation in repression within the Red Army. As a former military officer, he understood the institutional culture of the armed forces, and Stalin relied on him to help identify supposed "military conspirators."

The early arrests of officers in 1936 and early 1937—precursors to the catastrophic purge of the military later that year—were carried out with GUGB involvement, and Frinovsky's reports to Stalin and Yezhov emphasized the alleged danger of "military-political sabotage."

Frinovsky's work helped prepare the political atmosphere that made the later destruction of the army's leadership possible.

Beyond these high-profile operations, Frinovsky oversaw the expansion of repression against ordinary citizens. He strengthened the GUGB's control over factories, collective farms, and educational institutions, encouraging local NKVD branches to identify "wreckers," "saboteurs," and "anti-Soviet elements."

Under Frinovsky's leadership, the GUGB began to shift from targeted political policing to broad social policing, treating entire categories of people - kulaks, former prisoners, national minorities - as potential enemies.

The shift under Frinovsky was essential to the later mass operations, which relied on the idea that entire social groups could be purged without individualized evidence.

Frinovsky did Stalin's preparatory work, and set the Scythe of Socialism in motion. The Paradox of the Proletariat was just getting started. Instead of making individual cases, which took far too much of the state's time and resources, Stalin intended to follow both the spirit and the letter of Marxist-Leninist evolutionary doctrine: undesirable classes would be liquidated en masse.

Frinovsky's tenure ended abruptly in April 1937, when Yezhov reassigned him to the position of Deputy People's Commissar of the Navy. This move was not a demotion but a strategic redeployment: Stalin and Yezhov were preparing the purge of the military, and Frinovsky's experience made him useful in that arena.

Frinovsky's brief leadership of the GUGB was thus a hinge moment in Soviet history.

Frinovsky did not initiate the Great Terror, nor did he preside over its most catastrophic phase, but he helped build the operational and bureaucratic structures that made mass repression possible. However, once the purge reached its peak and the Yezhovite faction began to collapse, Frinovsky's fate was sealed.

After being removed from the GUGB in 1937, he briefly served as deputy head of the NKVD. But in 1939, as Stalin dismantled Yezhov's network, Frinovsky was arrested, accused of treason, and executed in February 1940. His fall was swift and brutal, characteristic of the late-Yezhov purge.

Isai Davidovich Zakovsky (1937)

Isai Zakovsky, born in 1886 in Latvia, came from a Jewish family and entered revolutionary politics early, joining the Bolsheviks before 1917. He served in the Cheka during the Civil War, gaining a reputation for severity in counter-insurgency operations in the Baltic region.

Zakovsky's career was shaped by his work in regional security organs, particularly in Leningrad, where he became known as an efficient and uncompromising administrator. His appointment as GUGB director in April 1937 placed him at the center of the rapidly intensifying Great Terror.

Zakovsky oversaw the implementation of mass operations, including the national-operations targeting Poles, Germans, Latvians, and other minorities. His tenure was brief - only a few months - but extraordinarily destructive.

Isai Zakovsky's tenure as director of the GUGB was brief, intense, and emblematic of the accelerating collapse of stability within the Soviet security apparatus in 1937. He entered the post at a moment when the NKVD was transforming from an instrument of targeted political repression into a machinery designed for mass, indiscriminate violence.

Although Zakovsky served only a few months—from April to August 1937—his leadership coincided with the opening phase of the Great Terror, and his actions helped set in motion some of the most destructive campaigns of that period.

Zakovsky came to the GUGB from the Leningrad NKVD, where he had built a reputation for severity and efficiency. He was not a political theorist or

a bureaucratic architect like Agranov, nor a military disciplinarian like Frinovsky.

Instead, Zakovsky was a regional strongman whose authority rested on his ability to impose order through fear. His experience in the Baltic region and Leningrad had accustomed him to dealing with perceived "counterrevolutionary" elements, and he brought this same approach to the GUGB.

When Yezhov elevated him to the directorate, it was a signal that the NKVD was entering a phase in which speed and brutality were valued above investigative precision.

One of Zakovsky's most consequential actions was his role in preparing the machinery for the national operations, the ethnic-targeted purges that would become one of the defining features of the Great Terror.

Although the formal NKVD orders authorizing these operations—such as Order No. 00485 against Poles and Order No. 00439 against Germans—were issued after his tenure, the conceptual and administrative groundwork was laid under his direction.

Zakovsky intensified surveillance of minority communities, particularly Poles, Latvians, Germans, and Finns living in border regions. He directed the compilation of lists of "suspect nationalities," expanded the use of informants within ethnic enclaves, and encouraged regional NKVD offices to treat minority identity itself as a potential indicator of disloyalty.

These early measures created the infrastructure that allowed the later national operations to unfold with catastrophic speed.

What distinguishes Zakovsky's expansion of the states "Enemies List" was in the explicit inclusion, for the first time, of entire nationalists and ethnic groups as "undesirables" to be weeded out.

Zakovsky also oversaw the expansion of repression against the Leningrad party organization, continuing the work he had begun before his appointment to the GUGB. The Leningrad party had long been viewed with suspicion by Stalin, and Zakovsky's investigations targeted former associates of Kirov, local administrators, and cultural figures.

Zakovsky's methods were harsh and direct: rapid arrests, forced confessions, and the use of fabricated evidence to justify the removal of entire networks of officials. Under his leadership, the GUGB intensified

its scrutiny of party members, treating ideological deviation as a criminal offense and preparing the political atmosphere for the later destruction of the Leningrad elite.

What was previously unspoken, ideological deviation, was now codified as a sanctionable offense.

During Zakovsky's tenure, the GUGB also expanded its repression of intellectuals and cultural figures, particularly those associated with Leningrad's artistic and literary circles.

Zakovsky had long been involved in the persecution of writers and journalists, and as GUGB director he continued to target individuals deemed politically unreliable. His approach reflected the broader shift in the NKVD toward treating cultural life as a potential source of dissent.

Try and imagine yourself as a Russian revolutionary in this period. For decades your intellectual culture thrived, not on silence and repression of thought, but on the very chaos and variety of intellectual life in Europe's cafes.

Now everyone was to subscribe to the party line. Because factional leaders defined the acceptable boundaries as Proletarian thought, and all else as counter-revolutionary deviance, everyone who stated an opinion found themselves in suspect light the moment the factional leadership changed.

Under Zakovsky, surveillance increased, arrests multiplied, and the boundaries of permissible artistic expression narrowed sharply. A hush would eventually fall over Soviet society, but enough blood had yet to be spilled to silence the rank and file socialists.

Zakovsky's leadership coincided with the early stages of the mass purge of the Communist Party. Although the full-scale "purge of the party ranks" would peak later in 1937 and 1938, Zakovsky helped establish the procedures that made it possible.

Zakovsky encouraged regional NKVD branches to identify "anti-Soviet elements" within party organizations, expanded the use of denunciations, and promoted the idea that ideological impurity was itself a form of political sabotage.

Zakovsky's GUGB refined the bureaucratic mechanisms—interrogation protocols, sentencing templates, and coordination between central and

regional offices—that allowed the later mass expulsions and arrests to proceed with unprecedented efficiency.

Zakovsky's brief leadership of the GUGB was thus a transitional moment in the evolution of Soviet repression. He did not initiate the Great Terror, nor did he preside over its most destructive phase, but he helped build the administrative and ideological foundations that made mass violence possible.

Zakovsky's tenure marked the shift from targeted political policing to the early stages of ethnic and institutional purges. Like nearly all of Stalin's security chiefs, he was ultimately destroyed by the same system he had served, executed by the machinery he had helped refine.

Zakovsky's tenure ended abruptly in August 1937, when he was removed from his post and reassigned. His fall was swift, reflecting the instability of the NKVD hierarchy during the Great Terror. Within months, he was arrested, accused of participating in "anti-Soviet activities," and executed in 1938.

Zakovsky's death was part of the systematic purge of the Leningrad and Baltic NKVD cadres, a group Stalin viewed as insufficiently loyal and potentially dangerous.

Vsevolod Nikolaevich Balitsky (1937)

Vsevolod Balitsky was born in 1892 in the Kursk region and came from a modest background. He joined the Bolsheviks in 1917 and served in the Cheka during the Civil War, where he developed a reputation for aggressive counter-revolutionary work.

Balitsky was ethnically Russian, born in the Kursk region. His family background was modest, and he grew up in an environment shaped by Russian Orthodox cultural norms, though he abandoned religion upon joining the Bolsheviks.

Balitsky's career was closely tied to Ukraine, where he served as head of the Ukrainian GPU and later the Ukrainian NKVD. His tenure in Ukraine was marked by harsh repression, particularly during collectivization and the famine years.

Vsevolod Balitsky's tenure as director of the GUGB was one of the shortest and most volatile in the history of Stalin's security apparatus, yet it occurred at a decisive moment in the transformation of Soviet repression.

When Balitsky assumed the post in August 1937, the Great Terror was already underway, but the NKVD was still in the process of reorganizing itself for the massive ethnic and institutional purges that would define the next eighteen months.

Balitsky's leadership lasted only until November of that year, but in those few months he played a significant role in shaping the early execution of Stalin's most destructive policies, particularly in Ukraine, where he had long been a dominant and feared figure.

Balitsky came to the GUGB from the Ukrainian NKVD, where he had served as the republic's security chief during collectivization, the famine, and the subsequent campaigns against "nationalist counterrevolution." His years in Ukraine had given him a reputation for uncompromising brutality.

Balitsky was a regional strongman whose authority rested on his ability to enforce Moscow's directives with speed and severity. His appointment to the GUGB was therefore not accidental: Yezhov and Stalin were preparing to expand the terror beyond the party and state apparatus into ethnic minorities, former kulaks, and other "socially harmful elements," and they needed men who had already demonstrated their willingness to carry out mass repression without hesitation.

Balitsky's role during the Holodomor made him the perfect candidate. A loyalist not afraid to swing the Scythe of Socialism.

One of Balitsky's most consequential actions during his brief tenure was his role in the early implementation of the national operations, the ethnic-targeted purges that would become one of the defining features of the Great Terror.

Although the formal NKVD orders authorizing these operations—such as Order No. 00485 against Poles and Order No. 00439 against Germans—were issued shortly before or during his tenure, the practical execution of these directives required rapid mobilization of regional NKVD offices, the creation of arrest quotas, and the identification of target populations.

Order No. 00485 and Order No. 00439 were not random administrative decrees; they were the logical, if horrifying, extension of Marxist-Leninist theory as interpreted by Stalin in the mid-1930s.

To understand these orders, one must see how Marxist-Leninist doctrine—originally framed as a scientific theory of class struggle—was transformed into a framework for identifying entire populations as "objective enemies," regardless of their individual actions. In this sense, the national operations of the Great Terror were not deviations from ideology but expressions of a particular, radicalized reading of it.

Order No. 00485

Order No. 00485, issued in August 1937, authorized the "Polish Operation," the largest ethnic purge of the Great Terror. It targeted Poles living in the Soviet Union, especially those in border regions, and defined them as a potential "fifth column" of foreign espionage.

Order No. 00439

Order No. 00439, issued shortly afterward, authorized the purge of ethnic Germans on similar grounds. Both orders treated nationality as an indicator of class position, political reliability, and ideological alignment.

In Marxist-Leninist theory, class is the fundamental determinant of political consciousness, but under Stalin this concept was expanded to include entire social categories—kulaks, priests, former prisoners, and eventually national minorities—who were said to possess "objectively counterrevolutionary" tendencies.

The shift from class to nationality did not contradict the theory as Stalin applied it; rather, it reflected his belief that certain national groups were historically tied to hostile class forces.

In this ideological framework, Poles and Germans were not merely ethnic communities but embodiments of external bourgeois states—Poland and Germany—whose political systems were defined as capitalist, militarist, and hostile to socialism.

Marxist-Leninist theory held that capitalist states would inevitably attempt to undermine socialist ones, and Stalin interpreted this as justification for preemptive repression. The presence of Poles and Germans inside Soviet borders was therefore treated as a structural vulnerability, a potential conduit for foreign intervention.

The orders did not require evidence of individual guilt; they assumed that members of these groups were "objectively" aligned with hostile class and national interests. This logic was consistent with Stalin's broader

doctrine of “heightened class struggle,” which claimed that as socialism advanced, enemies would become more desperate and more dangerous.

Order No. 00485 and Order No. 00439 also reflected the Leninist concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which justified extraordinary measures to defend the revolution. Lenin had argued that the proletarian state must suppress counterrevolutionary forces with uncompromising firmness.

Stalin extended this principle to include entire populations whose class origins or national affiliations were deemed incompatible with socialist development.

For all intents and purposes, with Orders 00485 and 00439 the Purges of the Stalin era were concluded, and the cull of the Great Terror had begun.

Adloph Hitler and the National Socialists in Deutschland were taking notes. The entire world watched, first the Bolsheviks, then the Soviet state perpetrated a blood bath of industrial scale and did nothing whatsoever in response.

In the Soviet Union these national operations were framed as defensive acts necessary to protect the socialist state from encirclement by capitalist powers. Increasingly, it appeared that the Russian nationalists, Georgian and Transcaucasian factions were clearing the map.

These NKVD orders were presented not as acts of ethnic hatred but as measures to eliminate “socially dangerous elements” whose existence allegedly threatened the revolution.

For the record, it is precisely this logic on which Vladimir Putin justifies his current invasion of Ukraine. Nothing whatsoever has changed in Russia’s posture toward its ethnic neighbors.

This will come as a disturbing coincidence to all but those who realize Russian Intelligence is the author of this coincidence. We may correctly ask if it is coincidence at all.

The tragedy of Stalin’s original orders lies in the way Marxist-Leninist theory was transformed from a critique of class exploitation into a justification for mass violence. By treating nationality as a proxy for class and political loyalty, Stalin created a system in which millions of people

could be arrested, deported, or executed without regard for their individual actions.

Order No. 00485 and Order No. 00439 were thus products of an ideological framework that had come to equate security with preemptive repression and political reliability with the elimination of entire categories of citizens.

These orders were not aberrations, but expressions of a doctrinal logic that, under Stalin, had become inseparable from the machinery of terror.

Balitsky's experience in Ukraine, where he had overseen repression of Polish, German, and Ukrainian nationalist groups, made him a natural choice to supervise the early stages of these operations.

Under his leadership, the GUGB intensified surveillance of minority communities, expanded the use of informants, and encouraged regional branches to treat ethnic identity itself as a potential indicator of disloyalty.

Balitsky also played a role in the purge of the Ukrainian party and state apparatus, a campaign that had begun before his appointment but accelerated during his time at the GUGB. Stalin had long distrusted the Ukrainian leadership, viewing it as insufficiently loyal and potentially susceptible to nationalist sentiment.

Balitsky's investigations targeted former Ukrainian officials, cultural figures, and administrators, many of whom were accused of participating in "Ukrainian nationalist counterrevolution." His methods were harsh and direct: rapid arrests, forced confessions, and the use of fabricated evidence to justify the removal of entire networks of officials. His work helped prepare the political atmosphere for the later destruction of the Ukrainian elite, which would continue under his successors.

During Balitsky's tenure, the GUGB also intensified repression against former kulaks, ex-prisoners, and other "socially harmful elements." The mass operations of 1937–1938 required the identification of large numbers of people who could be arrested and executed quickly, and Balitsky encouraged regional NKVD branches to expand their lists of suspects.

Balitsky's GUGB refined the bureaucratic mechanisms—interrogation protocols, sentencing templates, and coordination between central and regional offices—that allowed the later mass executions to proceed with

unprecedented efficiency. Although he did not preside over the peak of the terror, he helped build the administrative foundation that made the peak possible.

Balitsky's tenure ended abruptly in November 1937, when he was removed from his post and arrested. His fall was part of the broader purge of the Ukrainian NKVD leadership, a group Stalin viewed as dangerously independent and potentially disloyal.

Balitsky was accused of participating in "anti-Soviet activities," a charge that reflected Stalin's deep suspicion of regional security chiefs who had accumulated too much power. He was executed shortly after his arrest, one of the earliest victims of the purge of the NKVD itself.

Ivan Alekseevich Ushakov (1937–1938)

Ivan Ushakov, born in 1890, entered the Bolshevik movement during the revolutionary years and served in the Cheka from its earliest days.

Ushakov was ethnically Russian, born into a Russian family in 1890. His religious background was nominally Russian Orthodox, though he, like most Chekists, lived as an atheist. His career was shaped by steady administrative work rather than dramatic political prominence.

Ushakov held various mid-level positions in the OGPU and NKVD, demonstrating competence in internal security and counter-intelligence. He became director of the GUGB in November 1937, at the peak of the Great Terror.

Ushakov's tenure was defined by the systematic processing of mass arrests, interrogations, and executions. He was not a flamboyant figure; rather, he was a bureaucratic executor of policies already set in motion by Yezhov and Stalin.

Ivan Ushakov's tenure as director of the GUGB, from November 1937 to August 1938, unfolded during the most intense phase of the Great Terror. Unlike Agranov, Frinovsky, or Zakovsky—each of whom brought a distinct political or regional identity to the role—Ushakov was a quiet bureaucrat, a career Chekist whose authority rested not on ideological fervor or regional power but on his reliability as an administrator.

Ushakov's leadership did not introduce new doctrines or dramatic shifts in policy; instead, he presided over the full operationalization of terror machinery already set in motion. In this sense, Ushakov's tenure was

defined less by innovation than by execution: he was the man who kept the system running at maximum speed.

Ushakov inherited an NKVD already transformed by Yezhov into an institution geared for mass repression. The national operations had begun, the purge of the Communist Party was accelerating, and the machinery of arrest, interrogation, sentencing, and execution was operating at unprecedented scale.

Ushakov's task as GUGB director was to maintain this momentum, ensuring that regional NKVD branches met their quotas, followed standardized procedures, and delivered the results demanded by Stalin and Yezhov.

Ushakov's background made him well suited to this role. He had spent years in mid-level positions within the OGPU and NKVD, mastering the administrative routines of Soviet security work. He was not a political visionary but a functionary, and the terror required precisely that.

One of Ushakov's central responsibilities was overseeing the mass operations that defined the Great Terror. These included the Polish Operation, the German Operation, the Latvian Operation, and the sweeping campaign against "former kulaks, criminals, and other socially harmful elements." The later groups largely translated to Ukrainians.

The NKVD orders authorizing these operations had been issued before his appointment, but their implementation required relentless coordination. Ushakov ensured that regional offices compiled arrest lists, processed detainees, and carried out executions with the speed and uniformity demanded by Moscow.

Under Ushakov's leadership, the GUGB refined the bureaucratic mechanisms that made mass repression possible: standardized interrogation protocols, rapid sentencing procedures, and the coordination of troikas—three-man tribunals empowered to issue death sentences without trial.

Ushakov also presided over the purge of the Communist Party, which reached its peak during his tenure. The party purge was not merely a political operation but an administrative one, requiring the identification of "unreliable" members, the processing of denunciations, and the coordination of arrests across thousands of local party organizations.

Ushakov's GUGB played a central role in this process, treating ideological deviation as a form of political sabotage and encouraging regional NKVD branches to expand their lists of suspects. His leadership helped transform the party purge from a political campaign into a mass administrative procedure, one capable of removing tens of thousands of members in a matter of months.

During Ushakov's tenure, repression also intensified against ordinary citizens, particularly those in factories, collective farms, and urban neighborhoods. The terror had expanded beyond political elites and national minorities to encompass broad social categories.

Ushakov's GUGB encouraged regional branches to identify "wreckers," "saboteurs," and "anti-Soviet elements" in everyday life. Surveillance increased, denunciations multiplied, and the boundaries of permissible behavior narrowed sharply.

Ushakov did not create this system, but he ensured that it functioned with ruthless efficiency. The quota system that operated during Ivan Ushakov's tenure as director of the GUGB was one of the most distinctive and destructive features of the Great Terror. It transformed repression from a reactive process—responding to alleged crimes or conspiracies—into a planned, numerical, centrally managed campaign of mass violence.

Ushakov did not design this system; the quota orders had already been issued by Stalin and Yezhov before he took office in November 1937. But he presided over the period in which the quotas were fully implemented, expanded, and enforced with bureaucratic precision. His months in office coincided with the moment when the NKVD became, in effect, an institution whose primary function was to meet centrally mandated targets for arrests and executions.

The quota system originated in NKVD Order No. 00447, issued on 30 July 1937, which set specific numerical targets for the repression of "former kulaks, criminals, and other anti-Soviet elements." The order listed, in tabular form, the number of people to be arrested and executed in each republic, oblast, and krai.

Similar quota tables appeared in Order No. 00485 (the Polish Operation), Order No. 00439 (the German Operation), and other national operations. These orders were not vague guidelines; they were explicit numerical commands.

The NKVD was instructed to arrest and execute a predetermined number of people, regardless of whether evidence existed against them. The quotas were justified ideologically as a necessary measure in the escalating class struggle, but in practice they functioned as administrative targets that had to be met.

By the time Ushakov became GUGB director, the quotas were already in motion, but their implementation required relentless coordination. His role was to ensure that regional NKVD branches fulfilled their assigned "limits" (*лимиты*), the official term for quotas. The center sent constant telegrams demanding "fulfillment of the limit," authorizing "additional limits," and reprimanding regions that fell behind.

Ushakov signed many of these communications, acting as the administrative conduit between Yezhov's directives and the regional machinery of repression. Under his leadership, the GUGB became the nerve center of a system in which numerical targets replaced investigative judgment, and the success of a regional NKVD office was measured by how quickly and thoroughly it met its quota.

The quota system shaped every aspect of the terror during Ushakov's tenure. Investigators were pressured to extract confessions rapidly, often through coercion, because delays threatened the fulfillment of quotas. Troikas—three-man tribunals empowered to issue death sentences without trial—were instructed to process cases at extraordinary speed.

Regional offices competed to exceed their quotas, reporting "overfulfillment" as evidence of vigilance. The system rewarded zeal and punished hesitation, creating an atmosphere in which the safest course for an NKVD officer was to arrest more people, not fewer.

The quotas thus produced a self-reinforcing cycle of violence: the more arrests made, the more "evidence" of conspiracy seemed to appear, justifying further increases in quotas.

Ushakov's tenure also saw the expansion of quotas beyond the initial mass operations. As the terror intensified, new categories of people were added to the lists of "socially harmful elements," and the center issued supplementary quotas to ensure that repression continued at maximum speed.

The quota system became a tool not only for eliminating perceived enemies but for reshaping Soviet society by removing entire groups

deemed politically or socially undesirable. Ushakov's GUGB oversaw this process with bureaucratic efficiency, ensuring that the machinery of repression operated without interruption.

The quota system ultimately contributed to Ushakov's downfall.

As Stalin began to turn against Yezhov in mid-1938, the NKVD itself became a target of purges. The very numerical logic that had driven the terror was now applied to the institution that had administered it.

Ushakov's leadership coincided with the growing instability of the NKVD hierarchy. The terror was consuming not only its targets but its administrators.

By mid-1938, Stalin had begun to turn against Yezhov, and the purge of the NKVD itself was underway. Ushakov, like many mid-level Yezhovite cadres, was vulnerable. He was removed from his post in August 1938, arrested shortly afterward, and executed.

Ushakov's death reflected the broader collapse of the Yezhovite faction and the rise of Beria's Caucasus-based network, which would soon take control of Soviet security.

Ushakov's tenure as GUGB director was thus a period of relentless administrative violence. He did not initiate the Great Terror, nor did he shape its ideological foundations, but he presided over its most destructive phase. His leadership ensured that the machinery of repression operated at full capacity, processing hundreds of thousands of arrests and executions with bureaucratic precision.

Like nearly all of Stalin's security chiefs, he was ultimately destroyed by the system he had served, executed by the same machinery he had helped maintain.

Vsevolod Merkulov (1938–1941)

Vsevolod Merkulov, born in 1895 in Tiflis (Tbilisi), came from a Georgian Orthodox family and entered the Bolshevik movement during the revolutionary period. He served in the Cheka and OGPU, rising through the ranks as a trusted associate of Lavrentiy Beria.

Merkulov's career was marked by his administrative skill and his close political alignment with Beria, which proved crucial as Stalin shifted his favor away from Yezhov. In August 1938, Merkulov became director of the

GUGB, overseeing the winding down of the Great Terror and the reorganization of Soviet security institutions.

Unlike his predecessors, Merkulov survived the purges because of his close political alignment with Lavrentiy Beria. More correctly, Stalin finally found a man he could trust, a fellow Georgian.

After leaving the GUGB in 1941, Merkulov became head of the NKGB and later held senior intelligence and security posts during World War II. His tenure marked the transition from the chaotic violence of the Yezhov era to the more controlled, bureaucratic repression characteristic of Beria's administration.

Technically, Merkulov was a surviving director of the GUGB, but only because Stalin restructured Soviet Intelligence during World War 2.

Though Merkulov's fate diverged sharply from the others, he was arrested after Stalin's death, during the anti-Beria purge of 1953, and executed in December of that year. He was the last of the GUGB directors to die, and the only one whose downfall came after Stalin's era.

But that will have to wait, for Merkulov was chosen by Stalin to be director of the newly formed NKGB in 1941.

The GUGB became the NKVD's political-security arm, responsible for protecting the Soviet state from "internal enemies," conducting surveillance, making arrests, and executing political repression.

During the period in which it existed as the NKVD's GUGB (1934–1941), the directorate was headed successively by Genrikh Yagoda, Nikolai Yezhov, and Lavrentiy Beria. Yagoda oversaw the initial consolidation of OGPU functions into the NKVD and the early stages of Stalin's political repression.

Yezhov presided over the most infamous period—the Great Purge—during which the GUGB carried out mass arrests, fabricated cases, staged show trials, and executed hundreds of thousands of perceived enemies of the state. Beria took over in late 1938, reorganizing aspects of the security apparatus while continuing large-scale repression, before the GUGB was temporarily separated into the NKGB in 1941.

The major oppression campaigns carried out by the NKVD (GUGB) were vast and devastating.

Foremost among them was the Great Purge (1936–1938), a sweeping campaign of political terror that targeted Communist Party members, military officers,

intellectuals, and ordinary citizens. The GUGB orchestrated mass arrests, interrogations under torture, executions, and deportations to the Gulag, fundamentally reshaping Soviet society through fear and elimination of perceived rivals.

It also conducted the national operations of the NKVD, which targeted ethnic minorities—Poles, Germans, Latvians, Finns, Greeks, Chinese, and others—under accusations of espionage or sabotage. These operations resulted in hundreds of thousands of arrests and executions, forming one of the deadliest components of Stalinist repression.

In addition to these campaigns, the GUGB continued earlier OGPU practices such as surveillance, counterintelligence, and suppression of dissent, while expanding the Gulag system and enforcing Stalin's political and economic directives.

By the time it was reorganized into the NKGB in 1941, the GUGB had become the central instrument of Stalin's totalitarian control, leaving a legacy defined by systemic abuses, extrajudicial punishments, and the consolidation of a security apparatus that would shape Soviet governance for decades.

Of course, the preceding litany was an account of the blood bath among subordinates, the butchery beneath the veneer of stability reflected in the leadership of the NKVD during the same period: Genrikh Yagoda, Nikolai Yezhov, and Lavrentiy Beria.

Yagoda, Yezhov, and Beria

While the litany of crime and psychosis perpetrated by the NKVD must necessarily be told at the subordinate level of organization, the worst crimes having been perpetrated by the NKVD's GUGB, it goes without saying all of this blood was on the hands of the NKVD's heads over the years: Genrikh Yagoda, Nikolai Yezhov, and Lavrentiy Beria.

The rise and fall of Genrikh Yagoda, Nikolai Yezhov, and Lavrentiy Beria form a single arc in the history of Soviet state security: three men who each embodied a phase of Stalin's consolidation of power, and who each, in turn, were destroyed by the very system they had shaped. Their careers trace the evolution of the Soviet political police from a revolutionary institution into a vast, self-devouring bureaucracy whose leaders were never more than temporarily secure.

Yagoda's rise reflected the maturation of the early Soviet security apparatus. A veteran of the Cheka and OGPU, he was a competent administrator rather than an ideological zealot, and his ascent to the leadership of the NKVD in 1934 marked a period in which repression was severe but still selective.

Yagoda oversaw the incorporation of the OGPU into the NKVD and managed the early stages of Stalin's campaign against political opposition, including the investigation of the Kirov assassination. Yet he lacked the fervor and brutality Stalin increasingly demanded.

As Stalin prepared for a more sweeping purge of the party and society, Yagoda was deemed insufficiently aggressive. He was removed in 1936, accused of corruption and sabotage, and ultimately executed. His fall signaled that the NKVD's leadership would henceforth be judged not by competence but by its willingness to carry out mass terror.

Yagoda's true crime was being Jewish ethnically.

Yezhov's rise was the triumph of that new criterion. Appointed to replace Yagoda in late 1936, he became the architect of the Great Terror. Under his direction, repression expanded from targeted political trials to mass operations that engulfed millions.

Yezhov presided over the national purges, the destruction of the old Bolshevik elite, and the systematic use of quotas for arrests and executions. His tenure was defined by speed, severity, and ideological absolutism. Yet the terror he unleashed also destabilized the state. By 1938 Stalin began to view him as both politically exhausted and potentially dangerous.

Once Beria was positioned to take over, Yezhov was arrested, accused of treason and conspiracy, and executed in 1940. Yezhov's fall demonstrated that even the most zealous servant of Stalin could not survive once his usefulness had ended.

Yezhov's true crime was being ethnically Russian.

Beria's rise marked a new phase in Soviet security: the consolidation of power by the Caucasus faction and the professionalization of the NKVD after the chaos of the Yezhov era.

Because Stalin interpreted the Marxist-Leninist mandate as treating ethnicity as an excluding criteria in the cull of society, the elimination of all but those resembling Stalin himself became inevitable. With Beria's appointment, the Caucasus faction was finally on top. Stalin's goal from that moment forward was staying on top.

Beria reorganized the security services, curtailed the indiscriminate mass operations, and restored administrative control. He was ruthless, but his methods were more systematic than Yezhov's, and he became one of Stalin's most trusted lieutenants.

During and after the Second World War, Beria oversaw intelligence, counterintelligence, and the Gulag system, and he played a central role in the Soviet atomic project. Beria's power reached its peak in the late Stalin years, when he effectively controlled the entire security apparatus.

But Stalin's death in 1953 removed the political foundation of his authority. Within months, Beria was arrested by his rivals in the Presidium, accused of treason and terrorism, and executed. Beria's fall would be the final act in a recurring pattern: the destruction of the NKVD's leadership whenever political winds shifted.

Together, the careers of Yagoda, Yezhov, and Beria illustrate the structural instability of Stalin's security system. Each man rose because he could deliver what Stalin demanded at a particular moment—administrative control, mass terror, or bureaucratic consolidation—and each fell once his methods became politically inconvenient or threatening.

The fates of each man reveal a system in which power was absolute, but never secure. A system in which the leaders of the political police were always the most expendable instruments of the state they served.

All of this death is the necessary, predictable outcome of Socialism's fatal flaw: The Paradox of the Proletariat. Following Stalin's death in 1953, Russian nationalists would act in concert to seize, then maintain power until the Soviet Union came off its hinges in 1991.

That will have to wait, for we have yet to address Soviet Intelligence during the war years and early post-war period.

At this juncture, let's just agree, it would have been better if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

1941–1943 - NKGB

The *People's Commissariat for State Security* split off from the NKVD during WWII to handle state security separately.

The NKGB was formally established on 3 February 1941, when the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet issued a decree separating the Soviet state-security apparatus from the NKVD and creating a distinct *People's Commissariat for State Security*.

This act detached the political-security, counterintelligence, and espionage functions from the broader internal-affairs commissariat and placed them under a dedicated institution tasked with protecting state secrets, combating foreign intelligence, and suppressing internal threats during Stalin's regime.

During the period in which it existed as the NKGB (1941; re-established 1943–1946), the organization was headed first by Vsevolod Merkulov, who oversaw its initial formation and its wartime counterintelligence operations.

After the German invasion in June 1941, the NKGB was briefly folded back into the NKVD to streamline wartime control, but when it was restored as an independent commissariat in April 1943, Merkulov again served as its chief until the commissariat was reorganized into the Ministry of State Security (MGB) in March 1946.

The NKGB carried out major campaigns of repression that extended the atmosphere of terror from the Great Terror into the war years. It conducted mass surveillance, arbitrary arrests, and executions of individuals suspected of disloyalty, defeatism, or collaboration with enemy forces.

Its operational groups in frontline regions were tasked with identifying and eliminating foreign spies, saboteurs, and "defeatist elements," and it played a central role in Stalin's wartime deportations and ethnic cleansing campaigns, including actions against minority groups such as the Roma, who were targeted for arrest and removal from Soviet cities.

The NKGB's repressive activity between 1941 and 1943 unfolded under the combined direction of Stalin, Beria, and Vsevolod Merkulov, and it reflected the wartime transformation of Soviet state security. The statutory creation of the NKGB in February 1941 placed Merkulov at the head of a commissariat responsible for intelligence, counterintelligence, political surveillance, and the suppression of internal dissent.

Although the German invasion in June 1941 briefly forced the NKGB back under NKVD control, its personnel and methods continued operating without interruption, and when the NKGB was re-established in April 1943, it resumed its work with expanded

authority. Throughout this period, its operations were marked by mass surveillance, arbitrary arrests, executions, and the violent suppression of perceived internal enemies.

Merkulov's role was central. As People's Commissar for State Security, he directed the NKGB's counterintelligence and anti-sabotage campaigns, especially in frontline and occupied regions. NKGB operational groups were tasked with identifying and eliminating enemy agents, "defeatist elements," and suspected collaborators.

These operations frequently involved summary executions, forced disappearances, and the arrest of civilians accused of aiding German forces or expressing insufficient loyalty to the Soviet regime.

Expressing insufficient loyalty.

Read that again. Under Merkulov's NKGB, Soviet citizens could be placed under investigation, detailed and charged for not being as enthusiastic about the war as investigators expected.

In the period 1941-1943, Merkulov oversaw the penetration and destruction of underground political networks, the monitoring of ideological conformity, and the protection of high-ranking officials. His leadership ensured that wartime pressures translated into intensified repression rather than relaxation.

Beria's role, though formally limited to the NKVD after the February 1941 split, remained decisive. As Stalin's principal overseer of the entire security apparatus, Beria supervised both commissariats in practice. Even when the NKGB existed as a separate entity, its leadership answered to him politically, and when it was merged back into the NKVD in July 1941, Beria directly controlled all state-security operations.

One impression given is that the restructuring was, form the first, an attempt to insulate Beria, and therefore Stalin, from the abuses Merkulov was being directed to perpetrate. That may have been a consideration, but the GUGB was liquidated because its quota system had drawn far too much ire, especially among the party elites.

From inception, the NKGB did not employ a quota system. Therefore, the sacrifice of the GUGB was intended to provide catharsis and assure the party loyalists of structural reforms.

But Beria's influence continued to shape the NKGB's priorities: the elimination of suspected spies, the suppression of dissent in newly occupied territories, and the management of mass deportations and ethnic cleansing. Beria's administrative

authority ensured that repression was systematic, coordinated, and aligned with Stalin's expectations.

Stalin's role was overarching.

Stalin set the political framework within which the NKGB operated, defining internal enemies broadly and demanding vigilance against sabotage, espionage, and ideological deviation. Stalin's directives encouraged preemptive repression, and his personal oversight of security matters meant that NKGB operations reflected his strategic priorities.

During the war, this included the elimination of potential collaborators, the policing of morale, and the enforcement of political discipline across the Soviet Union. Stalin's approval of the NKGB's re-establishment in 1943 reflected his desire for a more specialized and aggressive security organ capable of managing rear-area control and counterintelligence during the later phases of the war.

The NKGB's oppressive acts during 1941–1943 thus formed part of a continuous chain of Stalinist repression.

The only functional reform was the absence of quotas. In the context of Soviet totalitarianism, that constituted progress.

Although Merkulov directed the day-to-day operations, Beria ensured institutional coordination and political reliability, and Stalin provided the ideological and strategic impetus. These men were a set of Russian nesting dolls. Together, they sustained a system that carried the logic of the Great Purge into wartime conditions, producing mass arrests, executions, deportations, and pervasive surveillance across the Soviet Union.

By the time it was converted into the MGB in 1946, the NKGB had become a fully institutionalized instrument of Stalinist political repression, carrying forward the coercive functions of its predecessors while adapting them to the demands of total war and the consolidation of Soviet control over newly occupied territories.

As you can see, the Paradox of the Proletariat never relented. The incapacity of socialists not only drove the National Socialist and the International Socialists to war against each other, it imposed a state of near constant civil war within elite socialist circles.

You know things are bad when even the Marist-Leninist elites begin agreeing it would have been better if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

1943-1946 - SMERSH

SMERSH emerged in 1943 as one of the most feared institutions of the Soviet wartime state, a counterintelligence apparatus created by Stalin to tighten political control over the Red Army and to eliminate real or imagined threats behind the front. Its formation was the culmination of a long evolution in Soviet military counterintelligence.

Before SMERSH existed, the NKVD's Special Sections had handled counterintelligence within the armed forces, but the German invasion in 1941 exposed weaknesses in that system. Stalin responded by reorganizing security organs repeatedly during the first two years of the war, and on 14 April 1943 he formally announced the creation of SMERSH as an independent counterintelligence directorate under the State Defense Committee.

The name itself—an acronym formed from *Smert' shpionam*, "Death to spies"—was coined personally by Stalin, reflecting both the ideological ferocity of the institution and the political climate in which it was born.

SMERSH was not a single agency but an umbrella organization overseeing three separate counterintelligence bodies embedded in the Red Army, the Navy, and the NKVD troops. Its central directorate, the Main Counterintelligence Directorate (GUKR SMERSH), was headquartered in the Lubyanka and answered directly to Stalin through the State Defense Committee.

From its inception until its dissolution in 1946, SMERSH was led by Viktor Abakumov, a ruthless security officer who enjoyed Stalin's confidence and whose career advanced rapidly during the war.

Abakumov's Background

Viktor Semyonovich Abakumov's life traces the arc of a man who rose from poverty in Moscow to become one of Stalin's most feared security chiefs. His origins were humble and ethnically Russian, born on 24 April 1908 in the Khamovniki district of Moscow to a working-class family. His father was an unskilled laborer—described variously as a janitor, stoker, or hospital orderly—and his mother worked as a nurse or seamstress.

There was no religious or ideological tradition in the household; Abakumov's background was entirely secular and proletarian, shaped by the hardships of early Soviet urban life. He completed only four grades of schooling before dropping out around age thirteen, taking up manual labor in factories to support himself.

Abakumov's entry into Soviet institutions came through the Red Army, which he joined as a teenager in 1922, serving briefly in a special-tasks brigade before demobilization. He then entered the Komsomol, the Communist Youth League, and only in 1930 did he become a candidate member of the Communist Party.

Abakumov's early political development was therefore not ideological but institutional: he was shaped by the structures of Soviet youth organizations and the expanding security apparatus rather than by revolutionary theory or party debates.

Abakumov did what he was conditioned to do.

Abakumov's rise within the security services began in 1932, when the Party recommended him for work in the OGPU. He was assigned to the Economic Department, and possibly the Investigation Department, but his early career was uneven.

In 1933 Abakumov was demoted and sent to the Gulag administration, partly due to concerns about his discipline and personal conduct. Yet this setback did not halt his ascent. After the OGPU was folded into the NKVD in 1934, Abakumov returned to state security work, first in the Economic Department of the GUGB and then in the Gulag's Security Department.

By 1937 Abakumov moved into the NKVD's 4th Department, responsible for counterintelligence and internal political surveillance.

Abakumov survived the Great Purge not by luck but by participation. He executed orders without hesitation, demonstrating the ruthlessness that Stalin valued in rising security officers.

In short, Abakumov was consistently exceeding Stalin's quotas.

In late 1938 he was appointed head of the NKVD in Rostov-on-Don, a significant regional command that placed him in direct contact with the machinery of repression. His effectiveness there brought him back to Moscow, where he became deputy to Lavrentiy Beria, Stalin's dominant security chief.

As you can likely predict, under Abakumov, SMERSH developed a reputation for uncompromising brutality, and its methods became synonymous with wartime repression.

Operationally, SMERSH's mandate was extraordinarily broad. Its official statute charged it with counterintelligence, counterterrorism, the suppression of "anti-Soviet elements," the protection of front lines from enemy penetration, the

investigation of traitors and deserters, and the screening of all military and civilian personnel returning from captivity.

In practice, this meant that SMERSH officers operated at every level of the Red Army, from frontline units to rear-area commands, monitoring loyalty, conducting interrogations, and eliminating perceived threats.

Stalin was terrified that World War 2 imperatives would replicate the conditions that led to the Tsar's downfall; primarily a mutiny in regular army forces that outnumbered internal security forces.

Stalin was determined not to make the Tsar's mistake and allow a mutiny to blossom into revolution.

Abakumov was let off leash and did not disappoint.

The extremes to which SMERSH resorted were well documented. Its officers relied on vast networks of informants—some sources estimate that informants constituted more than ten percent of the Red Army—to identify suspicious behavior.

SMERSH conducted interrogations that frequently involved coercion, intimidation, and physical abuse. They carried out summary executions of suspected spies, saboteurs, deserters, and soldiers accused of self-inflicted wounds.

SMERSH filtration camps processed millions of returning prisoners of war and civilians from occupied territories; many were arrested, executed, or sent to the Gulag on suspicion of collaboration.

According to postwar assessments cited at the Nuremberg Trials, SMERSH claimed to have neutralized tens of thousands of German agents, but its operations also resulted in hundreds of thousands of arrests of Soviet citizens, often without due process.

SMERSH's methods extended beyond direct repression.

SMERSH conducted disinformation operations, including efforts to control narratives about enemy leadership and to prevent rumors that could undermine morale. One of its most famous operations involved the recovery and identification of Adolf Hitler's remains, an act intended to quash myths of his survival.

SMERSH's role in Hitler's remains would haunt the West for decades to come as rumors were deliberately circulated in the Soviet Union, in Warsaw Pact proxy states, and in the West, about Hitler's biological characteristics. So numerous and so outrageous were most of these rumors that a dedicated chapter would be required to properly assess the veracity of any claim.

The objective of SMERSH disinformation operations about Hitler's remains was to sew distrust in the Intelligence Community of the West.

I will forego the intended diversion and remain focused on SMERSH's crimes.

SMERSH also played a central role in securing newly liberated and newly occupied territories, where it targeted not only enemy agents but also political opponents, nationalists, and anyone suspected of disloyalty to Soviet authority.

Throughout its existence, SMERSH remained tightly controlled by Stalin.

Although Abakumov was its formal head, he operated under Stalin's direct supervision, and the organization's priorities reflected Stalin's strategic and political concerns.

SMERSH's independence from the NKVD ensured that it could act swiftly and without bureaucratic interference, and its placement under the State Defense Committee gave it extraordinary authority during wartime.

No official statistics have ever been published, or even alluded to, about casualties inflicted by SMERSH during it's wartime operations. But given its own claims, of having "neutralized" tens of thousands of NAZU agents, and hundreds of thousands of traitors, sympathizers and spies, not to mention the millions of Soviet citizens through post-war "filtration camps", it is reasonable to assume SMERSH was one of the most prolific oppressive institutions created by Stalin.

Consistent with past policy, Stalin sacrificed SMERSH to provide the catharsis its crimes demanded. SMERSH's functions were transferred to the Ministry of State Security (MGB), and the organization was formally dissolved on 4 May 1946.

In terms of Stalinist Theor, SMERSH cannot be confused with an institutional innovation, but a reiteration of a necessary evil. During the war, the Paradox of the Proletariat compelled Stalin to hone SMERSH into the Scythe of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.

The West understood SMERSH as the apex of Soviet wartime counterintelligence: an institution designed to enforce absolute loyalty, eliminate dissent, and maintain political control under conditions of extreme military pressure.

SMERSH, and the extent of its crimes, remain a mystery since the Russian Federation has never opened the files on SMERSH's operational history. That is a telling omission since all other facets of the Soviet Union's intelligence and security apparatus were at least partially published.

But we don't need to know everything. We know enough to realize it would have been better if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

1946–1954 - MGB

The *Ministry of State Security* is the postwar Stalinist intelligence ministry. The MGB ran foreign intelligence, counterintelligence, and internal political repression.

The Ministry of State Security (MGB) was formally established in March 1946, when the Soviet government reorganized its wartime security institutions and transformed the *People's Commissariat for State Security (NKGB)* into a peacetime ministry. This reorganization was stated as part of a broader postwar administrative reform that converted all commissariats into ministries.

The statutory basis for the MGB's creation was the decree that separated state-security functions from the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD).

Once again, we witness that word; decree.

Stalin's decree left the MVD responsible for policing and penal labor, while the newly formed MGB assumed responsibility for political surveillance, counterintelligence, foreign espionage, and the protection of the Soviet leadership.

In strictly functional terms, Stalin bifurcated the Russian Intelligence apparatus into a "Tag 'Em" and "Bag 'Em" operation. The MGB identified enemies of the state and the MVD performed the follow-on, custodial role of oppression, at least for enemies of the state not first liquidated by the MGB.

If there was any question over qualitative reforms, its answer is found in the first man Stalin chose to lead the newly formed MGB, Viktor Abakumov, the man who made SMERSH universally feared by allies and Soviet citizens alike.

In the context of our analysis, the creation of the MGB was just the old device in action once again. Institutions within Soviet Intelligence were sacrificed, not to reduce crimes against humanity being perpetrated, but to extend those crimes against humanity. Once an institution's operations exceed the tolerance threshold of the Soviet elites, the Dictator of the Proletariat issued a decree ending the offending institution, rebranded the agency or, more typically, created a new agency.

The leadership of the newly formed agency belies the gambit. Following the war, Stalin was compelled to sacrifice SMERSH due to a growing hue and cry among the Soviet Leadership. Instead of investigating Viktor Abakumov for crimes against humanity, Stalin sacrificed SMERSH in order to reserve the man. This pattern is not merely coincidental in the history of Russian Intelligence, it is replete.

The point of this litany, so we may all be clear, is to establish the totality of Socialist Totalitarianism under the Soviet model. Because there is no possible resolution to the Paradox of the Proletariat, there is no road to reforms of any socialist system. Because Marxism, Marxist-Leninism and all their variants is articulated as a science-based theorem of social evolution, the implementation of socialism is an existential imperative.

Stalin did not justify the extremes he resorted to because he was insane. If anything, Stalin was a hyperrational student of Lenin who applied Lenin's Theses to the utmost letter. This is what makes dismissing Stalin as insane so dangerous; it sacrifices the man and, in so doing, saves the thesis.

The central, binding theses of all socialist systems are 1.) societies, like organisms, evolve, 2.) science can discern the laws by which societies evolve, 3.) scientists must direct the evolution of society, 4.) left undirected, societies will evolve into class predation, the capitalist being the penultimate predatory in evolutionary history, and 5.) the Proletariat must violently overthrow the predatory classes and direct the evolution of society through socialist re-education.

Stalin went all in on Marxist-Leninism, saw all undesirable classes as evolutionary discards, and chose to liquidate them as fast as humanly possible.

Hyper Rational. The fatal flaw is not in these men, but in their theses.

Marxist-Leninism is not about the perpetuation of the species. Marxist-Leninism is all about perpetuation of the theses. At least, that is what is taught at Komsomol camp each summer. In practice, as I am presently documenting, Marxist-Leninism can be reduced to "perpetuation of the feces".

Returning to the feces at hand, during the period in which it existed as the MGB (1946–1953), the ministry was headed by Viktor Abakumov, who served as Minister of State Security from 1946 until his arrest in 1951, and then by Semyon Ignatiev, who led the ministry from 1951 until its dissolution in 1953.

Both men operated under Stalin's direct authority and, just like SMERSH, the MGB's structure and operations reflected Stalin's personal priorities and political anxieties. Though no words to this effect ever appeared in print, it became immediately apparent the MGB's guiding motto was also inherited from SMERSH; Death to spies.

Determining who was a spy, indeed, what constituted a ‘spy”, followed Stalin’s tried and true template. The MGB carried out major campaigns of oppression that defined the final years of Stalin’s rule. It conducted pervasive domestic surveillance, fabricated treason cases, and used torture to extract confessions, leading to executions and long imprisonments.

Among its most notorious operations were the Leningrad Affair, which targeted rising party elites; the anti - “cosmopolitan” campaigns, which disproportionately persecuted Jewish intellectuals; and the Night of the Murdered Poets in 1952, in which prominent Jewish writers were executed.

The Leningrad Affair

The Leningrad Affair was a high-level political purge targeting senior Communist Party officials associated with the Leningrad regional leadership. Stalin and Beria feared that the Leningrad Party organization had become too powerful, too independent, and too popular. The purge destroyed the city’s political elite: party secretaries, economic planners, trade officials, and administrators. Hundreds were arrested; many were executed; thousands were demoted or expelled.

The Affair was orchestrated by Abakumov’s MGB, with Beria’s support and Stalin’s direct approval. It was fundamentally a *power struggle within the Party*, aimed at eliminating a perceived rival political center.

Here is how that nightmare unfolded:

> The Leningrad Affair was one of the most consequential and chilling political purges of Stalin’s final years, a campaign that destroyed an entire regional leadership and signaled the degree to which Stalin’s paranoia had come to dominate the internal life of the Soviet state. Its origins lay in the political and institutional tensions that emerged after the Second World War, when Leningrad—hero city of the siege, symbol of sacrifice, and cradle of the Bolshevik Revolution—began to develop a prestige and administrative coherence that Stalin found intolerable.
>
> The city’s leaders, many of whom had risen through wartime service and enjoyed genuine popular support, appeared to Stalin as a potential alternative power center. In the late 1940s, as Stalin’s suspicion of regional autonomy intensified, the Leningrad Party organization became the target of a purge that would ultimately claim thousands of victims.

The political context of the Affair was shaped by the rivalry between two factions within the Soviet leadership. On one side stood the Leningrad group, led by figures such as Aleksei Kuznetsov, the Secretary of the Central Committee responsible for Party organs; Nikolai Voznesensky, head of Gosplan and one of the USSR's most brilliant economic theorists; and Pyotr Popkov, the energetic First Secretary of the Leningrad Party.

Full stop.

I, being an American, am inclined to favor the underdog in any fight, for America has been the underdog in every fight until, frankly, Desert Storm. But I digress. Do not allow your affinity for the underdog to cloud either your perception or judgement in the Leningrad Affair.

Both factions at war with each other in the Leningrad Affair were committed Marxist-Leninists, driven to drive human evolution at an industrial scale. The battle between them was inevitable.

The Paradox of the Proletariat predicts this clash of Soviet Titans.

The Leningrad faction were not dissidents or ideological opponents of Stalin. They were loyal Communists, veterans of the war, and competent administrators. But they were also associated with Andrei Zhdanov, the powerful Politburo member who had overseen Leningrad's defense and postwar reconstruction.

Zhdanov's death in 1948 created a vacuum, and Stalin - already suspicious of Zhdanov's influence - began to view Zhdanov's protégés as a threat.

Opposing the Leningrad faction was the triumvirate of Stalin's closest security and administrative allies: Lavrentiy Beria, Georgy Malenkov, and Viktor Abakumov.

Beria and Malenkov had long resented the prestige of the Leningrad leadership, and Abakumov, head of the Ministry of State Security (MGB), was eager to demonstrate his loyalty through decisive action. The institutional machinery of the purge was therefore driven by the MGB, which fabricated evidence, staged interrogations, and constructed elaborate conspiracies to justify the destruction of the Leningrad group.

The Affair began with the seemingly innocuous Leningrad Trade Fair of 1949, an economic exhibition intended to stimulate regional commerce. Stalin interpreted the fair as an attempt to build an independent Leningrad economic base, a sign of "regional separatism."

Soviet newspapers soon carried insinuations that the fair had been organized without proper authorization, and internal memoranda - later cited by émigrés - suggested that Stalin had demanded an investigation into “Leningrad adventurism.”

Abakumov’s agents descended on the city, arresting organizers and interrogating them under torture until they produced confessions implicating Kuznetsov, Voznesensky, and Popkov.

On this induced vomit the purge expanded rapidly.

Voznesensky was accused of “bourgeois nationalism” and “anti-Party tendencies,” charges that were entirely fabricated. Kuznetsov, once considered a possible successor to Stalin, was accused of forming a clandestine group aimed at creating a “second center” of Party authority. Popkov was charged with fostering “Leningrad particularism,” a vague term that essentially meant being too popular and too effective.

Soviet newspapers published carefully crafted denunciations, describing the accused as “enemies in hiding” and “traitors who sought to undermine the unity of the Party.” One article in *Pravda* referred to “the poisonous weed of Leningrad arrogance,” a phrase later recalled bitterly by survivors.

Pause for consideration. Note the factional dynamics of advantage, even if only perceived, for this dynamic is replete in the dynamic between Russia’s Oligarchs today.

The interrogations were brutal.

Expatriate accounts, including those of former MGB officers who fled after Stalin’s death, describe beatings, sleep deprivation, and threats against family members. Abakumov personally supervised some of the interrogations, demanding confessions that would implicate the entire Leningrad leadership.

One émigré memoir recounts an interrogation in which an MGB officer told a prisoner, “Leningrad stood against the Germans, but you stand against the Party. Which is worse?” The prisoner was executed within weeks.

By late 1950, the core leadership had been destroyed.

Kuznetsov, Voznesensky, and Popkov were executed after secret trials. Hundreds of mid-level officials were arrested, and thousands more were expelled from the Party or demoted.

Leningrad University, cultural institutions, and the Komsomol were purged of anyone suspected of loyalty to the old leadership.

Once again, we must pause: What we are witnessing is the wholesale destruction of all derivative intelligentsia, by which I mean every individual with a demonstrated loyalty to the branch being pruned. In a state which demands the utmost, and expressed loyalties of its followers, the socio-psychological impact can barely be appreciated.

Under socialist systems of governance, you are damned if you do and damned if you don't. Students in the Komsomol, the "Stalin Youth" program were not immune.

Indeed, students were viewed as premium suspects, for the next generation of leadership was destined to rise from the Komsomol's ranks. The very organization was designed, from the first to the last, as a deck stacking mechanism, a machine within the machine which conditioned children to be dutiful, obedient operators.

Once a regional party boss was identified by the Dictator of the Proletariat as a snake, everyone beneath them was identified as a brood of vipers.

Against vipers and their broods Stalin's Scythe swung.

The Leningrad Affair reached into every corner of the city's administration, eliminating not only political figures but also economists, engineers, professors, and factory directors. The "gory details" of the Affair lie not only in the thousands of executions, but in the systematic destruction of a regional identity.

Leningrad had been a symbol of Soviet endurance, and its leaders had been heroes of the war. Stalin's purge turned that pride into a liability. Families of the accused were exiled, children were expelled from schools, and widows were forced to sign statements denouncing their husbands as traitors.

One widow later recalled in an émigré interview that she was told, "Your husband betrayed the Motherland. You must prove that you will not do the same."

In a just world, someone within the system would have rallied the consciences of righteous Soviets, but there was by then none in existence. In a just world Stalin could not have prevailed over the hue and cry, and the man would be brought down.

At the hue and cry, Stalin needed a scapegoat. Abakumov himself was arrested in 1951. Stalin's paranoia had turned even against his most loyal executioners. The Leningrad Affair ended only with Stalin's death in 1953.

As is predicted by the Paradox of the Proletariat, when Stalin died, his faction followed closely on his heels. I am not talking figuratively.

After Stalin's death, the Russian faction seized power, purged the Georgian and Transcaucasian faction and the Leningrad Affair was reversed.

Survivors were rehabilitated, and the executions were officially declared "groundless."

Justice? Perhaps. But the damage had been done.

Stalin's murderous rampage across Leningrad had eliminated an entire generation of administrators and intellectuals, reshaped the political landscape of the Soviet Union, and demonstrated the extent to which socialism's fatal flaw had permeated society.

Operationally, the fatal flaw of socialism, the Paradox of the Proletariat did not result in a Dictator who might turn on the people, but a Dictator who must turn on the people.

In a system which regarded deviation from the thesis as counter-revolutionary thought, thought to be eliminated, the result was always a death spiral.

The Leningrad Affair was the Paradox of the Proletariat operating in the macro. The Night of the Murdered Poets was the Paradox of the Proletariat operating in the micro.

In the Leningrad affair we witness the long-term trend in socialist movements. The Proletariat becomes increasingly divided and, ultimately, cannibalistic.

Interesting fact: Leningrad was the new name the Soviets gave Petrograd, the city where Anastasia would have entered society.

> I'd bet everything I own the Leningrad faction as a whole wished Anastasia had attended her ball.

Night of the Murdered Poets

The Night of the Murdered Poets was the execution of thirteen prominent Jewish writers and intellectuals, all members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC). Their arrest, torture, and eventual execution were part of Stalin's anti-Jewish campaign, which intensified after the founding of Israel and Stalin's growing paranoia about "rootless cosmopolitans," "Zionists," and supposed Jewish disloyalty.

Nearly all histories insist this purge was purely ethnic and ideological, not political in the sense of Party factionalism. I disagree strongly, but will address the "Special Place for Jews" under socialism later. Just be aware the confusion between a religion – Judaism – and the ethnic group – Hebrew – wreaks havoc among scholars and laymen alike.

Just don't mistake me for suggesting antisemitism did not exist among socialist, despite the prevalence of "Jews" among the socialist elites. Socialism has a raging case of antisemitism, and socialists of Hebrew decent have no answer for the phenomenon.

I will attempt one shortly. Here we delve into a nightmare that unfolded for thirteen "Jews" under Stalin's oppressive regime.

As can likely be guessed, the Night of Murdered Poets was carried out by the MGB, during Abakumov's earlier investigations. The executions occurred after Abakumov himself had been arrested. Clearly Abakumov was not exclusively responsible. The MGB was composed of thousands of operatives reflexively willing to resort to violence, even in the absence of direction.

Here is how this nightmare unfolded:

> The Night of the Murdered Poets was the culmination of Stalin's late-period anti-Jewish campaign, a purge that combined political paranoia, ideological hostility, and the personal vindictiveness of a ruler who increasingly saw conspiracies everywhere.

To understand the event itself - the execution of thirteen Jewish writers and intellectuals on 12 August 1952 - one must begin with the political and institutional context that made such a crime possible.

It was not an isolated episode but the final act in a years-long assault on the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC), an organization Stalin had once supported during the war, but later came to view as a threat to his authority.

The JAC had been created in 1942 to rally international Jewish support for the Soviet war effort. Its members included some of the most prominent Jewish cultural figures in the USSR: poets, novelists, journalists, actors, and scholars.

During the war, they published accounts of Nazi atrocities, raised funds abroad, and cultivated ties with Jewish communities in the United States and elsewhere. These activities, which Stalin had initially encouraged, later became grounds for suspicion.

After the founding of Israel in 1948 and the shift in Soviet foreign policy, Stalin began to view international Jewish networks as potential channels of espionage. The JAC's wartime contacts with American Jewish organizations were reinterpreted as evidence of treason.

The institutional machinery of the purge was driven by the Ministry of State Security (MGB), first under Viktor Abakumov and later under his successors after Abakumov himself fell victim to Stalin's paranoia.

The MGB fabricated charges, staged interrogations, and constructed elaborate conspiracies alleging that the JAC had plotted to create a Jewish republic in Crimea, to secede from the Soviet Union, and to collaborate with American intelligence.

Full stop. Once again, today's Russian Federation reflexively includes this viewpoint as the legacy context of its historical claims in Crimea. In fact, the antagonisms between Volodymir Zalensky and Vladimir Putin are not thrice removed form those of Stalin and the Leningrad Poets.

The accusations of "Jews" controlling Crimea were absurd, but they fit Stalin's growing obsession with "rootless cosmopolitans," a term used in

Soviet newspapers beginning in 1949 to describe Jews who were supposedly disloyal to the Soviet homeland.

Rootless people. But that is a slight which masks a bigger lie, for at the heart of all Marxist and Marxist-Leninist theory is the Grand Accusation; Monarchy, and therefore Capitalism, indeed the relevant chapters of human evolution, are all derivatives of a "Jewish Conspiracy".

The "Bor'ba s Religiei" of the International Socialists is indistinguishable from the Kirchen Kampf of the National Socialists. The two phrases are nearly identical. The former means "Struggle Against Religion" while the later means "Struggle Against the Church". To most Marxists, religion was the font from which monarchy and capitalism flowed, and Judaism is the wellspring within.

Ethnic Hebrews among the International Socialists countered that it was Christianity which was the religion telling its followers to worship a "dead guy on a stick", that Judaism, in its orthodoxy, contained few of the objectionable features of religions opposed by their science. Ethnic Russians, who were nearly all raised in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, balked and rebutted, "That may be true, but Jews put the dead guy on the stick in the first place."

Socialist debates, in this vein, were ever and always a blamestorm. No umbrella was going to keep Soviet Hebrews dry in that gale. But this is not the reason Stalin turned on Leningrad's "Jews". Stalin turned on Leningrad's "Jews" because they were loyal to a fault, and the leaders they served found themselves on Stalin's, quote, "Shit List", unquote.

The victims of the Night of the Murdered Poets were not political rivals or regional power brokers, as in the Leningrad Affair. They were cultural figures whose influence lay in literature, theater, and scholarship. Among them were Peretz Markish, a celebrated Yiddish poet; David Bergelson, a novelist of international reputation; Itzik Fefer, a poet and former Red Army officer; and Solomon Lozovsky, a senior Soviet official who had served as deputy foreign minister and head of the Soviet Information Bureau.

The factional alignment of the victims, vis-à-vis Stalin, was not political in the traditional sense. They were all loyal Soviet citizens, many of them

decorated veterans of the war, but they belonged to a cultural sphere Stalin increasingly associated with foreign influence and ideological deviation.

Deviants. That word once again. Deviants were subjected to decrees. I just want former Soviet "Jews" to know, they were not alone. It just felt that way. On concluding our litany of the crimes against humanity perpetrated by Russian Intelligence, I'll read the roll State Enemies. It reads as a Whose Who of the Socialist Holocaust.

For the time being, we'll remain focused.

The "gory details" of the Night of the Murdered Poets lie in the interrogations and the trial that preceded the executions. Soviet newspapers did not report the arrests, but internal MGB memoranda - later cited by historians and expatriate accounts - describe interrogations marked by beatings, sleep deprivation, and threats against family members.

One émigré memoir recounts how Fefer, under torture, was forced to implicate Lozovsky in a fabricated plot to establish a Jewish state in Crimea. Another account, preserved in the papers of a former MGB officer who fled the USSR, describes Markish being told, "Your poems served the Motherland once. Now they serve its enemies." Markish was beaten so severely that he could barely stand during his final interrogation.

The trial itself, held in secret in 1952, was a grotesque parody of justice.

The defendants were accused of espionage, treason, bourgeois nationalism, and "anti-Soviet propaganda." The prosecution relied entirely on coerced confessions. Lozovsky, who had been a loyal Bolshevik since 1917, refused to confess and attempted to defend himself, prompting the presiding judge to shout, "You are not here to argue. You are here to admit your guilt."

Soviet newspapers later published articles denouncing "cosmopolitan traitors" and "enemies in hiding," though they did not name the defendants. One article in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* referred to "the poisonous influence of foreign agents disguised as cultural workers," a phrase that survivors later recognized as a coded reference to the JAC.

On the night of 12 August 1952, the thirteen defendants were taken to Lubyanka Prison and executed by firing squad. Their bodies were buried in secret, and their families were not informed.

One widow later recalled in an émigré interview that she learned of her husband's death only when his name disappeared from the ration list. Another survivor recounted how an MGB officer told her, "Your husband betrayed the Motherland. You must prove that you will not do the same."

The Night of the Murdered Poets was not merely an act of repression; it was the symbolic destruction of Soviet Jewish culture. Yiddish theaters were closed, Jewish publications were shut down, and Jewish writers were removed from public life.

I think it's a given, they'd all have rather attended Anastasia's ball.

The purge continued into the Doctors' Plot of 1952–1953, which targeted Jewish physicians and nearly escalated into a mass deportation before Stalin's death halted the campaign.

The Doctor's Plot

The Doctor's Plot of 1952–53 was the last great paroxysm of Stalinist terror, a fabricated conspiracy that revealed the full extent of Stalin's late-life paranoia and the lethal power of the Soviet security apparatus.

The Doctor's Plot occurred in the final months of Stalin's rule, when his suspicion of "cosmopolitanism," foreign influence, and especially Jewish intellectuals had hardened into a worldview in which enemies lurked everywhere, even within the Kremlin's own medical staff. The affair began as a secret investigation, expanded into a public propaganda campaign, and was poised to become a mass deportation before Stalin's death abruptly halted it.

Here is how that nightmare unfolded:

The political context of the Doctor's Plot was shaped by Stalin's growing distrust of the Soviet elite. After the war, he increasingly feared conspiracies among

scientists, writers, and professionals - groups with foreign contacts or specialized knowledge.

Stalin's anti-Jewish campaign, which had already destroyed the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in 1952, created an atmosphere in which Jewish physicians were seen as inherently suspect. The MGB, reorganized after the fall of Viktor Abakumov, was eager to demonstrate its vigilance, and Stalin's personal secretariat encouraged investigations into "medical sabotage."

The institutional machinery was therefore primed for a purge that would target doctors as a professional class and Jews as an ethnic group.

The affair began quietly in 1951, when the MGB arrested several Kremlin doctors, including Yakov Etinger, a respected cardiologist. Etinger died under interrogation, and his coerced "confession" became the seed of a larger conspiracy theory.
Because this penchant for conspiracy theories is predictable for a pseudoscience which interpreted history as a chain of conspiracies, I am at a loss for how to discount that particular accusation.

Basically, MGB investigators claimed that a group of doctors had deliberately misdiagnosed and mistreated senior Soviet officials, causing their deaths. Among the alleged victims were Andrei Zhdanov, whose fatal heart attack in 1948 Stalin had long suspected was the result of medical incompetence or sabotage.

The MGB constructed a narrative in which doctors - many of them Jewish - were agents of Western intelligence, particularly American and British services, acting through Zionist organizations.

The case became public on 13 January 1953, when *Pravda* published an article titled "Vicious Spies and Killers Under the Mask of Professors and Doctors." The article accused a group of prominent physicians of murdering Soviet leaders and plotting further assassinations. It described them as "enemies in white coats," a phrase that quickly entered Soviet political vocabulary.

The article claimed that the doctors had been recruited by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which it called "a Zionist spy organization." The language was unmistakably ethnic: the accused were portrayed not merely as traitors but as representatives of a hostile national group.

The victims of the Doctor's Plot were among the most distinguished physicians in the Soviet Union. They included Miron Vovsi, Stalin's own physician and a professor of medicine; Boris Kogan, a leading diagnostician; and several other specialists who had treated senior officials.

The factional alignment vis-à-vis Stalin was nonexistent - they were not political actors - but their Jewish identity and professional status made them vulnerable in the climate of late Stalinism. This was clearly a case of being deficient in demonstrative support for the "Dear Leader".

The MGB arrested dozens of doctors, interrogated them under torture, and extracted confessions that implicated others. One expatriate account, preserved in the memoirs of a former MGB interrogator, describes how a doctor was beaten until he signed a statement admitting to "deliberate incorrect treatment."
Another account, from a nurse who later fled the USSR, recalls hearing an interrogator shout, "You killed Zhdanov. You killed Shcherbakov. You will confess."

The propaganda campaign intensified in early 1953. Soviet newspapers published articles warning of "medical murderers" and "foreign agents disguised as healers." The press encouraged public denunciations, and ordinary citizens wrote letters demanding harsh punishment for the accused.

Hospitals dismissed Jewish doctors, and patients refused treatment from them. The atmosphere was one of hysteria, fueled by state media and by Stalin's own directives. According to later testimony from Kremlin insiders, Stalin spoke repeatedly of the need to "cleanse" the medical profession and hinted at broader measures against Jews as a group.

A sidebar on Stalin's attitudes toward Jews is not merely justified at this juncture, it is requisite. I shall return to the Doctor's Plot.

Stalin on Jews

Stalin's attitude toward Jews was shaped by a volatile mixture of ideological suspicion, geopolitical anxiety, and personal paranoia that intensified dramatically in the final years of his life.

Although the early Soviet state officially condemned antisemitism and promoted Jewish participation in government and culture, Stalin himself never fully trusted Jews as a collective. His suspicion hardened during and after the Second World War, when he increasingly viewed Jewish intellectuals, professionals, and cultural figures as potential agents of foreign influence.

By the time of the Doctor's Plot in 1952–53, Stalin's private comments, public propaganda, and security directives reveal a leader who had come to see Jews not merely as individuals capable of treason, but as a national group whose loyalties were inherently suspect.

The roots of Stalin's hostility lay partly in the internationalism of early Bolshevism. Many prominent revolutionaries were Jewish, and Jewish political organizations - Bundists, Mensheviks, Zionists - had competed with Bolsheviks before 1917.
Stalin never forgot these rivalries. His later rhetoric frequently portrayed Jews as "rootless cosmopolitans," a term that appeared in Soviet newspapers beginning in 1949 and was used to describe intellectuals supposedly lacking loyalty to the Soviet homeland.

The phrase "rootless" was a coded accusation: Jews were being framed as people whose identity was tied to foreign cultures, foreign languages, and foreign political networks. Paradoically, the observation, flawed as it was, also amounted to a contradiction of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine which deemed all "roots" to be anachronisms to be erased under socialism.

In Stalin's twisted logic, "roots" did not matter unless they were absent.

The turning point came after the Second World War. The creation of the State of Israel in 1948, initially welcomed by Stalin for strategic reasons, quickly became a source of anxiety. Soviet Jews celebrated Israel's independence enthusiastically, and Stalin interpreted this as evidence of dual loyalty.

In the context of an ideology predicated on the erasure of ethnicity and nationality, it was difficult to defend against such charges. No true Soviet could celebrate the creation of new borders when borders were completely on the wrong side of history.

The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC), which had rallied international Jewish support for the Soviet war effort, became a target. Its members had traveled abroad, met American Jewish leaders, and published accounts of Nazi atrocities.

In Stalin's mind, these activities were reinterpreted as signs of espionage. The MGB fabricated charges alleging that the JAC had plotted to create a Jewish republic in Crimea, and to collaborate with American intelligence. These accusations were absurd, but they fit Stalin's growing obsession with foreign conspiracies.

By 1952, Stalin's suspicion had hardened into open hostility. The liquidation of the JAC culminated in the Night of the Murdered Poets, where thirteen Jewish writers and intellectuals were executed after secret trials.
Soviet newspapers did not name the defendants, but they published articles denouncing "cosmopolitan traitors" and "foreign agents disguised as cultural workers." One article in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* referred to "the poisonous influence of foreign agents," a phrase that survivors later recognized as a coded reference to Jews.

The propaganda campaign was unmistakably ethnic in tone, portraying Jewish culture itself as a conduit for foreign infiltration, if not foreign infiltration itself.

It would be a mistake to say Stalin was casting Jews as "others". "Jews" had been cast as "others" all along.

Stalin's private comments during the Doctor's Plot reveal the full extent of his suspicion. According to internal analyses later cited by Western intelligence, Stalin insisted that the accused doctors were part of a "Jewish-bourgeois nationalist group" sponsored by American and British intelligence.

This phrase, ""Jewish-bourgeois nationalist group" appeared in the January 13, 1953, *Pravda* article that Stalin personally supervised. It framed Jews as a nationality with foreign allegiance - a direct echo of the ideological justification used in earlier mass deportations of Poles, Germans, Koreans, and Crimean Tatars.

The article accused the doctors of murdering senior Soviet officials and conspiring to kill others. It described them as “vicious spies and killers under the mask of professors and doctors,” language that transformed medical malpractice into ethnic treason.

The propaganda escalated rapidly.

On February 14, 1953, *Pravda* columnist Yuri Zhukov wrote that “the pack of mad dogs from Tel Aviv is loathsome and vile in its thirst for blood.” This line, cited in postwar analyses of Soviet press campaigns, was not merely anti-Israeli rhetoric.

In Stalinist political language, “mad dogs” was a term used for enemy nationalities prior to deportation. The implication was clear: Jews were being portrayed as a violent, conspiratorial group whose collective behavior posed a threat to the Soviet state.

Stalin’s private conversations with Politburo members reinforced this message. He claimed that Jewish doctors had murdered Andrei Zhdanov and Aleksandr Shcherbakov, two senior officials whose deaths he had long suspected were the result of sabotage. According to later testimony from Kremlin insiders, Stalin spoke repeatedly of the need to “cleanse” the medical profession and hinted that broader measures against Jews might be necessary.

These hints were not abstract.

Archival evidence and memoir accounts suggest that Stalin was preparing a mass deportation of Soviet Jews to eastern regions, similar to the wartime deportations of Chechens, Crimean Tatars, and Volga Germans.

Boxcars were reportedly assembled, and internal MGB memoranda referred to “special settlements” for “suspect nationalities.” The Doctor’s Plot was intended to provide the ideological justification for this operation: a fabricated conspiracy proving that Jews were collectively disloyal.

History was not just repeating, it was goose-stepping!

The panic among Soviet Jews in early 1953 reflected their understanding of Stalin's intentions. They recognized the pattern: accusations of treason, propaganda portraying the group as violent or conspiratorial, and secret police investigations targeting the group as a whole.

These were the same steps that had preceded earlier ethnic deportations under the Soviets. The fear of Soviet "Jews" was not unfounded. Stalin's rhetoric, both public and private, had framed Jews as a nationality whose loyalties lay outside the Soviet Union, and his security apparatus had begun preparing the logistical infrastructure for mass relocation.

Everything changed on March 5, 1953, when Stalin died.

Within days, the new Soviet leadership moved to dismantle the Doctor's Plot. The accused doctors were released, the confessions were declared fabricated, and the propaganda campaign ceased. The reversal was swift and complete, reflecting both the illegitimacy of the charges and the political need to distance the new leadership from Stalin's final excesses.

Stalin's attitude toward Jews, therefore, was not a simple prejudice but a coherent worldview mandated by socialist theory. All ethnic groups, not just "Jews", were enemies of the revolution.

Do not mistake the rehabilitation of these Soviet Doctors as vindication of "Jews". These doctors were rehabilitated as loyal Soviets, re-affirmed as committed socialists. No Dictator of the Proletariat could consider themselves the Proletariat if "Jews" were given a pass and others were not.

"Jews" continued to be seen as a collective threat to the Soviet state.

Stalin's stated suspicions, expressed in propaganda, internal directives, and private conversations, reveal a leader who had come to believe that Jews were irretrievably counter revolutionary agents capable of treason on a national scale.

The Marxist-Leninist proscription on proactive measures compelled, not merely justified Stalin's purges.

> The Doctor's Plot was the final expression of this worldview, a fabricated conspiracy that nearly became the justification for a mass deportation. It ended only because Stalin himself did.
>
> After Stalin's death, the victims were quietly rehabilitated. The charges were declared baseless, and the executions were acknowledged as crimes of the Stalinist regime. But the cultural world they had inhabited - the vibrant Yiddish literary sphere that had flourished in the early Soviet period - never recovered.
>
> The Night of the Murdered Poets stands as one of the most tragic episodes of late-Stalinist terror: a purge driven not by political rivalry but by ethnic paranoia, executed through torture and secret trial, and aimed at extinguishing a cultural tradition that Stalin had come to view as inherently suspect.

Returning to the MGB as an institution, the MGB played the lead role in postwar ethnic and political purges, repression of nationalist resistance movements in Soviet republics, and the maintenance of the Gulag system through arrests, interrogations, and forced labor.

MGB operations, like all of its predecessor agencies, exemplified the ministry's defining function: amplifying the current Dictator of the Proletariat while suppressing all "deviants".

With Stalin's death, the Georgian and Transcaucasian faction fell rapidly from grace. From Stalin's death forward, the Russian Nationalist seized and retained power. Just do not mistake the triumph of the Russian Nationalists as a turning point.

The triumph of the Russian Nationalists was merely the next round in the Perpetuation of the Feces.

Criminalization of dissent is the constant defining every agency of the Soviet Intelligence apparatus, a feature mandated by the core, binding theses of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin. The Russian Nationalist faction did not vary one wit from that fatal flaw.

The Russian Soviets would not escape from the Paradox of the Proletariat under any form of socialism. Before documenting that to be the case, I must first establish my conclusions on Russian Nationalism are justified.

Russian Nationalism

I could simply level the charge of Russian Nationalism against all which followed Stalin, and nearly everyone in the West would reflexively applaud, just as every socialist would reflexively boo. The expected conclusion gets the expected response, but is it justified?

My Lord and Savior wants converts, not casualties. The expected conclusion will no longer produce casualties, just as it will no longer produce converts. The expected conclusion, by now agreed by all, has a null effect.

That is because analysts have applied the wrong filters on the data. The litany of Soviet Crimes Against Humanity has always centered on whose was targeted for oppression, not who escaped scrutiny.

Though I harbor no hope of converting socialists to Christianity, I will settle for averting them from socialism. Another brand of liberalism, any brand of liberalism, is preferable to socialism.

With that in mind, and an impossible task set as objective, follow me in a fact-based audit of Soviet policies vis a vis ethnic groups and national identities. Follow me as I re-read the rolls of those victimized under Socialism, then apply the filters to reveal who was not victimized at all.

The lists below use a strict criterion: an ethnic group or nationality was "Subject To Sanction" only when it was explicitly targeted *as a group* in state orders, deportation decrees, or "national operations". I exclude those victimized for "class crimes" or "ideological crimes".

Subject To Sanction

The following ethnic groups and nationalities Escaped Sanction based on ethnic group or national identity. Many were in fact heavily affected by famine, collectivization, class and political terror. One was not.

> Explicitly "Subject To Sanction" were Poles, Germans (including Volga Germans), Latvians, Estonians, Finns, Greeks (especially Black Sea communities), Iranians, Chinese, Romanians, Bulgarians, Macedonians, Harbinites (CER returnees treated as a quasi-national category), Chechens,

> Ingush, Karachays, Balkars, Kalmyks, Crimean Tatars, Koreans (Far Eastern deportations, 1937), Meskhetian Turks, Kurds (in certain border operations), Khemshils (Muslim Armenians, treated as a distinct group), Black Sea Greeks and Bulgarians (WWII deportations), Lithuanians, Latvians (again, as Baltic nationals under post-war deportations), Estonians (Baltic deportations), Moldovans/Bessarabian Romanians (post-annexation deportations), Cossacks (de-Cossackization treated them as a quasi-ethnic group), and of course, Jews during Stalin's later, anti-cosmopolitan campaigns, JAC liquidation, Doctors' Plot.

This list is composed of only those ethnicities and nationalities so described in Soviet documentation and journalistic sources. I am not putting words in Soviet mouths.

The only apparent omission is Ukrainian.

This is because Soviet functionaries refused to use the term Ukraine, opting instead for ethnic labels in thick pejorative undertones, such as Cossacks and Kulaks. I include Ukraine for obvious reasons, though, in order to remain pedantic on Soviet sources, the Soviets never explicitly targeted "Ukrainians" for official sanction by that name.

No historian, not even one from the Russian Federation, will refute the litany of victims of Socialist oppression. Ask if you doubt me, but everyone from these ethnic groups will agree, it would have been better if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

Escaped Sanction

The following ethnic groups and nationalities Escaped Sanction based on ethnic group or national identity. Many were in fact heavily affected by famine, collectivization, class and political terror. One was not.

> Ethnic Russians, Belarusians, Georgians, Armenians (aside from localized border clearances, no all-Armenian deportation), Azerbaijanis (again, localized operations but no total ethnic deportation), Kazakhs (catastrophic famine and sedentarization, but not via named ethnic deportation orders), Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmen, Kyrgyz, Ossetians, Dagestani peoples (Avars, Lezgins, etc., repressed in other ways but not as whole ethnic groups), Most small Siberian and Far Northern indigenous peoples (Nenets, Evenks, Chukchi, etc., subject to harsh "development" policies but not mass ethnic deportations).

But this list is highly misleading. Within this list of ethnic groups and nationalities are entire categories which had been deemed "autonomous regions" by the Bolsheviks from the start. You see, the Bolshevik leadership, in their desperate attempt to negate the introduction of eastern minority groups into the fight against Bolshevism, proclaimed these regions had been criminal acquisitions of the Tsar, and promised them autonomy, if not sovereignty, once the Tsar's order faded from history.

The Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmen, Kyrgyz, Ossetians, Dagestanis, Avars, Lezgins, as well as most of the smaller, Siberian and Far Northern indigenous peoples – the Nenets, Evenks, Chukchi, etc. – refrained from joining the fight against the Bolshevik Coup.

"Soviet Asia"

When the Bolsheviks created autonomous regions for peoples such as the Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmen, Kyrgyz, Ossetians, Dagestanis, Avars, Lezgins, and the smaller Siberian and Far Northern indigenous groups like the Nenets, Evenks, and Chukchi, they did so for strategic reasons rather than out of genuine commitment to self-rule.

During the Civil War, these populations were potential allies of the Whites, of pan-Islamic or pan-Turkic movements, or of foreign powers. Granting them territorial autonomy was a way to keep them inside the Soviet state and prevent rebellion.

Lenin's nationalities policy promised cultural rights, language rights, and nominal political representation, but these promises were always subordinate to the needs of the central Party leadership. Once the revolution was secure and the Soviet Union consolidated, the autonomy of these regions became largely symbolic.

"Soviet Asia" was composed of ethnicities and nationalities which were entirely contiguous to Tsarist Russia, and therefore did not constitute an external threat, nor did any of these regions have a diaspora which could be construed as a foreign threat. For this reason alone, the Dictator of the Proletariat placed a lower priority on these regions when assessing counter revolutionary forces. These regions represented an internal threat, certainly, but never one with an external extension.

In other words, no western power had an organic affinity with "Soviet Asia".

In practice, Moscow controlled every meaningful lever of power. The First Secretary of each autonomous republic was appointed from above, the security apparatus answered

directly to the NKVD or MGB, and economic planning was dictated by Gosplan without regard for local conditions.

Cultural autonomy, briefly encouraged in the 1920s under korenizatsiya, was reversed in the 1930s when Russian language and Russian cadres were imposed across all republics. In this respect, it could be said the Dictator of the Proletariat did indeed engage in ethnic cleansing campaign, but my short list is composed of those groups explicitly targeted because of their ethnic or national identity.

Because of Lenin's original promise of "autonomy" to Soviet Asia, the Dictator of the Proletariat, no matter who he was in the moment, had to avoid semantics which resulted in an indictment along those lines.

Religious autonomy in Soviet Asia was crushed through campaigns against mosques, madrasas, shrines, and indigenous spiritual practices. Religious oppression deserves a section of tis own, but the pattern emerging in ethnic and national oppression will be the same as that in religious oppression; all but Russians were subject to oppression.

Economic autonomy was nonexistent: collectivization and sedentarization devastated Kazakh nomads, cotton monoculture transformed Central Asia, and Siberian peoples were forced into settlements and boarding schools. Political autonomy was a façade, because no autonomous region could control its borders, its economy, or its leadership without Moscow's approval.

Despite Lenin's promises, "autonomous" was a hollow word.

This hollow autonomy explains why these groups were not subjected to ethnic-based mass deportation. Deporting the titular nationality of an autonomous republic would have undermined the constitutional logic of the Soviet Union, which depended on the fiction that each nationality had a protected homeland within the federal structure.

Stalin could deport Chechens, Ingush, Crimean Tatars, Kalmyks, Karachays, Balkars, and Volga Germans only by framing them as wartime traitors with foreign loyalties. He could not make the same claim about Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmen, Kyrgyz, Ossetians, Dagestanis, Avars, Lezgins, or the indigenous peoples of Siberia and the Arctic.

These groups had no foreign homeland to which Stalin could accuse them of allegiance, and they were essential to the governance of vast territories. Their "autonomy" was therefore a shield against ethnic-based sanction, not because Stalin respected their

identity, but because deporting them would have destabilized the Soviet federal system.

But, more important than the obvious reasons for apparent sanctuary form oppression, was the practical fact of the Soviet Deportation regime. Soviet Asia was the region to which Bolshevik and Soviet leadership deported dissidents and criminals, not the region from which deportations occurred.

If Stalin had ever felt compelled to "deport" ethnic groups, or entire nationalities, from Soviet Asia, to what region within the Soviet Union would they be deported? Certainly not along he Volga!

No! Anywhere BUT the Volga. That was the point of all deportations. Hat had been the point since Tsarist times. The Volga was the center of influence in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union precisely because everything east of the Volga was, effectively, a non-consequential colony.

Soviet Asia has always been regarded by the Russian Nationalists as the ethnic dumping ground of the Soviet Union, a distant, frozen wasteland where dissident voices go to scream in the bitter, winter winds, then die. Soviet Asia was a land time forgot. Soviet Asia was the land of the lost.

For our purposes then, was not Soviet Asia specifically targeted for repression – albeit semantically?

Yes. Many of these groups suffered severe repression for other reasons. Kazakhs endured catastrophic famine during collectivization, which destroyed their nomadic way of life. Central Asian peoples faced relentless anti-Islamic campaigns, suppression of traditional elites, and forced modernization. Ossetians and Dagestanis were heavily surveilled due to insurgencies and resistance movements. Indigenous Siberian and Arctic peoples experienced cultural destruction, economic exploitation, and forced assimilation.

None of this repression was explicitly framed as ethnic punishment; it was justified as class warfare, anti-religious struggle, or political security. But go for it, ask anyone in "Soviet Asia" if they believe it would have been better if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

Russian Nationalists

Only a few groups in the Soviet Union escaped targeted repression almost entirely.

Ethnic Russians, as the perceived core nationality of the state, were never punished as an ethnic group. Belarusians, who were then, and today remain, a sub-set of the Russian ethnicity, were not subjected to ethnic-based deportation or national operations.

Do not mistake me for stating that Russian nationals (which include Belarussians in my analysis) were not targeted and sanctioned by the state. I just documented the precise opposite. Stalin's entire regime is the repression and defeat of Ukrainian nationalists, followed by an attempt to do the same to Russian nationalists.

What I accomplish here, I pray to your satisfaction, is to establish when, where and why Russian Nationalists dominate the leadership of the Soviet Union, then controlled the dissolution of the Soviet State.

Just because there was a change of the guard in Moscow, does not mean anyone composed a new score. When the Soviet Union dissolved, a new captain assumed the helm, and the ship was still sinking.

The band, as ever, played on.

1954–1991 - KGB

Finally, after over one hundred and fifty pages of raw documentation, and minimal commentary from me, we arrive in what most today will recognize as Russian Intelligence: The KGB.

If you are like most people, your memory of Russian Intelligence begins with the term KGB. Make a note of that. For both practical reasons and for semantic reasons, I will henceforth refer to the KGB as Russian Intelligence, because that is precisely what it became following Stalin's death.

Everything I have written so far precedes the "living memory" of our generation. I never intended to inundate you with a litany of misery and mayhem. It is just necessary to calibrate your own knowledgebase, for the oppressive narrative of modern Russia has a prequel of its own called the Soviet Union.

Just don't mistake Soviet History for Russian "pre-history". Soviet History was and will remain Russian history until God calls Russia's leaders to account for their crimes. Say what you want about God, but we'll all agree, by this stage in our reading, if God does not call Russia's leadership to account for their crimes, the rest of us have nothing to worry about from above.

Just remember, this tedious, long march to hell and back, was made necessary by intellectuals who became convinced they had evolved into a superior species of hominin. Those geniuses were, in their sick minds, required by history to save the new human species from the rest of us.

Nothing whatsoever changed when the Russian Nationalists finally secured total control in Moscow.

The *Committee for State Security,* a.k.a, the KGB, remains the most famous Soviet intelligence and security organ. I blame a certain "Moose and Squirrel" from Ottawa. Blame whoever you wish.

The KGB included foreign intelligence, counterintelligence, border troops, communications security, and internal political surveillance. If the morphology has become obscured by all the name changing, allow me to connect the dots: It's all the Cheka.

It has always been the Cheka.

It never will be anything but the Cheka.

The periodic sacrifice of nomenclature is just Russia's intelligence apparatus releasing a bit of steam from the valve. It was concluded long ago that institutions would die in their sin to absolve the state from responsibility.

The KGB is the Cheka.

The KGB, by that name, was formally established on 13 March 1954, when the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet issued a decree creating the *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti*—the Committee for State Security—as the new, centralized Soviet intelligence and security organ.

This decree removed state-security functions from the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) and placed them under a distinct union-republic committee directly subordinate to the Council of Ministers.

Its statutory basis was therefore the 1954 founding decree, which defined the KGB as the "sword and shield of the Communist Party," responsible for foreign intelligence, domestic counterintelligence, border security, leadership protection, and the surveillance of Soviet citizens.

During the period in which it was known as the KGB (1954–1991), the organization was headed by a succession of chairmen. The first was Ivan Serov (1954–1958), who oversaw the initial consolidation of the new service.

Serov was followed by Aleksandr Shelepin (1958–1961), who strengthened party oversight; Vladimir Semichastny (1961–1967), who presided during the Khrushchev era; Yury Andropov (1967–1982), whose long tenure made him the most influential KGB chairman and eventually elevated him to General Secretary; Vitaly Fedorchuk (1982); Viktor Chebrikov (1982–1988), who managed the service during the early Gorbachev reforms; and, finally, and fatefully, Vladimir Kryuchkov (1988–1991), who later played a central role in the failed August 1991 coup.

I also include Vadim Bakatin (1991), as an Honorable Mention, for he attempted to dismantle the organization in the final months of the Soviet Union. I'll just address his tenure in the section dedicated to the Russian Federation.

And yes, you guessed correctly. Russian Intelligence in the Russian Federation is the Cheka.

Obviously, the litany of Crimes Against Humanity perpetrated by Russian Intelligence goes on. But take heart, we are closing on the latest chapter.

In all, the KGB, in it's Soviet form, was led by eight directors.

Ivan Serov (1954–1958)

Ivan Serov's tenure as the first chairman of the KGB between 1954 and 1958 unfolded in the shadow of his earlier career, and it is impossible to understand the crimes and repression of this period without recognizing that Serov carried into the post-Stalin era the methods, instincts, and institutional habits he had developed as one of the most brutal NKVD officers of the 1930s and 1940s.

Ivan Serov came from a modest Russian peasant background that shaped both his worldview and his path into the Soviet security apparatus.

In other words, he was Russian and not a member of a suspected class.

Serov was born in 1905 in the village of Afanasyevka in the Vologda region, an area of small farms, limited schooling, and traditional rural life. His family was ethnically Russian, part of the vast mass of poor villagers who had little access to education beyond the most basic primary instruction. Serov's early schooling reflected this environment: he completed only the lower levels of rural education before entering the Red Army as a teenager during the Russian Civil War.

Military service became Serov's gateway into the Soviet system. The army offered training, literacy, and political indoctrination, and Serov absorbed Bolshevik ideology through the Red Army's political departments. His loyalty to the new regime was forged not through intellectual conviction but through the experience of service, discipline, and the promise of upward mobility.

Serov joined the Communist Party in the early 1920s, a move that opened the door to further advancement. Serov was precisely what Lenin had in mind when his regime began recruiting young minds: a blank canvas. Serov was chosen for the military-political schools that trained officers for both command and political work, eventually transitioning into the OGPU and later the NKVD.

Serov's rise was not the product of elite education or revolutionary theory but of the Soviet state's ability to take a young man from a poor rural background and turn him into a disciplined, ideologically reliable instrument of its security apparatus.

And the record is unambiguous. Serov had, by 1954, already been deeply involved in mass deportations, forced population transfers, and political liquidations long before he assumed leadership of the KGB. He had overseen the liquidation of Ukrainian peasants and the deportation of Poles during the Soviet annexation of eastern Poland, and he had coordinated the 1944 deportation of nearly half a million Chechens and Ingush, an operation that caused tens of thousands of deaths through starvation, disease, and exposure during transit and exile.

But though Serov was a Russian national, attuned from the start more to Lenin's faction, the Russian nationalist faction was not the "loyal opposition" to Stalin's Georgian and Transcaucasian faction, at least not as the "loyal opposition" is understood in democratic systems. Both Stalin's faction and Lenin's faction were in lock step on the need for repression, re-education and, whenever necessary, liquidation of undesirables.

In the context of the Paradox of the Proletariat, the Russian nationalists were the "disloyal opposition". Because the Proletariat were required to be unanimous on all significant matters of revolution, and the Politburo only entertained significant matters of revolution, every difference in opinion manifest itself as an existential moment.

It didn't matter one wit if Stalin's faction and the Russian nationalists agreed on how to effect the revolution. That may have been tolerable. But where disagreement existed on what the nature of the revolution itself, disagreement was an existential threat.

Stalin was a purest in his interpretation of Lenin's theses, which called for the elimination of all class, ethnic and national distinctions. Stalin, convinced he was himself the Proletariat, and assured by Soviet Linguistic theory that the Japhetid language root was centered in the Caucus Mountains of his homeland, was convinced that Georgia was the very model of the modern major general.

That required the Russian ethnic and national identity be erased.

Lenin agreed with Stalin. It would seem counter intuitive, then, to learn Russian nationalists ran contrary to Lenin's dictates. Lenin, you see, detested the Russian people, and saw the ethnicity and nation itself as an anachronism of Imperialism, an historical mirage that would quickly melt away during the Socialist phase of human evolution.

Russian nationalists disagreed. And because Russian nationalists truly believed themselves to be the Proletariat, they, like all socialists everywhere, concluded their ethnic group and their nationality were the very model of the modern major general.

Perhaps you see now how the Paradox of the Proletariat works. But perhaps not.

In plain text, the Paradox of the Proletariat works its destructive magic on all socialists because the narcissism required to subscribe to Marx's theory of human evolution cannot admit fallacy. It's a core existential crisis built into the thesis.

Proletarians do not merely agree, they see themselves as a distinct revolutionary class in complete solidarity with each other. Any disagreement refutes the thesis, and no narcissist will surrender their claim on the revolutionary class, especially when surrendering the claim relegates you to counter-revolutionary status.

In both Lenin and Stalin's theses, all who were not Proletarian were re-educated or liquidated.

In short, the Russian nationalists were determined not be the ones doing the liquidating. Stalin put them on noticed they nearly failed.

So, though Serov served Stalin's regime, he was, from start to finish, a Russian nationalist who was both trusted and experienced in repression.

No incident better displays Serov's skills as oppressor than the Katyn Massacre.

The Katyn massacre was one of the most brutal and politically consequential crimes committed by the Soviet state during the Second World War, and Ivan Serov played a direct, hands-on role in its execution and cover-up.

In the spring of 1940, the NKVD carried out Stalin's order to eliminate thousands of Polish military officers, police, intellectuals, and civic leaders who had been taken prisoner after the Soviet invasion of eastern Poland. These men were not killed in battle or lost in transit; they were systematically executed with a single shot to the back of the head and buried in mass graves in the Katyn Forest and other sites such as Kalinin (Tver) and Kharkiv.

Serov, then a rising NKVD officer with a reputation for ruthless efficiency, was involved in the logistical and administrative side of the operation. He helped coordinate the movement of prisoners, oversaw aspects of the selection process, and ensured that the killings were carried out according to the timetable set by Lavrentiy Beria.

Later, when the Germans uncovered the graves in 1943 and publicized the atrocity, Serov participated in the Soviet effort to deny responsibility, fabricate evidence, and blame the massacre on the Germans.

Though Serov was not the man pulling the trigger, he was the conductor who scheduled the trains, staffed the operation, chose the victims and, in the end, covered the affair up. Serov's involvement in Katyn was not peripheral or accidental; it was part of the pattern of his career, in which he repeatedly served as an instrument of Stalin's most violent policies and later helped conceal the truth behind them.

Serov was precisely the man the Russian nationalist faction needed to effect purges of their own. It was not enough hat Stalin died. All of his principal supporters would have to be nullified. That typically meant liquidated.

Beria's fall was swift, brutal, and carefully staged to eliminate him as a political force after Stalin's death. In June 1953, only three months after Stalin died, Beria was arrested during a dramatic confrontation inside the Kremlin. Serov himself participated in the arrest of Lavrentiy Beria in 1953.

Khrushchev, Malenkov, and other members of the Presidium had come to see Beria as a mortal threat; he controlled the security organs, had begun releasing prisoners from the Gulag, and was maneuvering to reshape the post-Stalin leadership in ways that frightened his colleagues.

To neutralize him, the Russian nationalists arranged for Beria to be seized by armed officers loyal to Marshal Zhukov. Beria's arrest was a public display to ensure all of

Beria's loyal operators knew a new day had dawned, and their allegiances needed to be recalibrated. Immediately and demonstratively.

Beria was taken into custody, removed from all positions, and held in isolation while a case was built against him. The charges were sweeping and politically crafted. Beria was accused of treason, espionage, moral corruption, and abuse of power. The trial itself was conducted in secret, by a special military tribunal, with no defense counsel and no public record beyond the official summary later released by the state.

Beria received the justice he had dealt. The verdict was predetermined. On December 23, 1953, Beria was found guilty and immediately executed by gunshot.

According to later accounts from participants, the execution took place in a basement room, and Beria, who had once commanded the NKVD and overseen countless executions himself, died pleading for his life.

Beria was buried in an unmarked grave, and his name was erased from official histories for decades. Beria's execution was both a political purge and a symbolic act. It marked the end of the most feared security chief of the Stalin era and signaled that the new leadership had no intention of abandoning the terror tactics Beria had embodied.

Beria was just the latest victim of the Paradox of the Proletariat.

The basic machinery of repression remained intact, and Serov was one of the men who ensured that it continued to function. The KGB under Serov did not carry out the vast ethnic deportations that had characterized the late Stalin period, but it did continue to enforce political conformity, suppress dissent, and maintain the coercive architecture of the Soviet system.

The Katyn Massacre convinced Khruschev that Serov was the man to rebuild the secret police. Stalin's NKGB could not be tolerated. Its successor organization, the KGB, would have to be loyal to the revolution's new masters: Russia.

Serov focused on the newly acquired Eastern Bloc nations, the very system in which a young KGB officer named Vladimir Putin would cut his teeth. Serov did not suddenly become a different kind of official. Rather, he adapted longstanding methods to the new political environment created by Stalin's death and Khrushchev's rise.

Serov reorganized the security apparatus after Stalin's death, but this reorganization did not represent a liberalization. It was instead a consolidation of control, a tightening of surveillance, and a refinement of counterintelligence operations designed to guard the state against what Khrushchev defined as foreign influence and internal ideological deviation.

Internal ideological deviation translated to any manifestation of fealty to Stalin's apparatus.

The most dramatic act of repression during Serov's tenure was his role in the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Serov was directly involved in coordinating the Soviet response, and the sources describe him as playing an important role in crushing the uprising. This was not merely a military operation; it was a political and security campaign aimed at destroying a national movement for independence and reasserting Soviet control over a satellite state.

Serov's presence in Hungary symbolized the continuity between the NKVD's wartime and postwar methods and the KGB's approach to crises in the Eastern Bloc. Same shit, different toilet.

The suppression of the Hungarian uprising involved mass arrests, executions, and the re-establishment of a compliant security service in Budapest. Serov's experience in organizing secret police forces in newly occupied territories during the Second World War was directly applied to the reconstruction of Hungarian state security after the uprising was crushed.

Within the Soviet Union itself, Serov's KGB continued to enforce ideological discipline.

Although Khrushchev's de-Stalinization campaign criticized the excesses of the previous era, it continued in both Stalin's tenor and tone. Khrushchev did not dismantle the security state, just replace Stalin's loyalist.

Serov's KGB monitored intellectuals, writers, scientists, and political figures for signs of dissent or deviation. It maintained surveillance over religious institutions, national minorities, and political activists. It continued to use forced labor construction projects, a practice Serov had overseen in earlier decades, and it maintained the system of informants and internal monitoring that had been central to Soviet governance since the 1930s.

Still, the advent of the KGB under Khrushchev demarcated Soviet Intelligence from Russian Intelligence. Soviet nomenclature was retained, by there were no illusions within the system: Russia was in control going forward.

The crimes of this period were not the spectacular mass deportations of the war years, but they were nonetheless crimes against humanity in the sense that they involved systematic violations of human rights, suppression of political freedom, and the maintenance of a coercive apparatus designed to eliminate dissent.

Serov's tenure also reflected the permanent features of the Soviet system.

The CIA's biographic sketch notes that although Khrushchev and Serov adapted their professions to a more sophisticated age, they did not alter the basic features of Soviet governance, nor could they escape responsibility for the crimes of the Stalinist period.

Serov's leadership of the KGB was marked by continuity rather than rupture. He was a professional security officer shaped by decades of repression, and he brought those methods into the post-Stalin era.

Serov's eventual downfall in 1963, after his protégé Oleg Penkovsky was exposed as a mole, did not erase the legacy of his tenure. He was stripped of his rank, his Party membership, and his Hero of the Soviet Union award, and he lived in obscurity until his death.

Serov's survival into retirement is, in truth, about the only feature which indicated Russian Intelligence was different in any way from Soviet Intelligence. Serov's survival was, itself, a product of Russian chauvinism. Serov's survival implied that Russians within the apparatus, would play be Marquess of Queensberry Rules, at least toward fellow Russians. That reduced, though did not eliminate, the prospect any mistake could become an existential battle.

Though the rules governing one's downfall may have changed, the institutional structures Serov helped maintain continued long after he was gone. Because Serov survived, the KGB was not sacrificed as an institution. Perhaps I misread the scenario. Perhaps the facilities maintenance department just got tired of painting new signs. Perhaps the KGB's sign had just not been covered in enough innocent blood. Time would tell.

In sum, the crimes and repression campaigns of the KGB under Ivan Serov were characterized by continuity with the Stalinist past, adaptation to the political needs of Khrushchev's leadership, and the persistent use of coercive methods to maintain state control.

Aleksandr Shelepin (1958–1961)

Aleksandr Shelepin's tenure as chairman of the KGB from 1958 to 1961 marked a distinct phase in the evolution of Soviet repression, one that combined the lingering brutality of the Stalinist security apparatus with the emerging political ambitions of a younger, more technocratic generation of Party leaders.

Aleksandr Shelepin was born in 1918 in Voronezh, a provincial Russian city whose atmosphere of modest respectability shaped his early life. His family belonged to the educated Soviet middle class; his father, Nikolai Shelepin, worked as an engineer in

the administration of the South-Eastern Railway, a position that placed the household firmly within the Russian technical intelligentsia rather than the peasantry or the old prerevolutionary elite.

Shelepin grew up as an ethnically Russian child in a stable, urban environment, and he excelled academically from an early age, completing secondary school with distinction. His intellectual promise carried him to Moscow, where he enrolled in the Moscow Institute of History, Philosophy, and Literature, specializing in history and literature. This education placed him within the emerging Soviet meritocratic class: ambitious, ideologically committed, and trained in the humanities that the Party valued for producing future administrators and propagandists.

While still a university student, Shelepin joined the Communist Party in 1940, a step that marked the beginning of his political ascent. His entry into the Party was not accidental or opportunistic; even in his teens he had expressed a desire to become a leader within the Soviet system, and the Komsomol quickly became the arena in which he proved his organizational talent and ideological reliability.

Shelepin had risen through the ranks not as an old NKVD executioner but as the head of the Komsomol, and he brought into the KGB a style of governance that was less rooted in mass terror and more in systematic political control, bureaucratic discipline, and ideological policing.

Yet the crimes and repression campaigns carried out under Shelepin's leadership were no less severe in their impact on human rights. They reflected a shift from the overt violence of the Stalin era to a more controlled, institutionalized, and politically targeted form of coercion that still qualifies as crimes against humanity in its suppression of dissent, destruction of civil liberties, and maintenance of a pervasive system of fear. It just was not gratuitous violence. Violations of rights each had a patina of process. We can't call it due process, but there was a process.

Shelepin inherited a security apparatus that had already begun to change under Khrushchev. The Gulag system was shrinking, mass executions had ceased, and the most spectacular forms of terror had been curtailed. But the KGB remained the central instrument of political control, and Shelepin strengthened it in ways that made it more efficient, more intrusive, and more deeply embedded in Soviet society.

One of Shelepin's most significant actions was the reorganization of the KGB's internal structure. He streamlined departments, expanded surveillance capabilities, and placed new emphasis on monitoring intellectuals, writers, scientists, and cultural

figures. But, in essence, Shelepin was doing what all of his predecessors had done; purged loyalists of the previous head.

Under Shelepin's leadership, the KGB intensified its scrutiny of anyone who might challenge the ideological boundaries of the Khrushchev era, including those who criticized the Party's policies, explored forbidden historical topics, or expressed sympathy for nationalist movements within the Union Republics. The repression was quieter than in Stalin's time, but it was pervasive, and it created an atmosphere in which dissent could be crushed before it ever became visible.

And don't allow Shelepin's "Soviet Scouts" pedigree fool you.

Shelepin played a central role in the suppression of nationalist movements across the Soviet Union. Khrushchev's thaw had encouraged limited cultural expression among non-Russian peoples, but it had also awakened political aspirations that the state found threatening. In Ukraine, the Baltic republics, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, the KGB under Shelepin targeted writers, historians, and activists who sought to revive national languages, commemorate historical grievances, or challenge the dominance of Moscow.

Russia was in charge. Period.

Arrests, forced confessions, internal exile, and the destruction of manuscripts and cultural materials were common tools. The repression was not as dramatic as the mass deportations of the Stalin era, but it was systematic and aimed at erasing political identity. Shelepin's campaigns constituted crimes against humanity, because they sought to extinguish cultural autonomy and suppress entire communities through coercive state power. The impression of more liberal times was given only by the absence of conspicuous bloodshed.

Another major area of Shelepin's repression involved the control of religious life. Although Khrushchev publicly denounced Stalin's excesses, he launched a new anti-religious campaign in the late 1950s, and Shelepin's KGB was responsible for carrying it out.

Churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples were closed; clergy were harassed, arrested, or pressured into collaboration; and religious instruction was driven underground.

The campaign was particularly harsh in regions where religious identity was tied to national identity, such as Western Ukraine, Lithuania, and Central Asia. The KGB's actions in this sphere were not merely administrative measures but deliberate attempts to destroy communities' spiritual foundations.

All of Shelepin's campaigns fall within the broader definition of crimes against humanity because they involved systematic persecution of religious groups.

Shelepin also oversaw the expansion of the KGB's foreign intelligence operations, which included kidnappings, assassinations, and the manipulation of émigré communities. Soviet defectors were hunted, dissidents abroad were threatened, and propaganda campaigns were launched to discredit political opponents. These operations extended the reach of Soviet repression beyond its borders and demonstrated the regime's willingness to violate international norms to maintain control over its citizens and influence global politics.

One of the more egregious examples was the campaign against anti-Soviet émigré networks in Western Europe, where KGB officers carried out kidnappings and disappearances of individuals who were viewed as dangerous to Soviet interests. In several cases, émigré leaders were abducted from Vienna, West Berlin, or the Balkans and transported secretly back to the USSR, where they vanished into prisons or psychiatric institutions.

The KGB also conducted operations against defectors, and although the most famous case—the assassination of Stepan Bandera in Munich—occurred just before Shelepin formally took office, the methods used in that killing continued under his leadership. Bandera's murder, carried out with a concealed cyanide gas pistol by KGB agent Bohdan Stashynsky, became a model for later targeted killings. The assassination of Bandera demonstrated the KGB's willingness to eliminate political enemies on foreign soil through covert means.

At this granular level we can clearly see nothing has changed, even in Vladimir Putin's FSB. In 2018, Sergei Skripal, a former GRU officer who had been living quietly in Salisbury after a spy-swap, was poisoned along with his daughter Yulia with a military-grade nerve agent known as Novichok, a substance developed in the late Soviet period for battlefield use and covert assassinations.

This attack, on UK soil, could not have been authorized without Putin's direct knowledge and explicit approval.

The attack unfolded in a manner consistent with the logic of state intimidation: operatives entered the country under false identities, applied the agent to Skripal's front door, and departed before the victims collapsed. The poisoning caused severe injuries, triggered a massive public-health emergency, and led to the death of a local woman months later when she inadvertently came into contact with a discarded container used in the operation.

British investigators traced the attack to officers of the GRU, and the incident became a stark demonstration of how the Russian security services continue to use chemical agents as instruments of coercion and retribution. It also underscored the broader pattern in which dissidents, defectors, and former intelligence officers remain vulnerable to violent reprisals even years after leaving Russia.

What the Skripal attacks revealed is a security doctrine that treats foreign soil, not as a barrier, but as an extension of the state's reach. The organizational and doctrinal foundation for the Skripal attacks were laid down by Shelepin.

It was during Shelepin's tenure that the KGB intensified its pursuit of Soviet citizens who attempted to flee abroad, sometimes using violent force to capture or silence them. These operations were not random acts of brutality but part of a systematic effort to project Soviet power beyond its borders, intimidate dissident communities, and ensure that no opponent of the regime could feel safe even outside the USSR.

I, writing from the security of a nom de plume, admit Shelepin's apparatus works.

Perhaps the most consequential aspect of Shelepin's tenure was his role in institutionalizing the KGB as a political force within the Soviet leadership. He was ambitious, charismatic, and deeply committed to the idea that the security organs should play a central role in governing the country.

In this respect, Shelepin breathed some of the Komsomol's political life into the KGB.

Under Shelepin's leadership, the KGB became more professional, more disciplined, and more politically assertive. This transformation had long-term consequences, because it laid the groundwork for the later dominance of security-trained leaders in the Soviet and post-Soviet state.

In other words, under Shelepin, the Komsomol became a feeder school for the KGB< while the KGB became a feeder school for the political institutions. Shelepin was the architect of the vertical integration of which Lenin and Stalin had dreamed. Shelepin's initiatives as KGB head were not limited to specific acts of repression, but also a broader project to embed coercive power into the fabric of Soviet governance. Shelepin believed, correctly, Russian agents would not go on to bite the hand that fed them.

Prior to Shelepin, the only future senior agents in the intelligence apparatus knew was a grave. After Shelepin, and leaning heavily on the precedence of Serov's peaceful retirement, the existential threshold defining the end of a career was extended beyond the KGB and into the political apparatus.

Shelepin taught the Russian Intelligence Community it was possible to survive a career in the KGB. Shelepin himself took full advantage of the conveyor belt he constructed.

Shelepin's departure from the KGB in 1961 occurred when he moved into a high-level Party position, where he continued to shape policy. Aleksandr Shelepin's post-KGB political career was long, ambitious, and ultimately tragic in the quiet, bureaucratic way that Soviet political careers often ended.

After leaving the KGB in 1961, Khrushchev appointed Shelepin Chairman of the Party-State Control Committee, a powerful supervisory body responsible for investigating corruption, enforcing discipline, and monitoring the performance of ministries and republic-level governments.

One could correctly argue that Shelepin did not retire at all. Instead, Shelepin was laterally transferred to the Party institution to build a secret police within the party itself. This position gave Shelepin broad authority over the Soviet administrative machine and allowed him to cultivate a reputation as a strict, energetic, and ideologically reliable official.

But the Paradox of the Proletariat raged in the ranks. The salient of that battle was just removed from the KGB. Among the political institutions, the Paradox of the Proletariat remained an existential trip wire.

Not surprisingly, in 1964, Shelepin played a role - subtle but real - in the coalition that removed Khrushchev from power. For a brief moment afterward, Shelepin appeared to be one of the rising stars of the post-Khrushchev leadership, a man whose combination of Komsomol charisma, security-service experience, and administrative discipline made him a plausible future head of state.

Shelepin's ambitions frightened too many of his colleagues.

Leonid Brezhnev and his allies viewed him as too young, too forceful, and too closely tied to the security organs. They feared that he might use his influence over the Party-State Control Committee to build a personal power base.

Beginning in the mid-1960s, Shelepin was systematically sidelined. He was removed from the Control Committee, shifted into the trade-union bureaucracy - an unmistakable demotion - and gradually stripped of influence. By the early 1970s, Shelepin had become a political nonentity, a once-promising figure now trapped in the dull machinery of Soviet labor administration.

Shelepin went silently into Breshnev's encroaching night.

Shelepin's fall was not dramatic; it was the slow suffocation of a man whose ambition had exceeded what the collective leadership was willing to tolerate. The detente

struck between Russian Nationalists at Serov's retirement held. Russian would not kill Russian. Retirement was, ipso facto, political death, and that was all Russian rivals would expect of each other, as log as everyone played by the new rules.

Shelepin did.

Shelepin lived out his later years in quiet obscurity. He remained a member of the Supreme Soviet, but he exercised no real power.

The Supreme Soviet was enormous by design, a legislature built to look democratic. It's western parallels were, ostensibly, the United States Congress or British parliament. In reality, the Supreme Soviet functioned as a rubber-stamp body for the Party.

Composed of two chambers, each with 750 deputies, for a total of 1,500 members. The Supreme Soviet changed little during most of its existence. The upper chamber was the Soviet of Nationalities, representing the Union Republics and autonomous regions; the lower chamber was the Soviet of the Union, apportioned by population.

Deputies were elected in tightly controlled, single-candidate elections, and although the body met only a few times a year, its size gave the appearance of broad national representation. In practice, real authority rested with the Presidium and the Politburo, while the Supreme Soviet served to formalize decisions already made by the Party leadership.

Russians told countless jokes about the Supreme Soviet, and the humor followed a very specific pattern: everyone understood that the legislature was enormous, ceremonial, and powerless, so the jokes mocked its passivity, its theatricality, and its rubber-stamp nature.

One of the most common themes was that the deputies were so irrelevant that they barely needed to be conscious. A popular line went that the Supreme Soviet should meet "only once a year, and even then only to check whether the rubber stamp still works." Another joked that the deputies were "the bravest people in the USSR, because they always raised their hands before knowing what they were voting for." There was also the quip that the Supreme Soviet had two chambers only because "one chamber stamps laws, and the other chamber dries the ink."

And, in a darker vein, people said that if the Supreme Soviet ever voted against the Party, "the next session would be held in Siberia." The observation was not far from the truth.

These jokes captured the lived reality of Soviet political life: everyone knew the legislature was a façade, and humor became a safe way to acknowledge the gap

between the official narrative of popular representation and the actual mechanics of authoritarian rule.

As for Shelepin?

By the late 1970s he had been pushed out of meaningful authority, relegated to ceremonial posts, and gradually erased from the political landscape by Brezhnev's circle, who feared his energy, his KGB background, and his potential to build an independent power base.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, Shelepin was already a forgotten man, living out his last years in the confused, economically strained atmosphere of early post-Soviet Russia.

Aleksandr Shelepin died on 24 October 1994 in Moscow, at the age of seventy-six, after several years of declining health and near-total withdrawal from public life. His final decades were spent in quiet obscurity, a stark contrast to the forceful, ambitious figure he had once been in the upper reaches of Soviet politics.

After his death, Shelepin was interred in Moscow, at the Kuntsevo Cemetery, a burial place associated with many mid-level Soviet officials. His funeral attracted little public attention, and the state offered no special honors.

In the end, Shelepin's burial reflected the best-case scenario for any officer of the KGB.

Vladimir Semichastny (1961–1967)

Vladimir Semichastny's career in Soviet power began in the same mold as many of the post-war Party technocrats: born in 1924 in Donetsk (then Stalino) to an ethnically Russian working-class family, he grew up in the industrial heartland of the Ukrainian SSR, where Russian identity and Soviet patriotism blended into a single civic outlook. His father was a metalworker, his mother a homemaker, and the household embodied the disciplined, proletarian ethos the Party celebrated.

Semichastny's education was interrupted by the Second World War, during which he served in the Red Army, an experience that hardened his political loyalties and accelerated his ascent. After the war he studied at the Moscow Institute of Steel and Alloys, but his real trajectory unfolded through the Komsomol, the youth organization that functioned as a proving ground for future Party leaders.

Semichastny joined the Communist Party in 1947, rose rapidly through Komsomol ranks, and by the mid-1950s had become First Secretary of the All-Union Komsomol, a

position that placed him at the center of Khrushchev's efforts to cultivate a new generation of politically reliable administrators.

Semichastny's entry into the KGB in 1961, when he was appointed chairman, was not the rise of a secret-police veteran but the elevation of a politically loyal organizer whom Khrushchev trusted to reshape the security organs in line with the post-Stalin thaw.

Semichastny's tenure at the KGB from 1961 to 1967 was defined by a paradox: the Soviet Union had formally repudiated the mass terror of the Stalin era, yet the security organs continued to commit systematic abuses that qualify as crimes against humanity under modern standards.

The repression Semichastny oversaw was quieter, more bureaucratic, and more targeted than the purges of the 1930s, but it was no less destructive in its intent to suppress dissent, control national minorities, and enforce ideological conformity across a vast, unwilling population.

One of the central features of Semichastny's KGB was the expansion of surveillance to unprecedented levels. Telecommunications technology had advanced greatly since the end of World War 2, so Semichastny ensured the KGB had eyes and ears everywhere. The security organs monitored writers, scientists, students, clergy, and cultural figures with meticulous attention, building dossiers that could be used to block careers, deny publication, or justify arrest.

The goal was not mass extermination but the systematic suffocation of independent thought.

Preventive Measures

Under Semichastny, the KGB perfected the practice of "preventive measures" - warnings, interrogations, threats, and forced recantations - designed to break dissidents psychologically before they ever reached the point of open resistance.

National minorities were a major target of repression.

BY "national minorities" I mean to say everyone but ethnic Russians.

In Ukraine, the Baltic republics, and the Caucasus, the KGB under Semichastny intensified campaigns against nationalist intellectuals, historians, and cultural activists. Arrests, internal exile, and the destruction of manuscripts were common tools, and the security organs worked to ensure that no revival of national identity could threaten Moscow's control.

These campaigns were not isolated acts but part of a deliberate strategy to suppress entire communities' political aspirations, a form of cultural persecution that fits squarely within the definition of crimes against humanity.

Religious Repressions

The KGB also continued Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign, closing churches, harassing clergy, and infiltrating religious groups. In regions where religious identity was tied to national identity - Western Ukraine, Lithuania, Armenia - the repression was particularly severe, aimed at eroding the spiritual foundations of communities the state viewed as politically unreliable.

The KGB's use of clergy as covert operatives was one of the more insidious and least publicly discussed components of its repression system, a quiet counterpart to the overt political policing that defined the Soviet security state.

Beginning in the late Stalin period and continuing through the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras, the KGB embedded agents within the Russian Orthodox Church and other religious institutions, creating a controlled, state-managed clerical hierarchy that functioned as a kind of religious analogue to *Operation Trust*.

Just as the original Trust operation in the 1920s used a fake anti-Bolshevik network to lure, identify, and neutralize real opponents, the KGB's clerical operations used seemingly devout priests, bishops, and church administrators to monitor believers, identify dissidents, and steer religious life toward politically safe channels.

Soviet archival materials - including reports of the Council for Religious Affairs and internal KGB memoranda - describe clergy who were formally registered as informants, tasked with reporting on parishioners, discouraging unauthorized gatherings, and suppressing nationalist or anti-Soviet sentiment expressed in sermons or church communities. Some were placed in positions of authority precisely because of their reliability as agents, ensuring that the church's public voice aligned with state ideology.

In regions such as Western Ukraine, Lithuania, and parts of the Caucasus, where religious identity was tightly bound to national identity, these covert clergy played a decisive role in undermining local resistance by presenting themselves as spiritual leaders while quietly channeling information to the security organs.

Western leaders are strongly cautioned to keep the KGB's role in the Russian Orthodox Church in mind in their dealings with Vladimir Putin's regime. There is no functional or institutional difference between Vladimir Puntin's FSB and Semichastny's KGB. Although Putin did not enter KGB service under Semichastny, he did so under Semichastny's successor, Yuri Andropov.

Vladimir Putin studied surveillance and repression techniques in the house that Semichastny built. The school master may have merely been Semichastny's protégé, but that only means Putin is one degree removed from the KGB's longest serving director since the Beria.

Putin today controls the Russian Orthodox Church, just as Semichastny intended it would be controlled in 1961. The salient observation is that the apparatus, and all of its control features, survive periodic rebranding.

Semichastny's KGB also played a central role in the persecution of dissidents whose names would later become symbols of Soviet resistance. Writers such as Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel were arrested and subjected to show trials for publishing abroad, inaugurating a new era of ideological repression that signaled the end of Khrushchev's cultural thaw.

The KGB used psychiatric hospitals as instruments of punishment, confining dissidents in institutions where medical treatment was replaced by coercion, isolation, and chemical restraint. This practice, which expanded under Semichastny, is now recognized as a grave human-rights violation and a form of torture.

That conclusion should correctly make many psychiatric institutions in the west nervous. But that is a battle for another day. Just be aware, in the case of the late Soviet Union, official criticism from the West was often held in abeyance by accusations of hypocrisy. So close to western facsimiles had Russian Intelligence become, it was increasingly difficult to raise the hue and cry.

Whom am I kidding? Lenin and Stalin ran roughshod over every principal of due process and human rights, all without the hue and cry being raised in all but token fashion. Any deterrence that Western opinion held was lost before the first frost claimed Anastasia's grave.

There was a brief, fleeting moment when the United States intervened, and history could have taken a different course, but Wilson balked. The American Expditionary Forces dispatched to Russia in 1918 were hamstrung by ambiguous orders and ill-defined objectives before President Wilson withdraw US Forces.

Wilson's intervention during the Bolshevik Coup was Vietnam all over again.

By the 1960s, the Iron Curtain would not be brought down by force without hundreds of millions of casualties.

The Cuban Missile Crisis

Foreign operations during Semichastny's tenure also reflected the KGB's willingness to violate international norms. The security organs pursued defectors abroad, infiltrated émigré communities, and conducted disinformation campaigns designed to discredit political opponents. While the most notorious assassinations of émigrés occurred just before his tenure, the methods—covert poisoning, staged accidents, intimidation—remained part of the KGB's repertoire.

But the most daring and dangerous direction in Russian Intelligence became apparent during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

As chairman of the KGB, Semichastny oversaw the intelligence and counterintelligence framework that made Operation Anadyr - the covert deployment of missiles, troops, and matériel to Cuba - possible.

The KGB's task was to ensure that American, NATO, and even Soviet-bloc intelligence services did not detect the scale or purpose of the operation before the missiles were fully installed.

Semichastny personally supervised the use of elaborate deception measures: false shipping manifests, misleading troop movements, controlled leaks designed to suggest that Soviet deployments were routine, and strict surveillance of foreign diplomats and journalists inside the USSR who might notice anomalies. Semichastny's KGB monitored communications, enforced secrecy among military units, and tracked any sign that Western intelligence had begun to suspect the truth.

When the crisis erupted in October 1962, Semichastny's KGB provided Khrushchev with assessments of American political intentions, gauging whether Washington was preparing for airstrikes or invasion.

Although the KGB's foreign intelligence arm (the First Chief Directorate) was not as successful as Khrushchev hoped - Soviet intelligence underestimated Kennedy's resolve and misread several American signals - Semichastny's organization remained central to the crisis management process.

Semichastny briefed the leadership daily, coordinated internal security measures, and ensured that no domestic political actors could exploit the moment of extreme vulnerability. His role was therefore not that of a strategist but of a guardian of secrecy and stability, a man whose institution made the crisis possible and then helped prevent it from spiraling into internal panic while the world stood on the edge of nuclear war.

Semichastny himself played a direct role in Khrushchev's removal in 1964.

Bringing Khruschev Down

Vladimir Semichastny's role in the removal of Nikita Khrushchev in October 1964 was quiet, decisive, and indispensable, the work of a security chief whose institution made a bloodless palace coup possible.

Soviet sources - including Semichastny's own memoirs and later interviews, as well as archival-based reconstructions published after 1991 - make clear that he was involved from the earliest stages of the plot.

According to Semichastny, discussions about Khrushchev's removal began in early 1964, not in the frantic days before the October plenum, and the conspirators understood from the outset that the KGB chairman had to be part of the effort because only he could guarantee control over communications, surveillance, and Khrushchev's personal security apparatus.

The key players in the conspiracy were Leonid Brezhnev, then Chairman of the Presidium; Alexei Kosygin, Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers; Mikhail Suslov, the Party's chief ideologist; Anastas Mikoyan, a veteran statesman; and Aleksandr Shelepin, Semichastny's patron and former KGB chairman.

Together they represented a coalition of Party leaders who had grown weary of Khrushchev's erratic administrative style, his constant reshuffling of ministries, his impulsive foreign-policy decisions, and his habit of humiliating colleagues in public.

In other words, Khrushchev was not honoring the intent of the new rules.

Semichastny's role was to ensure that this political dissatisfaction could be translated into action without risk of counter-mobilization by Khrushchev loyalists. Soviet accounts describe Semichastny's tasks with remarkable specificity. He was responsible for neutralizing Khrushchev's personal security detail, and replacing his bodyguards with KGB officers loyal to the conspirators.

This change of the guard ensured that Khrushchev could not summon military or Party support once confronted. Once all was in place, the day was set.

When Khrushchev flew back from vacation in Pitsunda on 13 October 1964, Semichastny personally met him at Vnukovo-2 airport - a gesture that seemed routine but was in fact part of the operation. As Leonid Mlechin's archival-based study recounts, Semichastny had been instructed to keep Khrushchev calm, prevent any unexpected moves, and quietly monitor troop dispositions through military counterintelligence to ensure that no units attempted to intervene.

Inside the Kremlin, Semichastny's KGB controlled communications, monitored Presidium members, and ensured that no information leaked to Khrushchev's supporters outside Moscow.

During the decisive Presidium meeting on 14 October, Khrushchev - still unaware of the full extent of the plot - asked, "What has happened?" only to discover that every major figure in the leadership had turned against him. Semichastny's presence guaranteed that the confrontation remained contained, that Khrushchev could not flee, and that no loyalist forces could be mobilized.

I would not be shocked to learn that even Khruschev concluded it would have been better if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

Semichastny's role was not merely passive; according to his own later statements, Brezhnev even suggested the possibility of physically eliminating Khrushchev, though Semichastny claimed he refused and insisted the coup remain bloodless.

If Semichastny was going to enforce the new rules, Semichastny could not then resort to Chekist tactics. Not without killing the new rules in the process.

The power dynamics of the coup reflected the structure of the post-Stalin Soviet state. The Party leadership - Brezhnev, Suslov, Kosygin, Mikoyan - provided political legitimacy; Shelepin provided organizational muscle; Semichastny provided the coercive infrastructure that made resistance impossible.

The KGB did not initiate the coup, but without Semichastny's control over security, surveillance, and communications, it could not have succeeded. His participation ensured that Khrushchev's removal was swift, silent, and free of violence, a stark contrast to the purges of earlier decades.

In the strictest terms of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, this coup was the first example of the Proletariat acting collectively to remove their Dictator. That this coup went off without bloodshed stands as testament to the strength of the new rules: There would be no more Russian on Russian violence. Russian on Russian removals were fair game, as long as they remained bloodless.

After the coup, Semichastny's usefulness ended.

Brezhnev, having just witnessed the KGB's political power in action, and suspicious of Semichastny's loyalty to Shelepin, knew Semichastny had to go.

Bringing Semichastny Down

Semichastny was removed from the KGB in 1967 by Brezhnev, who distrusted his loyalty and resented his role in Khrushchev's ouster. Like Serov before him, Semichastny was demoted to regional Party work in Dnipropetrovsk, and later held minor administrative posts, a quiet political exile typical of Soviet power struggles under the new rules.

Semichastny lived into the post-Soviet era, dying in Moscow in 2001, largely forgotten by the public. Semichastny's tenure demonstrated the Paradox of the Proletariat remained in full effect, it just no longer required blood sacrifice – provided those defeated were Russian.

It is likely that Semichastny never gave Anastasia a single thought. It is plausible Semichastny went to his grave believing all of Soviet history was worth it until that very moment. But he would be in the minority, even among Soviet elites.

But even Semichastny would have had to admit, the Proletariat were too besieged by internal enemies to affect the global revolution which would end all sub-species. The Paradox of the Proletariat worked to its fullest purpose.

Yury Andropov (1967–1982)

Yury Andropov's life began far from the corridors of the Lubyanka, in circumstances that shaped both his worldview and the style of repression he later perfected. Born in 1914 in the small town of Nagaybaksky District in the southern Urals, he came from a modest, ethnically Russian family; his father was a railway worker, and Andropov was orphaned early, a fact that Soviet biographers often emphasized to illustrate his self-made ascent.

Andropov worked as a telegraph operator, a cinema projectionist, and even a boatman on Volga river craft before entering the Komsomol, the youth organization that became his ladder into political life. By age twenty-six he was head of the Komsomol of the Karelo-Finnish Republic, and after Stalin's death he was posted to the Soviet embassy in Hungary - an assignment that placed him at the center of the 1956 Hungarian uprising.

The Hungarian Uprising was an experience that left Andropov with what historians call his *"Hungarian complex"*: the conviction that any political thaw must be crushed before it becomes a flood. This worldview defined Andropov's entire tenure as Chairman of the KGB (1967–1982).

Note: It was under this, Andropov's overarching theme, that the young Vladimir Putin was weaned as a KGB agent.

Andropov's KGB was not a return to Stalinist mass terror, but it was a system of repression that qualifies under modern standards as a sustained campaign of crimes against humanity, carried out through surveillance, intimidation, punitive psychiatry, internal exile, and the destruction of civil society.

As the CIA-documented analysis of his tenure notes, Andropov "balanced very cleverly, avoiding the excesses of mass terror… while effectively suppressing dissent". Andropov transformed the KGB into one of the most pervasive and feared institutions in Soviet life.

Andropov's first major institutional act was the creation of the Fifth Directorate, a division dedicated to fighting "ideological subversion."

The Fifth Directorate opened files on every prominent dissident - Andrei Sakharov, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Jewish activists, Baptists, Ukrainian and Baltic nationalists, and countless others. Surveillance became total: writers, scientists, students, clergy, and workers were monitored through informants, wiretaps, and psychological pressure.

The KGB under Andropov perfected the practice of preventive repression, issuing warnings, conducting interrogations, and using threats to break dissidents before they could organize.

Perfected is, perhaps, an understatement. Yuri Andropov amplified and focused the apparatus he inherited. Andropov's predecessors introduced most elements to the toolchest of Russian Intelligence, but it was Andropov who put them to work in round the clock operations.

Under Andropov, punitive psychiatry, dissident suppression, religious repression, nationalist suppression, labor suppression, and suppression of foreign dissent matured into operational protocols implemented with cold, detached institutional efficiency.

It was these protocols which defined Vladimir Puntin's career curriculum. There she be no wonder why Vladimir Putn today is cold, detached while stressing institutional efficiency.

Andropov's KGB is Vladimir Putin.

Let's take a closer look in Putin's toolbox.

Punitive Psychiatry

The Soviet psychiatric system under Yury Andropov's influence between 1967 and 1982 became one of the most sophisticated instruments of political repression in the late-Soviet period. What had begun in the late Stalin years as episodic misuse of psychiatric institutions hardened, under Brezhnev and Andropov, into a fully institutionalized mechanism for neutralizing dissent.

The system's intellectual architect was Academician Andrei Snezhnevsky, head of the Serbsky Institute for Forensic Psychiatry, whose diagnostic theories — especially *sluggish schizophrenia* — provided the pseudo-medical foundation for declaring political opposition a mental illness.

According to authoritative documentation, political abuse of psychiatry became *systemic* from the 1960s through the mid-1980s, precisely the period in which Andropov served first as KGB Chairman and later as General Secretary.

Snezhnevsky's diagnostic framework was crucial. His theory held that schizophrenia could manifest without hallucinations or cognitive deterioration, instead presenting as "reformist delusions," "philosophical intoxication," or "obsession with justice."

In other words, being sane and entertaining hope for reforms leading to a just society, was regarded as 'insanity" under socialism. This contortion of diagnostic criteria allowed socialist psychiatrists to classify dissent as pathology.

Soviet legal codes reinforced this structure: Article 70 ("Anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda") and Article 190-1 ("Dissemination of fabrications known to be false") were routinely paired with psychiatric diagnoses, enabling the state to treat political behavior simultaneously as a crime and an illness.

Under Andropov's KGB, this dual framework became a powerful tool: dissidents could be removed from society indefinitely without trial, without public spectacle, and without the international scrutiny that accompanied overt imprisonment.

Dissidents were increasingly disappeared and "treated", instead of liquidated. I'd call that progress if the appalling conditions these "patients" were kept under did not qualify as torture by all standards of justice.

The system's operational center was the Serbsky Institute, which functioned not as a medical institution but as a forensic arm of the security services. Soviet and post-Soviet analyses describe Serbsky as fully subordinated to state security organs, with non-medical personnel — KGB officers — exerting decisive influence over diagnoses and confinement decisions.

Psychiatric hospitals became de facto prisons: patients were held under indefinite detention, subjected to isolation, and deprived of legal recourse. The conditions inside these facilities constituted documented atrocities. Prisoners were forcibly administered neuroleptics, sedatives, and experimental drugs such as sulfozinum, which induced extreme pain and fever.

Electroshock therapy was used not therapeutically but punitively. Confinement often took place in “special psychiatric hospitals” run by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, where the regime resembled a high-security prison more than a medical ward.

The victims numbered in the thousands.

The system targeted human-rights activists, writers, religious believers, nationalists from Ukraine and the Baltic republics, and ordinary citizens who voiced criticism of the Party.

Samizdat documentation and later human-rights investigations describe a pattern: arrest under Article 70 or 190-1, transfer to Serbsky for “evaluation,” assignment of a diagnosis such as sluggish schizophrenia, and indefinite confinement in a special psychiatric hospital.

The purpose was not treatment but political neutralization — to break the dissident psychologically, discredit him socially, and remove him from public life without the political cost of a trial.

Andropov’s role was personal and decisive.

As KGB Chairman, Andropov oversaw the expansion of psychiatric repression, supporting the institutionalization of punitive psychiatry as a state-approved mechanism of control. Ukrainian legal scholarship confirms that the 1960s marked the beginning of *mass, systematic* use of psychiatric institutions for political purposes, explicitly noting that these practices were implemented “with the support of KGB Chairman Yury Andropov.”

Under Andropov’s leadership, psychiatric hospitals were placed under full control of security organs, and KGB officers — lacking medical training — were empowered to determine the fate of “political patients.” The system was designed to appear humane to foreign observers: dissidents were not “imprisoned,” they were “treated.”

This façade allowed the Soviet state to present repression as medical care, masking what scholars now agree were crimes against humanity.

Between 1967 and 1982, punitive psychiatry became one of the most feared tools of Soviet repression. It was quiet, bureaucratic, and devastating. Victims emerged

broken, stigmatized, and often unable to resume normal life. Many never emerged at all.

The atrocities — forced drugging, indefinite confinement, psychological destruction — were not aberrations but the intended function of a system built by Snezhnevsky, administered by the Serbsky Institute, and politically empowered by Andropov's KGB.

The archival and scholarly record leaves no doubt: punitive psychiatry in the late Soviet period was a state-engineered mechanism of coercion, designed to crush dissent under the guise of medical science, and its systematic use constitutes one of the most chilling forms of repression in the USSR's final decades.

Dissidents Suppression

The suppression of dissent under Yury Andropov between **1967 and 1982** formed a single, integrated system of coercion that operated across borders, institutions, and methods. It was not a collection of isolated abuses but a coherent strategy built on surveillance, intimidation, punitive psychiatry, imprisonment, exile, and—beyond Soviet borders—assassination and "active measures" against émigrés.

Under Andropov, so widespread and prolific was the KGB in this capacity, individual cases appear like grains of sand on a beach.

Soviet and post-Soviet documentation paints a picture of a security apparatus that avoided the mass killings of the Stalin era, but replaced them with quieter, bureaucratic, and often devastating forms of repression. Andropov's KGB perfected the art of neutralizing dissidents without producing martyrs, using every tool available to the late-Soviet state.

Inside the USSR, dissidents were subjected to a wide range of repressive measures: surveillance, job loss, imprisonment, internal exile, and psychiatric confinement. The human-rights movement that emerged in the mid-1960s—writers, scientists, religious believers, nationalists, and workers—was met with escalating pressure. Dissidents received warnings, were interrogated, and were often incarcerated in psychiatric hospitals or pressured to emigrate.

Samizdat publications such as *A Chronicle of Current Events* documented these violations, providing detailed accounts of arrests, trials, and abuses. The KGB's Order No. 0051 (1968), issued shortly after the Prague Spring, mandated increased monitoring of "ideological sabotage" and Western influence, marking the beginning of a new era of preventive surveillance.

“Western Influence” became a new category of thought crime. Simply wearing a pair of American Levis was excuse enough for Anropov’s Chekists to disappear anyone.

Punitive psychiatry became one of the most feared tools of Andropov’s system. Beginning in the late 1950s and expanding dramatically under his leadership, psychiatric hospitals were used to isolate dissidents indefinitely.

In April 1969, Andropov submitted a plan to the Central Committee to expand the network of psychiatric hospitals and improve their use for state security. Special psychiatric hospitals under the Ministry of Internal Affairs functioned as prison-like institutions where dissidents were forcibly medicated, subjected to painful treatments, and held without trial.

Ukrainian dissidents such as Leonid Plyushch, Mykola Plakhotnyuk, and Yaroslav Kravchuk were confined in these facilities, while General Petro Hryhorenko—one of the most prominent victims—spent six and a half years in psychiatric hospitals after being declared mentally ill for his human-rights activism.

Psychiatrist Semen Gluzman, who evaluated Hryhorenko’s case and declared him sane, was himself imprisoned for seven years and exiled for three more. In Gluzman’s case, the practice of medicine became a form of dissent.

Estimating the total number of dissidents oppressed under Andropov requires inference from available documentation. The Chronicle of Current Events recorded hundreds of cases each year, and thousands of individuals were subjected to surveillance, interrogation, job loss, or forced emigration.

The number of dissidents confined in psychiatric hospitals at any one time is estimated in the low thousands, while arrests and imprisonments for political offenses likely reached into the tens of thousands across the fifteen years of Andropov’s tenure.

Based on the scale of documented repression—warnings, arrests, psychiatric confinements, internal exiles, and forced emigration—it is reasonable to infer that tens of thousands of Soviet citizens experienced some form of political persecution under Andropov’s apparatus.

This inference is supported by the breadth of dissident categories targeted: intellectuals, artists, religious believers, national minorities, and workers.

Beyond Soviet borders, Andropov’s KGB targeted dissidents and émigrés through “active measures,” including surveillance, intimidation, kidnapping attempts, and assassination.

The historical record shows that the KGB carried out operations against anti-Soviet émigrés in Europe and elsewhere during this era. These operations typically involved

poisoning, staged accidents, or covert shootings, and were designed to silence critics abroad without drawing international attention.

The KGB also monitored émigré communities, infiltrated exile organizations, and conducted disinformation campaigns to discredit prominent figures. Although the retrieved sources do not provide detailed case studies of foreign assassinations, they confirm the KGB's broad use of repressive measures against dissidents both inside and outside the USSR.

Taken together, the suppression of dissent under Andropov was a system of pervasive control that relied on surveillance, intimidation, psychiatric abuse, imprisonment, exile, and covert operations abroad.

Andropov's KGB was quieter than Stalin's terror but no less systematic, and its effects were profound: thousands of lives disrupted, careers destroyed, families broken, and a society kept in a pervasive state of fear and conformity.

The archival and scholarly record makes clear that Andropov's tenure marked the high point of late-Soviet repression, a period in which the KGB became the central instrument of political control, and dissent was met with a machinery of coercion that extended from the streets of Moscow to émigré communities across the world.

Under Andropov, the Dictator of the Proletariat refrained from openly killing dissidents, but simply "disappearing" them had the same result. The KGB, under Andropov, was openly Chekist in both its objectives and tactics.

The logic behind the entire system remained Marxist-Leninist existential imperatives which could not tolerate disagreement or non-conformity of any sort.

Religious Repression

Religious repression under Yury Andropov was not an accidental by-product of Soviet policy but a deliberate, centrally coordinated program that treated faith communities as potential centers of ideological contamination.

When Andropov became Chairman of the KGB in 1967, he inherited a system already hostile to religion, but he transformed it into a more disciplined, intrusive, and politically weaponized apparatus.

The Soviet state did not return to Stalinist mass executions, but it built a machinery of surveillance, infiltration, intimidation, and selective violence that hollowed out religious life from within.

The KGB's Fifth Directorate, created under Andropov, was responsible for "ideological counter-subversion," and religion was one of its primary targets. Soviet archival materials released after 1991 show that the KGB maintained files on tens of thousands of clergy, parishioners, and religious activists, treating them as potential threats to state stability.

The Council for Religious Affairs, formally under the Council of Ministers, but effectively subordinate to the KGB, monitored every church, synagogue, mosque, and parish school, controlling appointments, sermons, and even the content of religious instruction.

The repression took many forms.

Clergy were recruited as informants, pressured to report on parishioners, or replaced with politically reliable figures. Parishioners who attended services too frequently, baptized their children, or participated in underground Bible study groups were interrogated, threatened, or dismissed from their jobs.

In Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, and Georgia, where religious identity was intertwined with national identity, the KGB treated churches as proto-nationalist organizations. Priests who preached in local languages or encouraged cultural revival were targeted for surveillance, arrest, or internal exile.

The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, outlawed since 1946, survived underground, and its clandestine clergy were among the most persecuted religious figures in the USSR. Post-Soviet Ukrainian archives document hundreds of cases in which Greek Catholic priests were detained, beaten, or pressured to renounce their faith. One such case involved Father Vasyl Romanyuk, later a prominent dissident, who was arrested repeatedly, tortured, and sentenced to labor camps for conducting underground services and refusing to collaborate with the KGB.

Romanyuk's memoirs, published after independence, describe interrogations in which KGB officers threatened to "make him disappear," a phrase that in late-Soviet usage meant indefinite imprisonment or psychiatric confinement rather than murder.

Documented murders of clergy inside the USSR during Andropov's tenure are rare, because the late-Soviet state preferred bureaucratic repression to overt killings. However, there were cases of suspicious deaths, disappearances, and fatal beatings that Soviet authorities concealed.

In Lithuania, the death of Father Bronius Laurinavičius in 1981 is widely believed to have been a KGB killing. He was struck by a truck under circumstances that witnesses described as staged; post-Soviet Lithuanian investigations concluded that KGB officers

orchestrated the incident to silence a priest who had become a vocal critic of religious repression.

In Ukraine, the death of Father Oleksiy Zarytskyi, who perished in a labor camp after brutal treatment, is considered by historians a politically motivated killing by neglect. These cases were not officially recorded as murders, but they form part of the pattern of coercion that defined Andropov's system: dissidents and clergy were not executed; they were broken, silenced, or allowed to die in captivity.

The KGB also used psychiatric hospitals against religious believers, especially Baptists, Pentecostals, and Orthodox Christians who refused to register with state-controlled religious bodies.

The Serbsky Institute, the center of punitive psychiatry, declared religious devotion a symptom of "paranoid development" or "obsessive reformist delusion." Believers were confined indefinitely, forcibly medicated, and subjected to painful treatments. Soviet dissident documentation, including *A Chronicle of Current Events*, records dozens of cases in which religious activists were declared insane for distributing Bibles, preaching, or organizing prayer meetings.

One Pentecostal believer, Anatoly Marchenko, described in his memoirs how fellow prisoners were injected with haloperidol until they could no longer speak coherently. These accounts were later corroborated by post-Soviet psychiatric reviews, which concluded that the diagnoses were fabricated and the treatments constituted torture.

Estimating the total number of clergy and parishioners oppressed under Andropov requires inference from archival data. The Council for Religious Affairs alone maintained surveillance files on more than 30,000 clergy across the USSR.

The KGB's Fifth Directorate monitored hundreds of thousands of believers, especially in regions with strong religious traditions.

Based on documented arrests, interrogations, psychiatric confinements, job dismissals, and forced emigration, it is reasonable to estimate that tens of thousands of clergy and parishioners experienced some form of repression between 1967 and 1982.

In Ukraine alone, post-Soviet archival research suggests that more than 10,000 religious activists were interrogated or penalized during this period. Across the USSR, the number of believers subjected to administrative punishment—loss of employment, denial of education, confiscation of property—likely exceeded 100,000.

These figures reflect not mass terror but pervasive, grinding pressure designed to suffocate religious life without provoking international outrage.

Beyond Soviet borders, Andropov's KGB conducted operations against churches, clergy, and religious activists abroad. The most famous case is the assassination of Bulgarian dissident writer Georgi Markov in London in 1978, carried out by the Bulgarian secret police with KGB technical assistance. Markov was not a clergyman, but his murder demonstrates the KGB's willingness to target ideological enemies abroad.

In the religious sphere, the KGB infiltrated émigré Orthodox parishes, monitored Ukrainian and Baltic churches in Western Europe, and conducted disinformation campaigns against religious leaders who criticized Soviet repression.

Post-Soviet Russian intelligence archives confirm that the KGB maintained active operations against the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church in Canada and the United States, infiltrating clergy and attempting to discredit bishops who supported Ukrainian independence.

The question of whether the KGB ever targeted the Holy See or the Pope is historically significant. The answer is yes: the KGB conducted operations against the Vatican, including surveillance, infiltration, and disinformation campaigns.

The most dramatic case is the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II in 1981. While the full extent of Soviet involvement remains debated, post-Soviet Russian and Bulgarian sources strongly suggest that the KGB, through Bulgarian intelligence, encouraged or facilitated Mehmet Ali Ağca's attack.

John Paul II's outspoken support for Solidarity in Poland made him a major threat to Soviet control in Eastern Europe. The Mitrokhin Archive, smuggled out of Russia in the 1990s, contains notes indicating that the KGB viewed the Pope as a destabilizing force and sought ways to "neutralize" his influence.

Although direct orders from Andropov have not been proven, the circumstantial evidence points to at least indirect KGB involvement in the plot. KGB involvement in an operation against the Pope could not have been conceived, much less carried out, without Andropov's knowledge and approval.

The KGB also targeted Vatican diplomats, infiltrated Catholic seminaries in Eastern Europe, and attempted to plant agents within the Vatican's Eastern Rite offices. Soviet disinformation campaigns portrayed the Pope as a CIA asset and attempted to undermine his moral authority in Catholic countries. These operations did not involve murder, but they formed part of the broader strategy of religious repression that extended beyond Soviet borders.

Religion was and remains the enduring enemy of the International Socialist movement.

In the end, religious repression under Andropov was a system of pervasive control that combined surveillance, infiltration, intimidation, psychiatric torture, administrative punishment, and selective violence. It did not produce mass graves, but it produced a society in which faith was dangerous, clergy were monitored, believers were punished, and the state sought to extinguish religious life quietly, efficiently, and without leaving the kind of evidence that had condemned Stalin's terror.

The archival record—Soviet and post-Soviet—makes clear that Andropov's apparatus oppressed tens of thousands of religious citizens, targeted clergy at home and abroad, and even reached into the Vatican itself. The system amplified and focused by Andropov was a system designed not to kill religion outright but to suffocate it, leaving behind a legacy of fear, silence, and spiritual devastation that endured long after Andropov himself was gone.

Nationalist Repression

Nationalist repression under Yury Andropov was one of the defining features of late-Soviet internal security policy, a system that treated national identity as a potential threat to the cohesion of the USSR.

When Andropov became Chairman of the KGB in 1967, he brought with him the worldview shaped by the Hungarian uprising of 1956: nationalism was not a cultural phenomenon but a political contagion capable of destabilizing socialist rule.

Under Andropov's leadership, the KGB developed a comprehensive program to monitor, infiltrate, intimidate, and neutralize nationalist movements across the Soviet Union. The repression was not uniform; it varied by region, intensity, and historical memory. But the underlying logic was consistent: national identity, when expressed outside state-approved channels, was treated as subversion.

The most heavily targeted groups were in Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Georgia, and Armenia — republics with strong historical traditions, distinct languages, and deep cultural memories of independence.

Soviet and post-Soviet archival materials show that the KGB's Fifth Directorate maintained extensive files on nationalist intellectuals, writers, historians, clergy, and students.

In Ukraine, the KGB monitored the activities of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group, founded in 1976, whose members documented human-rights violations and advocated for national cultural rights. Many of its members were arrested, imprisoned, or exiled.

Mykola Rudenko, the group's founder, was sentenced to seven years in labor camps and five years of exile. His memoirs describe interrogations in which KGB officers threatened to "erase" him from public life, a phrase that in late-Soviet usage meant indefinite imprisonment or psychiatric confinement rather than physical disappearance.

In Lithuania, the KGB targeted the Catholic Committee for the Defense of Believers' Rights, founded in 1978. Its members, including priests and lay activists, documented religious and cultural repression.

Father Sigitas Tamkevičius, one of the committee's leaders, was arrested in 1983 and sentenced to ten years in labor camps and exile. His case is well documented in Lithuanian archives, which describe how the KGB infiltrated his parish, monitored his sermons, and attempted to recruit informants to undermine his influence.

The repression of Lithuanian nationalists often involved violence.

The death of Father Bronius Laurinavičius in 1981, struck by a truck under circumstances widely believed to have been staged by the KGB, is one of the most chilling examples. Post-Soviet investigations concluded that KGB officers orchestrated the incident to silence a priest who had become a vocal critic of Soviet rule.

In Latvia and Estonia, nationalist repression focused on cultural institutions, writers' unions, and youth organizations. Here, the KGB monitored language activists who advocated for the preservation of Latvian and Estonian linguistic rights. Those who resisted Russification policies were interrogated, dismissed from their jobs, or forced to emigrate.

In Georgia, the KGB targeted nationalist intellectuals who celebrated Georgian history and culture. The 1978 demonstrations in Tbilisi, sparked by attempts to downgrade the status of the Georgian language, were met with arrests and intimidation. Although the protests succeeded in preserving Georgian language rights, the KGB intensified surveillance of nationalist groups afterward.

The Armenian nationalist movement, particularly those advocating for recognition of the Armenian genocide or greater cultural autonomy, was also targeted. The KGB monitored diaspora contacts, censored publications, and arrested activists who attempted to commemorate historical events deemed politically sensitive. The repression was not always violent, but it was pervasive, creating an atmosphere in which cultural expression was inseparable from political risk.

The KGB maintained surveillance files on hundreds of thousands of individuals across the USSR. Based on documented arrests, imprisonments, psychiatric confinements, job

dismissals, and forced emigration, it is reasonable to estimate that tens of thousands of nationalists experienced direct repression between 1967 and 1982.

In Ukraine alone, post-Soviet archival research suggests that more than 10,000 nationalist activists were interrogated or penalized during this period.

Across the Baltic republics, the number likely exceeded 5,000. In Georgia and Armenia, thousands more were subjected to administrative punishment. These figures reflect not mass terror but pervasive, grinding pressure designed to suffocate national identity. Again, without provoking international outrage.

Beyond Soviet borders, Andropov's KGB conducted operations against nationalist émigrés. Ukrainian, Baltic, and Caucasian exile organizations in Western Europe and North America were infiltrated, monitored, and targeted with disinformation campaigns. The KGB sought to discredit nationalist leaders abroad, portraying them as fascists, CIA agents, or criminals. In some cases, the repression turned violent.

The assassination of Ukrainian nationalist leader Stepan Bandera in Munich in 1959, carried out by KGB agent Bohdan Stashynsky, occurred before Andropov's tenure but set the precedent for foreign operations.

During Andropov's years, the KGB continued to target nationalist émigrés, though post-Soviet sources on the subject do not list specific assassinations from this period. The record does show that the KGB conducted lethal operations against anti-Soviet émigrés in Europe and elsewhere, typically involving poisoning, staged accidents, or covert shootings. These operations were designed to silence critics abroad without drawing international attention.

The KGB also targeted nationalist churches abroad, particularly Ukrainian and Baltic parishes in Canada, the United States, and Western Europe. Soviet intelligence infiltrated these communities, recruited informants, and attempted to undermine clergy who supported independence movements.

Post-Soviet Russian intelligence archives confirm that the KGB maintained active operations against the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church abroad, infiltrating clergy and attempting to discredit bishops who supported Ukrainian independence.

In the course of my survey, the question arose whether "Russian nationalism" itself was ever targeted by the KGB under Andropov.

The answer is yes, though in a different form.

The Soviet state feared any nationalism, including Russian nationalism, that operated outside Party control. Russian nationalist intellectuals who advocated for greater

cultural autonomy, criticized Russification policies, or promoted pre-revolutionary historical narratives were monitored and sometimes punished.

These “nationalists” were not the party members who formed the Russian nationalist faction in Soviet government.

Anrodpov, unlike his predecessors, did target unaffiliated “Russian nationalists”. Andropov’s KGB targeted writers associated with the Russian nationalist underground, including members of the “Russian Party” within the intelligentsia.

Figures such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, whose nationalism was rooted in Orthodox Christianity and pre-Soviet cultural identity, were persecuted, exiled, or forced to emigrate. The KGB also monitored Russian Orthodox clergy who promoted nationalist themes. Thus, while the Soviet state promoted a controlled form of Russian identity as part of its ideological narrative, it repressed any independent Russian nationalism that threatened Party authority.

In the end, nationalist repression under Andropov was a system of pervasive control that combined surveillance, infiltration, intimidation, psychiatric torture, administrative punishment, and selective violence.

Andropov did not produce mass graves, but produced a society in which national identity was dangerous, cultural expression was monitored, and the state sought to extinguish nationalist movements quietly, efficiently, and without leaving the kind of evidence that had condemned Stalin’s terror.

The archival record — Soviet and post-Soviet — makes clear that Andropov’s apparatus oppressed tens of thousands of nationalists, targeted cultural groups at home and abroad, and even suppressed Russian nationalism when it operated outside Party control.

Labor Dissent

Labor dissent repression under Yury Andropov was one of the least discussed yet most revealing aspects of late-Soviet internal security policy. The USSR presented itself as the vanguard of the proletariat, the world’s first workers’ state, the embodiment of Marx’s promise that labor would rule.

Yet under Andropov’s tenure as Chairman of the KGB from 1967 to 1982, the Soviet security apparatus treated labor unrest not as a sign of legitimate grievance but as a form of political subversion.

The KGB's Fifth Directorate, responsible for "ideological counter-subversion," monitored factories, mines, construction brigades, and transport hubs with the same vigilance it applied to nationalist movements or religious groups. Soviet and post-Soviet archival materials show that the KGB maintained files on tens of thousands of workers, foremen, and informal labor organizers, treating workplace dissatisfaction as a potential threat to state stability.

The repression of labor dissent took many forms. Workers who complained about unsafe conditions, low wages, or corruption were interrogated, threatened, or dismissed. Those who attempted to organize informal committees or circulate petitions were labeled "anti-Soviet elements."

In the industrial centers of Ukraine, the Urals, and Siberia, the KGB infiltrated factory councils, monitored conversations in break rooms, and recruited informants among foremen and engineers.

The Soviet state did not tolerate independent labor organization; the official trade unions were instruments of Party control, not vehicles for worker advocacy. When workers attempted to form independent groups, the KGB intervened swiftly.

One of the best documented cases of labor repression under Andropov occurred in Novocherkassk, though the massacre itself took place in 1962, before Andropov became KGB chairman. What matters for this period is how Andropov handled its legacy.

The Novocherkassk massacre, in which Soviet troops opened fire on striking workers, killing at least twenty-six, was concealed for decades. When Andropov took over the KGB, he ensured that the event remained classified, that survivors were monitored, and that any attempt to commemorate the dead was suppressed.

Post-Soviet Russian archival releases show that Andropov personally approved measures to prevent "the spread of harmful rumors" about the massacre. Survivors who attempted to speak about the event were interrogated, threatened, or forced into silence.

More directly tied to Andropov's tenure were the labor protests of the 1970s, especially in Ukraine and the Baltic republics. In 1972, miners in Donbas staged a series of informal strikes over dangerous conditions and shortages of basic supplies. The KGB responded by arresting organizers, interrogating dozens of workers, and transferring suspected leaders to remote regions.

Soviet sources describe how the KGB used "administrative exile" to break up labor networks, sending workers to distant factories or construction sites where they could not continue organizing.

In Lithuania, textile workers who protested wage cuts in 1976 were detained, interrogated, and threatened with criminal charges. Post-Soviet Lithuanian archives document at least thirty cases in which workers were punished for participating in unauthorized labor actions during Andropov's tenure.

The repression was not always violent, but it was pervasive.

Workers who complained too loudly were dismissed, denied housing, or blacklisted. Those who attempted to organize independent unions were arrested under Article 70 ("anti-Soviet agitation") or Article 190-1 ("dissemination of fabrications known to be false").

The KGB used psychiatric hospitals against labor activists, declaring them mentally ill for "obsessive reformist delusion."

One such case involved a Ukrainian railway worker, Petro S., who was confined in a psychiatric hospital for distributing leaflets demanding safer working conditions. His medical records, released after independence, show that he was diagnosed with "sluggish schizophrenia," a fabricated condition used to justify indefinite confinement.

The KGB maintained surveillance files on hundreds of thousands of workers across the USSR. Based on documented arrests, interrogations, psychiatric confinements, job dismissals, and forced transfers, it is reasonable to estimate that tens of thousands of workers experienced direct repression between 1967 and 1982.

In Ukraine alone, post-Soviet archival research suggests that more than 5,000 labor activists were interrogated or penalized during this period. Across the USSR, the number of workers subjected to administrative punishment — loss of employment, denial of housing, forced relocation — likely exceeded 50,000.

These figures reflect not mass terror but pervasive, grinding pressure designed to suffocate labor dissent, again, without provoking international outrage.

Beyond Soviet borders, Andropov's KGB conducted operations against labor dissidents abroad, though these cases were fewer than those involving nationalists or religious activists.

The most notable foreign-soil labor repression involved Soviet émigré workers who attempted to expose unsafe conditions or corruption in Soviet industries. The KGB infiltrated émigré labor organizations in Western Europe, monitored Soviet defectors who had worked in industrial sectors, and conducted disinformation campaigns to discredit whistleblowers.

In one documented case, a Soviet engineer who defected to Sweden in 1978 and attempted to publish a report on unsafe conditions in Soviet nuclear facilities was targeted by a KGB disinformation campaign portraying him as mentally unstable.

Post-Soviet Russian intelligence archives confirm that the KGB maintained active operations against émigré labor activists, though post-Soviet sources do not cite assassinations from this period.

The Workers of the World went easy on labor advocates.

The repression of labor dissent under Andropov reveals a profound irony at the heart of the Soviet project. The USSR claimed to represent the workers of the world, yet it consistently and systematically repressed its own laborers whenever they attempted to assert their rights.

The Soviet state celebrated May Day parades, glorified industrial workers in propaganda, and proclaimed itself the champion of the proletariat. But when workers complained about unsafe conditions, low wages, or corruption, they were treated as enemies of the state.

The KGB monitored factories with the same vigilance it applied to nationalist movements or religious groups. Labor dissent was not seen as a sign of legitimate grievance but as a form of ideological contamination.

In the end, labor repression under Andropov was a system of pervasive control that combined surveillance, infiltration, intimidation, psychiatric torture, administrative punishment, and selective violence. Andropov did not fill mass graves, but he “filled hospital wings”.

The record — Soviet and post-Soviet — makes clear that Andropov’s apparatus oppressed tens of thousands of laborers, targeted workers at home and abroad, and enforced a system in which the “dictatorship of the proletariat” became, in practice, a dictatorship over the proletariat.

Foreign Dissent

Foreign dissent repression under Yury Andropov was not an auxiliary function of the KGB but one of its core missions. From 1967 to 1982, the Soviet security apparatus treated foreign critics, émigrés, defectors, and ideological opponents abroad as legitimate targets for surveillance, intimidation, kidnapping, and, in some cases, assassination.

Andropov's worldview, shaped by the Hungarian uprising of 1956 and reinforced by his long tenure in the Central Committee, held that dissent outside Soviet borders was often more dangerous than dissent inside them. Foreign critics could speak freely, publish uncensored accounts, influence Western governments, and inspire domestic dissidents.

For Andropov, foreign dissent was a strategic threat, and the KGB's First Chief Directorate — responsible for foreign intelligence — became the spearhead of a global repression program.

The repression of foreign dissidents took many forms.

The KGB monitored émigré communities in Western Europe, North America, and Australia, infiltrating cultural organizations, churches, political groups, and student associations.

Soviet and post-Soviet archival materials show that the KGB maintained files on tens of thousands of émigrés, especially Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Georgians, Armenians, and Russians who had fled the USSR.

These communities were seen as potential centers of anti-Soviet agitation. The KGB recruited informants among émigrés, planted agents in exile organizations, and conducted disinformation campaigns to discredit prominent figures.

The Mitrokhin Archive, smuggled out of Russia in the 1990s, contains extensive documentation of these operations, including detailed notes on infiltration strategies and psychological pressure tactics.

The most dramatic cases of foreign dissent repression involved assassination. Although some of the most famous killings occurred before Andropov's tenure as KGB chairman, they set the precedent for the methods he later refined.

The assassination of Ukrainian nationalist leader Stepan Bandera in Munich in 1959, carried out by KGB agent Bohdan Stashynsky using a cyanide spray pistol, demonstrated the KGB's willingness to eliminate ideological enemies abroad. Stashynsky also murdered Lev Rebet, another Ukrainian émigré leader, in 1957.

These killings were not isolated acts but part of a broader strategy of "special tasks," as the KGB called assassinations. Under Andropov, the KGB continued to target foreign dissidents, though the retrieved sources do not list specific assassinations from this period. However, the broader historical record shows that the KGB conducted operations against anti-Soviet émigrés in Europe and elsewhere, typically involving poisoning, staged accidents, or covert shootings.

These operations were designed to silence critics abroad without drawing international attention.

One of the most documented cases of foreign dissent repression under Andropov involved the Bulgarian dissident writer Georgi Markov, who was assassinated in London in 1978. Markov was killed by a ricin pellet injected into his leg using an umbrella modified by the Bulgarian secret police, with technical assistance from the KGB.

Although the assassination was carried out by Bulgarian agents, the KGB's role was decisive. Post-Soviet Bulgarian and Russian sources confirm that the KGB provided the poison, the delivery mechanism, and operational guidance. Markov's murder became one of the most infamous examples of Cold War repression, demonstrating the reach of Soviet intelligence and its willingness to eliminate critics abroad.

The KGB also targeted defectors who attempted to expose Soviet secrets. In one documented case, a Soviet engineer who defected to Sweden in 1978, and attempted to publish a report on unsafe conditions in Soviet nuclear facilities, was targeted by a KGB disinformation campaign portraying him as mentally unstable.

Post-Soviet Russian intelligence archives confirm that the KGB maintained active operations against émigré labor activists, though the retrieved sources do not list specific assassinations from this period. The KGB's strategy was often to destroy reputations rather than bodies, using forged documents, planted stories, and psychological pressure to silence critics.

Foreign dissidents were also targeted through kidnapping attempts.

In the 1970s, the KGB attempted to abduct several Soviet defectors in Western Europe, including a former GRU officer in West Germany. These attempts were often thwarted by Western intelligence services, but they demonstrate the KGB's willingness to use force abroad.

In some cases, dissidents were lured to meetings under false pretenses, drugged, and transported to Soviet territory. Post-Soviet Russian sources describe at least three such attempts during Andropov's tenure, though details remain classified.

The KGB maintained surveillance files on tens of thousands of émigrés, but only a fraction were targeted directly. Based on documented cases of surveillance, infiltration, disinformation, kidnapping attempts, and assassination, it is reasonable to estimate that thousands of foreign dissidents experienced direct repression between 1967 and 1982.

The number of dissidents subjected to indirect repression — smear campaigns, infiltration, psychological pressure — likely exceeded 20,000. These figures reflect not

mass terror but pervasive, global pressure designed to suffocate foreign dissent without provoking international outrage.

The repression of foreign dissidents under Andropov reveals a profound irony at the heart of the Soviet project. The USSR claimed to represent the oppressed of the world, yet it systematically repressed foreign critics whenever they attempted to speak for themselves.

The Soviet state celebrated international solidarity, supported liberation movements, and proclaimed itself the champion of global justice. But when foreign dissidents criticized Soviet policies, exposed abuses, or advocated for national independence, they were treated as enemies of the state.

The KGB monitored émigré communities with the same vigilance it applied to domestic dissidents. Foreign dissent was not seen as a sign of legitimate grievance but as a form of ideological contamination.

In the end, foreign dissent repression under Andropov was a system of pervasive control that combined surveillance, infiltration, intimidation, disinformation, kidnapping attempts, and selective violence. It did not produce mass graves, but it produced a world in which foreign critics — the very people the Soviet state claimed to defend — were silenced, punished, and sometimes killed whenever they attempted to speak for themselves.

The archival record — Soviet and post-Soviet — makes clear that Andropov's apparatus oppressed thousands of foreign dissidents, targeted tens of thousands of critics at home and abroad, and enforced a system in which the "international solidarity" of the Soviet state translated, in practice, to a global machine of repression.

When we, in the 21st Century think of the Soviet Union in its heyday, when the Evil Empire had reached the zenith of its power, and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat postured on the brink of actually staging their global revolution, we are thinking of Andropov.

The imprimatur of the man is found in every act of oppression which assures the Cold War will resonate as an object lesson for millennia to come.

If asked, I assure you, Andropov will have said Anastasia should be dug up, then shot and defiled again, just to put a period on the end of the Imperial sentence.

Andropov Rises

Yury Andropov's rise from KGB chairman to General Secretary in 1982 was unprecedented in Soviet history, not because he emerged from nowhere, but because he ascended from a position that had traditionally been treated as politically radioactive.

No head of the Soviet security organs - neither Yagoda, nor Yezhov, nor Beria, nor Shelepin - had ever been permitted to reach the pinnacle of Party power.

The Soviet system feared its own secret police too deeply to allow its chiefs to become national leaders. Andropov succeeded because he spent fifteen years reshaping the KGB into an institution that was simultaneously feared, disciplined, politically loyal, and – crucially - non-threatening to the collective leadership.

At least, that is what could be concluded in the best light. One could also argue that, following the entrenchment of Russian nationalists, there was nobody left to fear Andropov as Dictator of the Proletariat. The machine had literally become the man.

Before Andropov's rise to the top, one could be debated what Russia truly was, a nation or a long-subjugated region. After Andropov's rise to the top, it became abundantly clear: Russia was not a country with an intelligence apparatus. Russia was an intelligence apparatus with a country.

Russia, both under Andropov, and since, is a criminally insane police state with pervasive, near total control over the Russian population.

Andropov's rise was the product of long-term maneuvering, careful cultivation of alliances, and a political style that convinced the aging Brezhnevite elite that he was the only man capable of stabilizing a system drifting toward paralysis.

Andropov's path began with his reputation as the man who "saved socialism" in Hungary in 1956. His role in crushing the uprising made him a trusted figure among hardliners.

Andropov In Hungary

> Yury Andropov's role in the Hungarian Uprising of 1956 was not merely administrative or diplomatic; it was direct, personal, and morally repugnant. Andropov was the Soviet ambassador in Budapest at the moment the uprising exploded, and his actions during those weeks shaped both the Soviet response and his own future as one of the USSR's most formidable security chiefs.

Andropov arrived in Hungary in 1954, a young, ambitious diplomat whose job was to keep the Hungarian leadership aligned with Moscow. When protests began on 23 October 1956, he was inside the Soviet embassy, watching crowds swell in the streets.

Andropov's first decisive act was to send a series of urgent cables to Moscow claiming that the uprising was not a spontaneous national revolt but a "counterrevolutionary fascist rebellion." Pay close attention to the accusations underpinning Andropov's intervention, for they are identical to those being used by Vladimir Putin in his invasion of Ukraine today.

This framing of Hungarian protests as "fascism" mattered: it evoked the World War 2 enemy without alluding to their shared socialist imperatives. Fascism became the reflexive justification the Kremlin needed to authorize military intervention.

Soviet archival materials released after 1991 show that Andropov exaggerated the threat, described the protesters as "armed insurgents," and insisted that the Hungarian government was collapsing. His reports were not neutral intelligence; they were political arguments designed to push Moscow toward force.

When the first Soviet troops entered Budapest on 24 October, Andropov coordinated closely with them, providing intelligence on Hungarian political figures, advising on which ministries to occupy, and urging the arrest of individuals he considered unreliable.

Andropov was in constant contact with the Hungarian Communist leadership, pressuring them to denounce the uprising and to request Soviet "assistance." When Imre Nagy attempted to negotiate, Andropov treated him as a threat.

According to later testimony from Hungarian officials, Andropov personally encouraged the Soviet military command to isolate Nagy, cut off his communications, and prepare for his removal.

The bloodiest phase came in early November, when Moscow decided to crush the uprising outright. Andropov played a central role in the deception that made the second intervention possible. Andropov assured Nagy that negotiations were continuing, even as Soviet tanks were massing for the assault.

On 4 November, when Soviet forces launched Operation Whirlwind - the full-scale invasion of Budapest - Andropov was again in the embassy, directing political coordination and identifying targets for arrest. The fighting that day and the days that followed killed thousands of Hungarians.

Andropov did not pull a trigger, but he was one of the men who made the violence possible, who justified it, who facilitated it, and who ensured that no compromise could avert it.

Remove Andropov from the scenario and it is doubtful if the Soviet Union would have invaded Hungary at all.

But Andropov's most personally-damning act came after the uprising was crushed. Nagy and his ministers sought refuge in the Yugoslav embassy. Andropov negotiated with them, promising safe passage if they surrendered.

It was a lie.

When Nagy left the embassy, Soviet security forces seized him, transported him to Romania, and later returned him to Hungary, where he was tried in secret and executed in 1958.

Andropov was directly involved in the deception that led to Nagy's capture. Hungarian sources describe Andropov as the man who "gave his word and broke it," a betrayal that has become one of the darkest stains on his record.

So what blood does Andropov have on his hands? You be the judge. I say all of it, for without his lies about armed, fascist militants in the streets, and a government on the verge of collapse, would Moscow have sent in the Red Army?

In the early career of Andropov we witness how the personal career of a single apparatchik could be conflated with national security, and relatively benign crises quickly inflate into existential crises.

This is not a flaw in socialist systems of government, it is a feature. Because failure was interpreted as deviation, socialist apparatchik can risk failure on their part. Failures always and ever ended in death or a life in obscurity, in poverty. Usually it ended in death. Too few examples of a peaceful retirement existed in Andropov's day to provide him any hope of a future if he failed in Hungary.

One could correctly say Andropov never even made a choice. The Paradox of the Proletariat made the choices for Andropov.

The casualties suffered by Hungarians during the 1956 uprising form one of the most searing chapters of twentieth-century European history, not only because of the numbers themselves but because of the human texture behind them: a sudden national revolt, a brief moment of freedom, and then the crushing weight of Soviet armor descending on a small country that had dared to break away.

The accepted historical consensus, based on post-1991 Hungarian government investigations, Soviet military archives, and the work of scholars such as Charles Gati and Johanna Granville, places the number of Hungarian dead at roughly 2,500 to 3,000, with another 13,000 wounded.

These figures represent civilians, students, factory workers, and hastily organized insurgents who fought Soviet tanks with Molotov cocktails, hunting rifles, and whatever weapons they could seize from police stations.

The uprising was concentrated in Budapest, where street-to-street fighting turned entire neighborhoods into battlefields. Soviet T-54 tanks fired into apartment blocks suspected of sheltering insurgents; artillery was used in densely populated districts; and snipers, both Hungarian and Soviet, contributed to the chaos.

Many of the dead were not combatants at all but residents caught in crossfire or killed when Soviet units, under orders to secure the city rapidly, used overwhelming force against any perceived resistance.

The casualty count does not end with battlefield deaths.

After the uprising was crushed, the new Soviet-backed government initiated a wave of reprisals that added another layer of suffering. Roughly 22,000 Hungarians were arrested, 13,000 imprisoned, and between 200 and 230 were executed after secret trials, including Prime Minister Imre Nagy, whose death became a symbol of the betrayal that followed the uprising.

The human cost also includes the 200,000 Hungarians who fled the country, creating one of the largest refugee movements in post-war Europe. These numbers, stark as they are, only hint at the lived reality: families torn apart, neighborhoods depopulated, and a generation traumatized by the sight of Soviet tanks rolling through their capital.

The uprising lasted barely two weeks, yet its casualty figures reflect the intensity of urban warfare and the ruthlessness of a superpower determined to prevent even the possibility of political pluralism within its sphere.

That, of course, is the lay of the land in the macro. In truth, in practical experience, Yuri Andopov could not tolerate even the appearance of failure in a system which dealt death to all who deviated from the expectations of superiors.

Hungarians would have to die so that Yuri Andropov did not.

Andropov's subsequent work in the Central Committee apparatus - especially his supervision of relations with Eastern Europe - gave him a reputation for ideological vigilance.

When Andropov became KGB chairman in 1967, he inherited an institution still haunted by the specter of Beria. Andropov's first maneuver was to depoliticize the KGB's public image while strengthening its internal authority. He professionalized the service, purged unreliable officers, and built a cadre of disciplined, technocratic operatives.

Soviet internal sources from the late 1960s and early 1970s—particularly Central Committee personnel reports—describe Andropov as "politically reliable, organizationally strong, and ideologically firm," a formula that reassured the Party that the KGB would not become an independent political force.

Andropov's second maneuver was to cultivate a reputation as the Party's guardian rather than its rival. Andropov used the KGB to protect Brezhnev's leadership from internal dissent, monitor corruption, and manage ideological discipline. He did not challenge Brezhnev; instead, he positioned himself as the man who could keep the system intact.

This loyalty was not merely rhetorical.

Archival materials from the Politburo's internal correspondence show that Andropov regularly provided Brezhnev with intelligence briefings tailored to reinforce Brezhnev's worldview, strengthening their personal bond. At the same time, Andropov quietly built alliances with key figures such as Mikhail Suslov, the Party's chief ideologist, and Konstantin Chernenko, Brezhnev's longtime aide.

These alliances mattered because they placed Andropov inside the informal network that controlled succession politics. The decisive maneuvering began in the late 1970s, when Brezhnev's health declined and the question of succession became unavoidable.

Andropov understood that the KGB chairman could never simply "run" for General Secretary; he had to be invited. His strategy was to shift from the KGB into the Party apparatus at precisely the right moment. In 1982, he engineered his own transfer from the KGB to the Secretariat, becoming overseer of ideology—a position traditionally held by men destined for higher office.

Soviet sources from the period, including minutes from Secretariat meetings, show that Andropov immediately began presenting himself as the defender of Party discipline, warning of corruption, inefficiency, and "moral decay." This rhetoric resonated with a leadership terrified of social stagnation and economic decline.

When Brezhnev died in November 1982, the Politburo faced a crisis of legitimacy. Chernenko was Brezhnev's personal favorite, but he lacked administrative competence and was visibly ill. Grigory Romanov was ambitious but widely distrusted.

Andropov, by contrast, had three advantages: he was seen as intellectually capable, he had no personal faction threatening the collective leadership, and he had spent fifteen years demonstrating absolute loyalty.

The KGB's files on corruption—compiled under Andropov—also gave him quiet leverage.

Andropov never used them openly, but everyone in the Politburo knew he possessed them. As later memoirs by Politburo members suggest, this knowledge made Andropov the safest choice: he could stabilize the system without unleashing chaos.

Thus, on 12 November 1982, the Politburo selected Andropov as General Secretary.

It was not a triumph of the secret police over the Party; it was the Party choosing the one man from the security organs who had spent his entire career convincing them he would never turn the KGB against them.

Andropov's rise was unprecedented because he achieved what Beria never could: he made the KGB appear indispensable rather than dangerous, and he made himself appear loyal rather than threatening.

But ask anyone in Hungary, even the "socialists" of that day. All will agree it would have been better if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

In the end, Andropov became General Secretary not because he was feared, but because he was trusted—trusted to preserve a system that was already beginning to collapse under its own weight.

Andropov's Legacy

Yuri Andropov's legacy can be summarized in one name: Vladimir Putin. But there are chapters to fill before we arrive at the current nightmare scenario. During his tenure as Secretary General, Yuri Andropov continued to direct the KGB, albeit through proxies. The observation is not trivial, for no previous leader of the U.S.S.R. had ever served as the head of Russian Intelligence.

The institutions which would answer to Yuri Andropov, could not pull the wool over Andropov's eyes. More to the point, every man who assumed control over the KGB, until the 1991 Coup, had been groomed by Yuri Andropov himself.

During Yuri Andropov's tenure as Secretary General, it was understood by all that the KGB was answerable to him alone. Let's take a look at the follow-on directors of the KGB.

Vitaly Fedorchuk (1982)

Vitaly Vasilyevich Fedorchuk's brief tenure as Chairman of the KGB in 1982 cannot be understood without first tracing the long arc of his life: a trajectory that began in a poor Ukrainian peasant household and ended in the highest ranks of the Soviet security apparatus.

Born on 27 December 1918 in the village of Ogievka in the Kiev Governorate, he came from an ethnically Ukrainian farming family, one of six children raised amid the upheavals of collectivization and the economic hardships of early Soviet rule.

Fedorchuk's childhood unfolded in a region deeply scarred by the political violence of the 1930s, though surviving records do not document specific family experiences during the Holodomor. What is clear is that Fedorchuk grew up in a world where state power was omnipresent and loyalty to the Party was the only path upward.

As a teenager, Fedorchuk worked at a local printing press and then as a regional newspaper correspondent, an early exposure to information management that would later serve him well in the security services.

In 1936, at age eighteen, he was conscripted into the Red Army and admitted to the Kyiv Military School of Communications, graduating in 1939 with training in signals and secure communications. That same year, he entered the NKVD, the Soviet secret police, beginning a career that would span more than five decades.

Fedorchuk's early assignments placed him in Mongolia during the Battle of Khalkhin Gol, where he served in counterintelligence operations against the Japanese. During the Second World War, he rose through the Special Departments of the NKVD attached to Red Army units, eventually becoming chief of counterintelligence for armored brigades on the North Caucasus Front.

After the war, he served in SMERSH in Yaroslavl and later in Soviet-occupied Austria and East Germany, often under diplomatic cover. These years hardened him into a classic Soviet security officer: disciplined, suspicious, and deeply committed to the ideological mission of the state.

Fedorchuk's rise accelerated in the postwar decades.

In 1970, he became Chairman of the KGB of the Ukrainian SSR, a position he held for twelve years. His tenure in Ukraine was marked by aggressive suppression of nationalist

movements, religious activism, and cultural dissent. Post-Soviet Ukrainian sources describe him as one of the most hardline security chiefs of the Brezhnev era, overseeing surveillance, arrests, interrogations, and the liquidation of underground nationalist networks.

Fedorchuk's methods were uncompromising: infiltration of cultural groups, harassment of writers and historians, and the use of administrative exile and psychiatric confinement against dissidents. Emigré memoirs from Ukrainian nationalists frequently mention Fedorchuk's name as synonymous with repression, describing midnight searches, confiscation of manuscripts, and interrogations designed to break the will of activists.

Fedorchuk's reputation for severity was well known in Moscow, and it was precisely this reputation that led Yury Andropov to select him as his successor at the KGB in May 1982. That, and his Ukrainian background would make him easier to replace if the need arose.

Fedorchuk's tenure as Chairman of the KGB of the USSR lasted only seven months, from 26 May to 17 December 1982, but even in that short period he attempted to impose stricter internal discipline.

Soviet sources describe him issuing warnings about "imperialist threats" and pushing for purges of officers he considered lax or politically unreliable. His approach, however, met resistance.

Senior KGB officers viewed him as an outsider — a provincial Ukrainian security chief without deep roots in the central apparatus. His style was blunt, militarized, and reminiscent of earlier NKVD traditions, clashing with the more bureaucratic, technocratic culture Andropov had cultivated.

Truth be told, the Russian nationalists reflexively balked at the prospects of another Trotskyite kulak over them.

Despite internal friction, or perhaps because of it, Fedorchuk initiated several campaigns of repression during his brief tenure.

One campaign targeted Ukrainian and Baltic émigré networks, which the KGB believed were increasing their influence abroad. Drawing on his experience in Ukraine, Fedorchuk ordered intensified monitoring of émigré publications and cultural organizations, particularly those in Canada and West Germany.

Russian-language periodicals from the late Soviet era, including *Ogonyok* and internal KGB bulletins later declassified, describe operations aimed at discrediting émigré leaders by planting stories portraying them as fascists or Western intelligence assets.

These operations did not involve assassinations during his tenure, but they continued the long tradition of psychological warfare against nationalist communities abroad.

Another campaign focused on religious dissent, especially underground Baptist and Pentecostal groups. Fedorchuk authorized expanded use of psychiatric hospitals and administrative detention against religious activists, continuing practices established under Andropov.

Soviet sources from the Ministry of Internal Affairs — which he would soon lead — describe cases in which believers were declared mentally ill for "religious fanaticism" and confined indefinitely. Emigré accounts published in the 1980s recount interrogations in which KGB officers invoked Fedorchuk's name as a threat, warning that "the Ukrainian methods" would be applied to believers who refused to register with state-controlled religious bodies.

Fedorchuk's most politically sensitive campaign involved anti-corruption investigations.

Although these intensified after he became Minister of Internal Affairs in December 1982, the groundwork was laid during his KGB tenure. Fedorchuk pushed for investigations into regional Party officials suspected of bribery or embezzlement, a move that earned him enemies within the nomenklatura.

Russian post-Soviet analyses describe him as a "blunt instrument" used by Andropov to shake the system, though his methods were considered too heavy-handed for long-term political stability.

There are no documented cases of disappearances or murders directly ordered by Fedorchuk during his short tenure as KGB chairman. The late Soviet security apparatus preferred administrative repression — surveillance, dismissal, exile, psychiatric confinement — over overt killings.

However, Fedorchuk's earlier years in Ukraine did involve lethal operations against nationalist insurgents in the postwar period, particularly during the liquidation of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA).

The UPA

> The Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) was a nationalist paramilitary formation created during the Second World War, composed largely of ethnic Ukrainian peasants, students, former Polish and Soviet soldiers, and members of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN). Its purpose was to fight for an independent Ukrainian state, resisting both Nazi occupation and Soviet rule.

After 1944, when the Red Army re-entered western Ukraine, the UPA became the primary armed opponent of Soviet authority in the region. Soviet internal documents from the NKVD and later the KGB describe the UPA as a "bandit-nationalist formation," though post-Soviet Ukrainian scholarship emphasizes its role as an anti-totalitarian resistance movement.

The UPA's members operated in forests and rural villages, relying on local support networks, clandestine supply lines, and underground political structures. By the late 1940s, the UPA had tens of thousands of fighters and sympathizers, making it one of the largest anti-Soviet insurgencies in postwar Europe.

When Vitaly Fedorchuk became head of the Ukrainian SSR KGB in 1970, the UPA as an armed force had long been defeated, but its surviving members, supporters, and underground nationalist networks remained a central target of Soviet repression.

Fedorchuk's branch of the KGB inherited decades of counterinsurgency files and continued the systematic dismantling of UPA remnants. Post-Soviet Ukrainian archives reveal that Fedorchuk oversaw operations aimed at identifying former UPA fighters who had avoided arrest, tracking down individuals who had sheltered insurgents, and suppressing cultural or historical organizations that preserved UPA memory.

Many surviving UPA members were interrogated, pressured to confess, or forced to sign statements renouncing their past. Some were imprisoned on charges of "anti-Soviet agitation," while others were subjected to administrative exile or psychiatric confinement.

Emigré memoirs published in the 1980s recount how KGB officers under Fedorchuk conducted nighttime searches, confiscated family archives, and threatened elderly former fighters with renewed prosecution.

Although outright executions had ceased by the 1960s, the fate of UPA veterans under Fedorchuk was one of relentless surveillance, intimidation, and social marginalization. In the late Soviet period, the UPA no longer died in forests; it died in interrogation rooms, in psychiatric wards, and in the quiet erasure of its history.

Fedorchuk's continued persecution of UPA members illustrate how long the Proletariat held a grudge.

Soviet archival materials confirm that counterinsurgency operations under Fedorchuk's supervision resulted in deaths, though these were framed as military engagements rather than political murders. Estimating the number of people oppressed under Fedorchuk's watch requires caution. His seven-month tenure at the USSR KGB was too brief for large-scale campaigns, but his twelve years in Ukraine saw thousands of dissidents interrogated, hundreds imprisoned, and countless others subjected to surveillance or administrative punishment.

Post-Soviet Ukrainian historians estimate that during the 1970–1982 period, the Ukrainian KGB under Fedorchuk monitored tens of thousands of individuals, with several thousand facing direct repression. Fedorchuk's impact on Soviet-wide repression in 1982 was more limited, but his policies reinforced the hardline trajectory Andropov had set.

After his removal from the KGB in December 1982, Fedorchuk became Minister of Internal Affairs, overseeing the Soviet militia and internal security forces until 1986. This role allowed him to continue anti-corruption drives and maintain pressure on dissident networks, though his influence gradually waned as the political climate shifted under Gorbachev.

Vitaly Fedorchuk died on 29 February 2008 in Moscow at the age of eighty-nine. He was interred at Troyekurovskoye Cemetery, a resting place for many Soviet officials. His legacy remains controversial: a man shaped by war, hardened by counterintelligence, and defined by his role in suppressing dissent in Ukraine and the USSR.

Soviet and post-Soviet sources portray him as a loyal servant of the state, uncompromising and often brutal, whose brief leadership of the KGB reflected both his strengths and his limitations — a provincial strongman thrust into the center of Soviet power at a moment of institutional uncertainty.

Viktor Chebrikov (1982–1988)

Viktor Mikhailovich Chebrikov's ascent to the leadership of the KGB in December 1982 was the culmination of a life shaped by war, Party loyalty, and the bureaucratic machinery of Soviet power. Born on 27 April 1923 in Yekaterinoslav — today's Dnipro in eastern Ukraine — he came from a working-class family of ethnic Russian origin, his father employed as a laborer in the industrial heartland of the Ukrainian SSR .

Chebrikov's childhood unfolded in a region defined by rapid industrialization, political upheaval, and the rigid ideological expectations of Stalin's rule. He completed secondary school in 1940, and like many young men of his generation, his life was

transformed by the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. At eighteen, he enlisted in the Red Army, entering military school and graduating in 1942 before being thrown directly into the inferno of the Eastern Front.

Chebrikov's wartime service was brutal and formative. He fought at Stalingrad, commanding platoons and mortar units, and was wounded three times — once severely — as well as shell-shocked and frostbitten, yet each time he returned to duty. His contemporaries described him as brave and selfless, a soldier who endured the worst conditions of the war and emerged hardened but loyal.

After the war, Chebrikov attempted to continue his military career, but poor eyesight prevented admission to the Frunze Military Academy. Instead, he turned to engineering, earning a degree from the Dnepropetrovsk Metallurgical Institute and joining the Communist Party in 1950.

Chebrikov's entry into the Party apparatus came soon after: by 1951 he had moved from engineering into full-time Party work, rising through administrative posts in Dnepropetrovsk, a city whose political networks — including Leonid Brezhnev's — would shape his future.

Chebrikov's entrée into Soviet intelligence came through Party channels rather than the traditional security-service pipeline.

In 1967, Brezhnev brought him to Moscow as head of personnel for the KGB, placing him at the center of the organization's internal management. A year later, he became Deputy Chairman of the KGB, serving under Yury Andropov from 1968 to 1982. This long apprenticeship under Andropov was decisive: Chebrikov absorbed the worldview of a security chief who believed that ideological vigilance, bureaucratic discipline, and quiet repression were essential to preserving Soviet power.

By early 1982, he had become First Deputy Chairman, and when Andropov succeeded Brezhnev as General Secretary, Chebrikov was elevated to Chairman of the KGB on 17 December 1982, a position he held until 1 October 1988.

Chebrikov's tenure as KGB chief coincided with one of the tensest periods of the late Cold War. His leadership was defined by campaigns of repression that blended traditional Soviet internal security practices with intensified counterintelligence operations shaped by global confrontation.

Domestically, Chebrikov expanded surveillance and strengthened the Fifth Directorate, responsible for ideological counter-subversion. Soviet and post-Soviet analyses describe how Chebrikov oversaw the infiltration and neutralization of opposition networks, including dissident circles, underground nationalist groups, religious communities, and informal labor activists.

Chebrikov's approach was methodical: expand surveillance, tighten controls, and prevent any form of organized dissent from gaining momentum.

One of the most significant domestic campaigns under Chebrikov involved the suppression of nationalist movements in the Baltic republics, Ukraine, and the Caucasus. Building on the foundations laid by Andropov and earlier KGB chairmen, Chebrikov intensified monitoring of cultural organizations, writers' unions, and youth groups.

Post-Soviet sources describe how the KGB under his leadership infiltrated Lithuanian Catholic networks, Latvian language activists, and Ukrainian cultural circles, using administrative exile, job dismissal, and criminal prosecution to silence dissent.

Emigré memoirs published in the late 1980s recount interrogations in which KGB officers invoked Chebrikov's name as a symbol of the new hard line, warning activists that "the Chairman himself" had ordered crackdowns on nationalist agitation.

Religious repression also continued under Chebrikov, though with less overt brutality than in earlier decades. The KGB monitored underground Baptist and Pentecostal congregations, pressured Orthodox clergy who resisted state control, and used psychiatric hospitals against believers deemed politically unreliable.

Russian-language periodicals from the late Soviet era, including *Ogonyok*, describe cases in which religious activists were detained for distributing samizdat theological texts or organizing unauthorized prayer meetings. Chebrikov's KGB maintained the long-standing Soviet practice of treating independent religious life as a potential threat to ideological stability.

Chebrikov's tenure was also marked by high-profile international incidents.

The most notorious was the shootdown of Korean Air Lines Flight 007 on 1 September 1983, when Soviet forces downed a civilian airliner after it strayed into Soviet airspace, killing 269 people. I recall this episode vividly because, at that time, I was serving in the Army stationed in a tank company near the DMZ in Korea.

That incident sparked the international outrage the kremlin, under Andropov, had so consistently sought to avoid. Andropov was attempting to intimidate President Reagan, and emasculate him in the eyes of America's allies in Asia.

Ronald Reagan responded to the destruction of Korean Air Lines Flight 007 with a combination of moral outrage, diplomatic pressure, and a deliberate effort to frame the incident as a defining contrast between the values of the United States and those of the Soviet Union. In his televised address on 5 September 1983, Reagan called the shootdown "a crime against humanity," emphasizing that 269 innocent people — men,

women, and children aboard an unarmed civilian aircraft — had been killed without justification.

President Reagan stressed that the Soviets had violated “every concept of human rights,” citing grieving families and global condemnation to underscore the universal shock at the attack.

Reagan argued that civilized nations assist lost or distressed pilots rather than destroy them, contrasting U.S. restraint with Soviet aggression. He also accused the USSR of lying about the incident, noting that Soviet authorities refused to admit their pilot had fired on the airliner and had not even informed their own citizens that a shootdown occurred.

In remarks on 2 September, Reagan described the act as “barbaric,” questioned whether meaningful dialogue was possible with a regime that committed such atrocities, and called for an urgent meeting of the United Nations Security Council.

Reagan’s response framed the shootdown not merely as a geopolitical crisis but as a moral indictment of Soviet behavior, reinforcing his broader Cold War narrative that the USSR’s rhetoric of peace was contradicted by its actions.

Reagan next suspended all Aeroflot flights to and from the United States, effectively shutting down the Soviet national airline’s American operations. This was the most visible and immediate sanction.

The suspension was announced on 15 September 1983, two weeks after the shootdown, and remained in place until 1986. The administration also restricted certain bilateral contacts, froze pending aviation negotiations, and supported international condemnation of the USSR through ICAO and the UN.

Reagan’s team considered broader economic sanctions — including grain embargoes or technology restrictions — but rejected them because previous embargoes had hurt American farmers and businesses more than the Soviet economy.

Instead, the administration focused on diplomatic isolation, public condemnation, and intelligence exposure, releasing intercepted Soviet communications to demonstrate that the shootdown was deliberate rather than accidental.

Reagan’s sanctions were real but modest: a ban on Aeroflot operations, suspension of aviation agreements, and coordinated international pressure. They were designed to punish the USSR without destabilizing global markets or triggering a dangerous escalation.

Although the military executed the attack, Chebrikov’s KGB played a central role in the intelligence assessments and post-incident information management. Post-Soviet

analyses describe how the KGB attempted to control the narrative, suppress internal criticism, and manage diplomatic fallout, reflecting Chebrikov's broader commitment to shielding the Soviet state from external pressure.

Foreign operations expanded under Chebrikov, particularly in counterintelligence and active measures. He oversaw intensified efforts to infiltrate émigré communities, disrupt exile organizations, and conduct disinformation campaigns abroad. His KGB targeted Ukrainian, Baltic, and Russian nationalist groups in Western Europe and North America, portraying their leaders as fascists or Western intelligence assets.

Russian-language sources describe operations aimed at discrediting prominent émigré writers and activists, including forged documents, planted stories, and psychological pressure. Although Chebrikov did not preside over the dramatic assassinations of earlier decades, his tenure maintained the KGB's global reach and its willingness to silence critics through covert means.

Chebrikov also played a major role in the Soviet–Afghan War, overseeing internal repression against anti-war activists and managing intelligence operations related to the conflict. His KGB monitored soldiers returning from Afghanistan, suppressed accounts of atrocities, and attempted to prevent the emergence of an Afghan veterans' protest movement.

Soviet sources describe how Chebrikov's KGB worked closely with military intelligence to manage the war's political impact, reflecting his belief that ideological control was essential to sustaining Soviet foreign policy.

By the mid-1980s, Chebrikov had become one of the most powerful figures in the Soviet state, joining the Politburo in 1985 and representing the Brezhnevite old guard opposed to Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms.

Chebrikov's resistance to glasnost and perestroika made him increasingly isolated. Gorbachev viewed the KGB under Chebrikov as a barrier to political liberalization, and in October 1988, he removed Chebrikov from the KGB and reassigned him to a Secretariat role focused on defense and legal affairs.

Less than a year later, in September 1989, Chebrikov was dismissed entirely, marking the end of his political career.

Viktor Chebrikov died on 2 July 1999 in Moscow at the age of seventy-six. His legacy remains contested: to Soviet hardliners, he was a disciplined guardian of state security; to dissidents and émigrés, he was a symbol of late-Soviet repression; and to historians, he represents the final phase of a security apparatus struggling to preserve a system already beginning to unravel.

Chebrikov's tenure at the KGB was long, consequential, and emblematic of the contradictions of the late Soviet state — a system that sought stability through surveillance, control, and silence, even as the state it served changed beyond recognition.

Chebrikov is an outlier in the context of his ultimate disposition. Chebrikov stands as the only example of a director of Russian Intelligence removed from office who survived within a lesser post until his retirement.

By the time of Chebrikov's retirement, the new rules which prohibited violence-based power struggles were well established. The Russian nationalists had succeeded in altering the rules of succession in the Soviet Union, though only for a brief time.

The Paradox of the Proletariat was still in effect, and Gorbachev's reforms sparked disagreement on nearly every point on Gorbachev's plan for Dictatorship of the Proletariat.

The KGB's next director, Vladimir Kryuchkov, broke the new rules when he began plotting Gorbachev's overthrow. But then again, perhaps not. It all depends on how you perceive Gorbachev in the spectrum of state enemies.

Gorbachev's father was Russian, but his mother was Ukrainian. Both his parent's families were caught up in Stalin's purges, so hard liners could, and did interpret Gorbachev's reforms as Revenge of the Kulaks. To the degree Vladimir Kryuchkov and the Russian nationalists viewed Gorbachev as a counter-revolutionary Kulak, the new rules did not apply.

So, to Vladimir Kryuchkov we at last turn.

Vladimir Kryuchkov (1988–1991)

Vladimir Aleksandrovich Kryuchkov's tenure as Chairman of the KGB from 1988 to 1991 was the final act in a life shaped by proletarian origins, wartime hardship, ideological discipline, and a deep suspicion of political liberalization.

Born on 29 February 1924 in Tsaritsyn — later Stalingrad, now Volgograd — he came from a working-class Russian family, his father a factory laborer who began work at age nine in the Barrikady plant and spent his life moving between industrial jobs in the Caucasus and Ukraine.

Kryuchkov's parents were strong supporters of Stalin, and Kryuchkov grew up in an environment steeped in early Soviet proletarian values and the harsh realities of

prewar collectivization. The German invasion in 1941 forced him out of school and into factory labor, contributing to wartime industrial production until he joined the Communist Party in 1944, marking his formal entry into Bolshevik political life.

Kryuchkov's early adulthood was defined by war and ideological apprenticeship. After joining the Party, Kryuchkov became active in the Komsomol, the Communist Youth League, demonstrating the discipline and reliability expected of future cadres.

Kryuchkov pursued legal studies through correspondence at the All-Union Juridical Institute, earning his diploma in 1949, and then entered the Higher Diplomatic School of the Foreign Ministry, graduating in 1954 with training in international relations and diplomatic protocol.

Kryuchkov's diplomatic service included postings in Hungary during the 1956 uprising, where he first came into contact with Yury Andropov, then ambassador to Budapest. Andropov became his patron, shaping Kryuchkov's worldview and opening the path into Soviet intelligence.

Kryuchkov entered the KGB in 1967, initially overseeing foreign intelligence operations. His rise was rapid: by 1974, he became head of the First Chief Directorate (PGU), the foreign intelligence arm of the KGB, a position he held for fourteen years. Under his leadership, the Directorate achieved major successes in penetrating Western intelligence agencies, acquiring scientific and technical intelligence, and refining disinformation and "active measures" campaigns across the world.

The KGB also suffered from high-profile defections and bore responsibility for encouraging the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, a decision that would haunt the USSR politically and militarily. These years forged Kryuchkov into a hardliner who believed deeply in centralized control, ideological vigilance, and the necessity of confronting perceived Western subversion.

When Mikhail Gorbachev appointed him Chairman of the KGB on 1 October 1988, Kryuchkov inherited a security apparatus under immense strain. Perestroika and glasnost had opened political space, emboldened nationalist movements, and weakened the authority of the Communist Party.

Kryuchkov initially appeared to support reform, but quickly came to view Gorbachev's policies as existential threats to the Soviet state. His tenure was defined by campaigns of repression aimed at halting what he saw as the disintegration of Soviet power.

Domestically, Kryuchkov intensified surveillance and counter-subversion operations. According to post-Soviet analyses, he expanded efforts against ethnic unrest, particularly in the Baltic republics, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, where nationalist movements were gaining momentum.

Kryuchkov's KGB infiltrated political groups, monitored informal associations, and attempted to suppress demonstrations through administrative pressure rather than mass violence. Russian-language periodicals from the late Soviet era describe how Kryuchkov's officers targeted activists who distributed samizdat, organized cultural associations, or advocated for greater autonomy, often subjecting them to interrogations, job dismissals, or criminal charges.

Emigré accounts published in the early 1990s recount interrogations in which KGB officers invoked Kryuchkov's name as a symbol of the new hard line, warning dissidents that the Chairman considered their activities part of a Western plot to destabilize the USSR.

Kryuchkov also intensified foreign intelligence and counterintelligence operations. His KGB continued to fund and support communist, socialist, and anti-colonial movements abroad, though its influence over Western European communist parties had diminished significantly by the late 1980s.

Kryuchkov oversaw disinformation campaigns aimed at discrediting émigré communities, particularly Ukrainian, Baltic, and Russian nationalist groups in Western Europe and North America. These operations relied on forged documents, planted stories, and psychological pressure, reflecting Kryuchkov's belief that ideological warfare was essential to preserving Soviet influence.

One of the most consequential episodes of Kryuchkov's tenure was the 1983 war scare, which occurred while he was still head of foreign intelligence but shaped his later leadership. During NATO's Able Archer exercise, Kryuchkov's Directorate misinterpreted Western military movements as preparations for a possible nuclear strike, reinforcing his conviction that the West sought to exploit Soviet weakness.

This worldview carried into his chairmanship, where he frequently warned the Politburo of Western plots and argued that glasnost had opened dangerous channels for foreign influence.

By 1989, Kryuchkov had become a full member of the Politburo, positioning himself as one of the most powerful opponents of Gorbachev's reforms. His resistance to democratization hardened as the Soviet republics moved toward sovereignty and as the New Union Treaty — intended to decentralize the USSR — approached ratification.

Kryuchkov believed the treaty would dissolve the Soviet state, and his conviction led directly to the most dramatic act of his career: the August 1991 Coup against Gorbachev.

Kryuchkov's 1991 Coup cannot be understood outside of the context of historical Purges in the Soviet Union. Indeed, Gorbachev's reforms cannot be understood outside the context of historical Purges in the Soviet Union.

One man's reform is another man's purge, after all. Kryuchkov realized what Gorbachev was attempting, and plotted a Purge of his own. Gorbachev had gone too far, and the new rules were thrown out the window.

Since 1946, the institutional setting for all Purges was the MVD, the Ministry for Internal Affairs. Just remember, when we're talking about the MVD's purges, we are only talking about intra-party violence.

The Red Terror was a permanent state of existence for everyone considered a 'dissident" or an "ethnic" or "nationalist" on the suspect list. None of Andropov's, Fedorchuk's, Chebrikov's or Kryuchkov's victims would argue it was not better if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

To the MVD, and its pattern of Purges we finally turn.

The Purge Cycle

Politics under socialist systems of government, whether domestic or foreign, can only be described as a cycle of purges due to socialism's fatal flaw. The Paradox of the Proletariat results from the irrational criteria Marx assigned to ideological unanimity. Because the revolutionary class is defined by Marx as possessing uniform "class consciousness", the Proletariat can never accept disagreement in their ranks.

But Marx goes beyond defining dissidents as another class. Dissidents are another species altogether, a counter-revolutionary species which must be eliminated.

This irrational dependence on unanimity of thought drives every socialist movement to self-annihilation.

What we witness in the Purge Cycle of the Soviet Union and Russian Federation is the Paradox of he Proletariat in action.

In this chapter, I'll forget the never-ending rebranding of Russian Intelligence and focus exclusively on the Purge Cycle. In Stalin and Lenin's Soviet Union the institutional rebranding functioned as intended, to impart concluding chapters to embarrassing episodes in it's intelligence history.

Rebranding had less of an effect between 1946 and 1991, for the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) served as the parent ministry for all subsequent intelligence agencies.

1946- 1991 MVD

The Ministry of Internal Affairs—the MVD—was one of the most consequential institutions in Soviet history, a body whose evolution mirrored the political transformations of the USSR itself. The MVD emerged formally in March 1946, when the Soviet government abolished the system of People's Commissariats and reorganized them into ministries.

This metamorphosis of Russian Intelligence was the inevitable, post-War purge of all institutions, but it was a rebranding nonetheless. In this reform, the wartime NKVD, which had been the central organ of internal security since 1934, went away, and all its sins wiped clean.

All gone. Nothing to see here folks.

The statutory basis for the new ministry was the decree of the Supreme Soviet that converted commissariats into ministries and transferred to the MVD responsibility for policing, internal security, border troops, fire protection, and—critically—the administration of the Gulag system of camps and colonies.

Once again, by decree.

In design, the MVD was meant to be a peacetime internal-security ministry, a more bureaucratic and less overtly terror-oriented successor to the NKVD. In practice, however, it inherited the NKVD's structures, personnel, and methods, and for the first decade of its existence it functioned as the institutional continuation of Stalin's coercive apparatus.

The purpose of the MVD was broad and multifaceted. It oversaw ordinary policing, criminal investigations, passport and residence controls, internal troops, and the massive network of forced-labor camps and colonies. It was responsible for maintaining public order, suppressing dissent, managing deported nationalities, and enforcing the complex system of internal passports that regulated Soviet citizens' movement.

Internal passports. I have yet to do a thorough study on government restrictions on internal travel, but the only examples which come to mind are the Roman Empire, NAZI Germany and the Soviet Union.

The ministry also controlled the fire service, border guards, and various auxiliary security functions. In design, it was a centralized, hierarchical institution with a minister at the top, supported by deputy ministers and directorates responsible for specific domains. Its structure reflected the Soviet belief that internal security

required a unified, vertically integrated system capable of rapid mobilization and strict control.

The risks peculiar to vertically integrated institutions, ironically, only exacerbated the Paradox of the Proletariat. The Dictator of the Proletariat – that is the head of both party and state – required an apparatus that was immediately responsive, top to bottom. Such an institution, however, would be immediately responsive to any "class enemy" within the chain of command.

Because of the Paradox of the Proletariat, Russian Intelligence and Security institutions formed complexes of interlocking agencies, like a set of Russian nesting dolls. There were police for the police, and those police had even more police still. The MVD was no exception. Indeed, the MVD was the epitome of the Russian nesting doll, the largest, all containing institution.

The MVD's leadership changed several times in its forty-five-year history, and these changes often signaled shifts in Soviet political priorities. Its first minister was Sergei Kruglov, who had served as a deputy to Lavrentii Beria in the NKVD, and who continued many of Beria's policies in the early postwar years. Kruglov presided over the ministry during the late Stalin period, overseeing the Gulag at its peak and managing the deportation and surveillance of various ethnic groups.

In 1953, after Stalin's death, Beria briefly returned to power as Minister of Internal Affairs, merging the MVD with the state security ministry (MGB) and attempting to reform the coercive apparatus. His tenure lasted only months; he was arrested and executed later that year.

The Paradox of the Proletariat did not die with Stalin, and there were, by then, many grudges to settle.

After Beria's fall, Nikolai Dudorov became minister and presided over the dismantling of the Gulag, the release of millions of prisoners, and the reorientation of the MVD toward more conventional policing.

In the 1960s and 1970s, ministers such as Nikolai Shchelokov oversaw a ministry increasingly focused on crime control, public order, and bureaucratic administration, though corruption scandals and abuses persisted.

Nikolai Shchelokov's tenure as Soviet Minister of Internal Affairs (1966–1982) is remembered not for ideological terror but for systemic corruption, embezzlement, abuse of office, and the transformation of the ministry into a personal fiefdom. His downfall in 1982–1984 became one of the most spectacular political purges of the late Brezhnev era, exposing how deeply corruption had penetrated the Soviet internal-security apparatus.

I will return to Nikolai Shchelokov's corrupt tenure in the chapter "Kapitalism vs Capitalism", for the cannibalistic tendencies of the Proletariat would be rebranded as "Kapitalism" during the perestroika years, and beyond.

The most emblematic scandal of Shchelokov's tenure was the luxury-goods corruption network that flourished under Shchelokov. He used the MVD's procurement channels to obtain Western consumer goods—furniture, electronics, jewelry, imported alcohol—and distributed them as patronage to favored officials.

During Nikolai Shchelokov's tenure a second major scandal involved embezzlement and misuse of state funds. Under Shchelokov, the MVD financed lavish construction projects—holiday resorts, elite dachas, private hunting lodges—nominally for "internal troops" or "police recreation," but in practice reserved for high-ranking officials.

Funds were siphoned from the ministry's budget, falsified through inflated invoices, and laundered through MVD-controlled enterprises. The scale of theft was so large that, after Shchelokov's fall, auditors concluded that the ministry's financial records for the 1970s were "unreconstructable."

See what I mean about blat? Blat even secured you access to the truth.

Outsiders mistook the rise of corruption scandals as a sign the Proletariat were, at last, coming to their senses. They were not. The consensus formed within the Soviet hierarchy was that the unmitigated bloodbaths which characterized their early years were doing "reputational damage" to the Soviet State, and therefore, the envisioned World Wide revolution.

The Dictatorship of the Proletariat chose to 'tone it down". No longer would rivals be branded "class traitors" or "counter revolutionaries". Rivals would henceforth be branded thieves. The Paradox of the Proletariat remained in effect. Only the excuses used on its death warrants changed.

The truth is, corruption within the Soviet State was replete. So replete was corruption and graft within the Soviet State that it was widely acknowledged that Blat, not the Ruble was the true Russian currency. Blat is the Russian word for "access". If you had a friend who worked in a diary processing plant, you had access to dairy products.

Blat had been worth more than the Ruble since 1918.

Only naïve western journalists were fooled by the shift from the NKVD's murderous history to the MVD's constabulary approach to repression.

During Shchelokov's tenure, investigators found that MVD warehouses contained enormous quantities of foreign luxury items, all diverted from state channels. Shchelokov's own home was filled with imported furnishings, art, and expensive gifts,

far beyond what a Soviet minister could legally acquire. This was not a matter of petty graft; it was a parallel economy operating inside the ministry, with Shchelokov at its center.

This parallel economy did not end with Shchelokov's downfall. Blat, and al the graft and corruption it entailed, continues to this very day. Every leader within the hierarchy of the Russian state knows they enjoy access to everything their department procures, and goods are regularly exchanged between department heads and ministers as "honoraria". In post-NKVD Russia, all acknowledge that "corruption" will be the stated reason behind anyone's downfall.

Communist China today operates in an identical manner. When westerners read about corruption scandals in Russia or China, I assure you, the stated charges are a mask for the true offense. In Proletarian states, whether they call themselves "socialist" or not, the highest order of crime is ideological infidelity.

In other words, in modern Russia, the Paradox of the Proletariat remains in effect, and will remain in effect, as long as Russian Intelligence maintains its dictatorship. Though modern Russian apparatchiks no longer use revolutionary nomenclature, they retained the structures and functions of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat by other names.

In simplest terms, no change of the guard took place when the Soviet Union was dissolved. The dissolution of the Soviet Union was the grandest institutional sacrifice perpetrated by the Proletariat. And the West appears satisfied to accept its dissolution as fact.

But it would be a mistake to conclude that Shchelokov's tenure was just about Blat.

Shchelokov also presided over systemic abuses of power. The MVD under his leadership became notorious for brutality in police stations, coerced confessions, and widespread extortion by local officers.

While these practices predated him, Shchelokov's protection of loyal subordinates allowed abuses to flourish. His ministry was also implicated in the cover-up of major crimes, including shielding corrupt party officials from prosecution and suppressing investigations that threatened Brezhnev's political allies.

In effect, the MVD became a tool for maintaining the Brezhnev-era "stability of cadres," where loyalty mattered more than legality.

The scandal that finally destroyed Shchelokov was the Georgi Pavlov affair, in which one of his closest associates - Deputy Minister Pavlov - was arrested for massive bribery and embezzlement. Pavlov's testimony implicated Shchelokov directly,

revealing that the minister had personally authorized illegal procurement schemes and accepted bribes in exchange for promotions.

When Yuri Andropov became General Secretary in late 1982, he launched a sweeping anti-corruption campaign targeting Brezhnev's inner circle. There is nothing unique about Andropov's purges. He was, by then, just employing an administrative tool well worn by past Dictators of the Proletariat.

Google it. The history of Soviet purges begins with Lenin and ends only when the Soviet state itself collapses. Each leader inherited a system of repression and reshaped it according to his political needs, producing a century-long arc of coercion that evolved from revolutionary terror into bureaucratic policing and finally into selective political suppression.

Although the scale and character of purges changed over time, the logic behind them - eliminating perceived enemies to consolidate power - remained constant.

Lenin's Purges

Under Vladimir Lenin, purges took the form of revolutionary terror rather than formalized mass campaigns. The Bolshevik government launched the Red Terror during the Civil War, targeting political opponents, former Tsarist officials, suspected counterrevolutionaries, and entire social classes deemed hostile to socialism. This period established the ideological and institutional foundations of Soviet repression: the Cheka, summary executions, hostage-taking, and class-based persecution. Lenin's purges were not yet the bureaucratic, centrally orchestrated campaigns of later decades, but they normalized political violence as a tool of governance and created the security organs that would later carry out far larger purges.

Stalin's Purges

Under Joseph Stalin, purges reached their most catastrophic scale. The Great Purge of 1936–1938, documented extensively in archival research and summarized by Britannica, involved show trials, fabricated charges, torture-induced confessions, and the execution or imprisonment of Old Bolsheviks, party officials, military leaders, and ordinary citizens. The NKVD under Yagoda, Yezhov, and later Beria eliminated Stalin's real and imagined rivals, sending millions to the Gulag and executing hundreds of thousands. Official figures record 681,692 executions during the main purge years, with an additional 116,000 deaths in the Gulag, though independent estimates place the total between 700,000 and 1.2 million. The purges extended beyond the party elite to the Red Army, where the arrest and execution of commanders such as Marshal Tukhachevsky crippled military readiness. Stalin's purges also included ethnic

operations, deportations, and the criminalization of entire nationalities, producing a climate of fear that permeated every level of Soviet society.

Khrushchev's Purges

After Stalin's death, Nikita Khrushchev repudiated the excesses of Stalinism and initiated de-Stalinization, but purges did not disappear. Instead, they shifted from mass terror to political cleansing within the Communist Party. Khrushchev removed Stalinist hardliners, reorganized ministries, and purged opponents such as Georgy Malenkov and Vyacheslav Molotov. These purges were not lethal, but they were decisive in reshaping the Soviet leadership. Khrushchev also suppressed uprisings, most notably the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, which resulted in thousands of deaths and mass arrests. Although Khrushchev condemned Stalin's terror, he maintained the state's prerogative to use force against dissent.

Brezhnev's Purges

Under Leonid Brezhnev, purges became bureaucratic rather than violent. Brezhnev presided over a period of political stagnation in which repression targeted dissidents, writers, scientists, and activists rather than party elites. The KGB under Yuri Andropov used surveillance, harassment, forced psychiatric hospitalization, and imprisonment to silence critics. These were purges in a quieter form: selective, legalistic, and aimed at maintaining ideological conformity. Brezhnev also oversaw ethnic repression and the suppression of national movements, though not on the genocidal scale of Stalin.

Andropov's Purges

When Yuri Andropov became General Secretary in 1982, he launched a campaign against corruption and inefficiency that functioned as a purge of Brezhnev-era officials. Andropov removed or prosecuted numerous party and state leaders, including high-ranking figures in the MVD such as Nikolai Shchelokov. His purges were administrative rather than lethal, but they were sweeping, targeting the entrenched networks of privilege that had flourished under Brezhnev. Andropov also intensified repression of dissidents, using the KGB's full apparatus to silence opposition.

Chernenko's Purges

Konstantin Chernenko's rule is the only exception. Konstantin Chernenko conducted no major purges. He only ruled briefly from 1984 to 1985, and is best understood in the context of Brezhnev's unexpected death due to a heart attack.

Chernenko was only nine years old when the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917. By the time Lenin died in 1924, Chernenko was a teenager. He did not participate in the Civil War, did not belong to any early revolutionary faction, and did not enter the

Communist Party until 1931, long after the Bolshevik era had ended and Stalin's consolidation of power was underway.

Chernenko's career was that of a Stalin-era apparatchik, not a revolutionary. He rose through the Party bureaucracy in the 1930s and 1940s, working in propaganda, administration, and regional Party structures. His ascent was slow and conventional until the 1960s, when he became close to Leonid Brezhnev and entered the upper elite through personal loyalty rather than ideological distinction.

Following the purge of Stalin's "Chekists", extremists who operated primarily by the use of terror and coercion, the Politburo became increasingly geriatric. The Politburo, which had always been composed of the Proletariat, the elite of the elite, the consensus of which defined the party line at all points in time, became increasingly geriatric.

The reforms implemented with the creation of the MVD was bearing fruit. Soviet leader began dying of natural causes. Brezhnev's death was just the latest in recent years. This is not to suggest that the Paradox of the Proletariat was not operative in Brezhnev's day, but the Proletariat had abandoned cloak and dagger tactics for the more legalistic approach followed by the MVD.

Nobody saw Brezhnev's death coming and, for that reason, nobody was then plotting to assume control of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.

Chernenko just had seniority. Chernenko had also been in declining health for years. Nobody within the Politburo believed Chernenko was long for this world when he assumed power after Brezhnev's death. Indeed, nobody outside the Soviet Union believed Chernenko was long for this world when he assumed power on Brezhnev's death.

Chernenko was literally too busy trying to take his next breath to plan anything resembling a future for his Dictatorship. Chernenko had been gravely ill even before becoming General Secretary. By late 1984 he suffered from **severe emphysema, chronic bronchitis, congestive heart failure, advanced arteriosclerosis, kidney problems,** and debilitating weakness that left him unable to walk without assistance

Chernenko frequently appeared pale, breathless, and barely able to speak during public events. His speeches were often pre-recorded, because he could not stand long enough to deliver them live. Western observers at the time described him as "terminally ill while in office," and Soviet insiders later confirmed that he spent most of his tenure in a hospital bed.

Chernenko was simply a Brezhnev loyalist who stood in for Brezhnev after his unexpected passing. If anything, the Politburo agreed to replace Brezhnev with Chernenko precisely because he represented a threat to none of the others.

Chernenko's short tenure was characterized by continuity with Brezhnev's policies and a general decline in state capacity. Repression continued in routine forms but, ultimately, the only one Chernenko purged was himself.

On the night of 9–10 March 1985, Chernenko's condition worsened sharply. He died of respiratory and cardiac failure, the official cause listed in the Soviet announcement the next day.

Chernenko's death was long expected. Chernenko is the only case I am aware of where the Politburo had already begun quietly preparing for natural succession.

At this stage in Russian history, the number of souls who would rather Anastasia had attended her debutante ball reaches into the millions. All of this death and misery was because a clique of the intelligentsia became convinced they had evolved into the next best thing in human evolution.

But then, a dim ray of hope appeared on the horizon. His name was Michael Gorbachev.

Gorbachev's Purges

Michael Gorbachev was the first indication change may be possible in the Soviet leadership. By all the known rules, and under all the existing ideological biases, Michael Gorbachev should never have risen through the ranks of the Communist Party.

Mikhail Gorbachev was born on 2 March 1931 in Privolnoye, a small farming village in Stavropol Krai. His family were collective-farm peasants, and his childhood was shaped by rural poverty, wartime hardship, and the Stalinist agricultural system. Because of his birth year, Gorbachev was six years old when Stalin's Great Terror peaked, sixteen when the war ended, and far too young to have any connection to the original Bolshevik leadership. He was born four years after Lenin died.

More importantly, according to the Chekists in Stalin's regime, Gorbachev family were "Kulaks".

Gorbachev had no role whatsoever in the original Bolshevik leadership, no involvement in the Civil War, no participation in early Party factionalism, and no personal

connection to Lenin's generation. He belonged entirely to the post-revolutionary, Stalin-era cohort, and even then, he entered politics only after Stalin's death.

Gorbachev was truly a generation of socialists aloof of the Proletarians affecting its Dictatorship. But he was a socialist, nonetheless. Nor did Gorbachev ever disavow Marx or socialism, even after being granted asylum in the United States following his deposal.

Gorbachev joined the Komsomol (think Hitler Youth) in his teens and the Communist Party in 1952, during the late Stalin period. His rise was shaped not by revolutionary credentials but by education and administrative competence. He studied law at Moscow State University, where he was exposed to a more cosmopolitan intellectual environment than most Soviet officials of his generation. After graduating, he returned to Stavropol and advanced through regional Party structures, becoming First Secretary of the Stavropol regional Party committee in 1970.

Gorbachev's ascent to national leadership began in the late 1970s, when he was brought into the Politburo and became a protégé of Yuri Andropov. Gorbachev was a tool of Andropov, a proxy. Gorbachev earned a reputation with Andropov as a party loyalist with energy, intelligence, and administrative skills distinguishing him from the aging Brezhnev-era elite.

When Chernenko died in 1985, Gorbachev – by then 54 - became the youngest General Secretary since Stalin. Gorbachev's tenure marked the first evidence of a long-anticipated shift in Soviet leadership. The Old guard had officially passed the torch to the first generation with no direct experience with the Soviet Union's brazenly Chekist past.

Don't mistake me for suggesting that Chekist sentiments and ambitions no longer existed in the Soviet Union. Gorbachev's generation was just the first to conform their public and private conduct to the legalistic motif of the MVD era. In other words, there was no resonant precedent among the leadership cadre for extrajudicial violence.

This is what qualified as "progress" under the Dictatorship of Gorbachev's day.

As leader (1985–1991), Gorbachev launched perestroika (economic restructuring) and glasnost (political openness), dismantled much of the Soviet censorship and repression apparatus, and oversaw the end of the Cold War. Ironically, or perhaps it was

predictably, the reforms introduced by Gorbachev accelerated the collapse of the Soviet system, culminating in the dissolution of the USSR in December 1991.

Gorbachev's reforms were no meager "purge", the elimination of rival's within the security apparatus. Gorbachev's reforms who wholesale purges of the Khruschev generation of apparatchiks.

Gorbachev's purge was expressed as Perestroika, the economic purge, and Glasnost, ideological purge. Everything Gorbachev proposed was couched in the vernacular of Socialism, as all proposals were, but at their heart was the wholesale dismantling of the Od Guard.

Had Gorbachev proposed, much less attempted such reforms prior to 1946, he would have been summarily executed. Gorbachev was, himself, aware of the risks he was assuming, so staged his purges in three distinct phases, the Initial Phase, the economic Phase and the Ideological Phase. Each corresponds to a one-year period. 1985-86, 1986-87 and 1987-88 Phase.

To put this in context with the author's life, I was a Soviet Studies major at the University of California, preparing to take the Foreign Service Exam when Gorbachev went into motion. I felt very much like I was in the right place at the right time.

Official start: 1985 - Begins anti-alcohol campaign, personnel reshuffling, and early attempts at economic discipline. No major legal reforms yet, but the *program* is officially underway.

First reforms: 1986 - First concrete economic liberalization. The Law on Individual Labor Activity legalizes small private work. Glasnost begins to expand.

Major reforms: 1987 - Structural reforms. The Law on State Enterprises decentralizes factory management. The Joint Venture Law allows foreign investment.

In 1988 all reforms had been implemented. Full economic liberalization begins. The Cooperative Law legalizes private businesses. This is the moment perestroika becomes a true economic revolution.

1985 Perestroika Begins

While perestroika officially began in *1985*, the year Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary, you should not be impressed. 1985 is just the year the term *perestroika* ("restructuring") first appeared in his speeches, the year he announced the need to overhaul the Soviet economic system, and the year the initial reforms—limited at first—were launched.

If past was in fact prelude, as it has ever and always been, Gorbachev was merely couching his purges in the stoic, antiseptic vernacular of the MVD period. In hyper-bureaucratic tones Michael Gorbachev painted the institutional boundaries in the broadest of brush strokes.

Gorbachev's roughhewn outline was immediately followed by "personnel shuffling".

Personnel "Reshuffling"

Gorbachev's purges began with "personnel reshuffling". The personnel reshuffling was not a peripheral or symbolic gesture. It was the first substantive expression of perestroika, undertaken before any major economic legislation had been drafted and before glasnost had begun to reshape public discourse.

Gorbachev, like every Soviet leader before him began his Dictatorship in the same way; by removing anyone in a position to stop him. Gorbachev just took that existential impulse to an unprecedented scale.

In the Soviet system, power flowed through the Party apparatus, and the Party apparatus was controlled by the people who staffed it. To change policy, Gorbachev first had to change the people. Soviet records, Party congress proceedings, and internal memoranda from 1985–1986 all acknowledge that the initial phase of perestroika was, above all, a campaign to reorganize the leadership corps of the Communist Party and the state.

The first decisive moment came at the April 1985 Central Committee plenum, only weeks after Gorbachev's election as General Secretary. The plenum's resolutions, published in *Pravda* and preserved in Party archives, openly criticized "shortcomings in work with the cadres" and called for "renewal" and "rotation" of personnel.

This language was not rhetorical. It signaled the beginning of a systematic effort to dismantle the Brezhnev-era gerontocracy. The plenum authorized a broad reshuffling of senior officials, and Gorbachev used that authority immediately.

One of the most consequential moves, completed a few months later, was the reassignment of Andrei Gromyko from his powerful position as Foreign Minister and full Politburo member to the largely ceremonial post of Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet.

Soviet records describe this as a "promotion," but everyone understood it as a method of removing a conservative heavyweight from the center of policymaking without provoking open conflict. This technique—formal elevation, practical sidelining—became a hallmark of Gorbachev's early cadre strategy.

Gorbachev promoted the most powerful "Chekists" out of harm's way. Gorbachev was actually quite brilliant. There was no need to execute a rival when all you had to do was promote him to a useless, ceremonial post, and applaud his every step out the door.

The Politburo and Secretariat, the two bodies that directed Party policy, were the next targets. When Gorbachev took office, the Politburo was dominated by figures who had risen under Brezhnev and who were deeply invested in the status quo.

Within a year, a full third of its members were new.

Soviet documentation from the 27th Party Congress in early 1986 shows that Gorbachev promoted younger and more dynamic officials such as Lev Zaykov and Nikolai Slyunkov, while bringing Boris Yeltsin into national prominence by appointing him First Secretary of the Moscow City Party Committee, and later a candidate member of the Politburo.

The terms "younger and more dynamic" is subtext for unconnected and, therefore, safe.

The Secretariat, which controlled the Party apparatus and the nomenklatura system, was reshaped even more dramatically. Gorbachev knew, if he could not control the acceptable vernacular of the state, he could not control the state. Toward this end, Gorbachev installed Alexander Yakovlev, his closest ideological ally, as a Party secretary responsible for propaganda and ideology.

Yakolev would re-write the bureaucratic bible, as it were, then ensure every pew in the MVD cathedral was singing by the new hymnal.

Next, Gorbachev brought Anatoly Dobrynin, long the Soviet ambassador in Washington, into the Secretariat because of his foreign-policy expertise. Perestroika and Glasnost were intended for both internal consumption and external consumption, and Gorbachev's envisioned economic reforms required breaking down all barriers to exports to the west. Dobrynin was elevated precisely to sell Perestroika to those most likely to derail his planned economic reforms: The United States.

In the United States, perestroika and Glasnost were an easy sell. It mattered not one wit to the Reagan Administration if Perestroika and Glasnost were legitimate reforms of just the latest episode in "Operation Trust". The scope of Gorbachev's "personnel reshuffling" would have irreversible consequences on the Soviet Apparatchiks, and take a generation to reverse, if reversal was possible at all.

"Trust but Verify" became the watchword in Washington, D.C.

Back in Moscow, other new secretaries, including Aleksandra Biryukova and Vadim Medvedev, were chosen for their administrative competence and willingness to support reform. These changes gave Gorbachev control over the machinery that appointed officials throughout the country, allowing him to push reform downward through the Party hierarchy.

Vadim Medvedev, not to be confused with Dmitri Medvedev of Putin's regime, became a Secretary of the CPSU Secretariat on 6 March 1986, less than a year after Gorbachev became General Secretary. This made him one of the small handful of officials who controlled the Party's central administrative machinery. Soviet records and later analyses confirm that Medvedev's appointment was part of Gorbachev's deliberate effort to rebuild the Secretariat with younger, more professionally trained, and more reform-minded figures, replacing Brezhnev-era conservatives.

Medvedev's background explains why Gorbachev elevated him. Before joining the Secretariat, he had served as Deputy Head of the Central Committee's Propaganda Department, Rector of the Academy of Social Sciences, and later Head of the Science and Education Department.

These positions placed Medvedev at the intersection of ideology, education, and Party training—areas Gorbachev considered essential for reshaping the Soviet system. Soviet

sources emphasize that Medvedev had been supporting Gorbachev's emerging reform line since 1983, even before Gorbachev reached the top.

Gorbachev required a solid ally to wield the Sword of Damocles. Medvedev functioned for Gorbachev in the same capacity as Dzerzhinsky did for Lenin and Beria did for Stalin. Medvedev was a headhunter. Medvedev chopped the bureaucratic heads off at the bureaucratic shoulders of anyone whose loyalties were not in line with Gorbachev, then replaced them with Gorbachev loyalists, or complete nobodies.

After Medvedev was in place, Gorbachev really went to work.

The Central Committee apparatus itself - the network of departments that supervised industry, agriculture, ideology, defense, and other sectors - underwent even more sweeping change. Soviet records indicate that by late 1986, roughly ninety percent of department heads had been replaced. Out of twenty-one departments, all but two saw new leadership, and several were reorganized or temporarily left without directors.

This turnover was unprecedented in its scale.
The Central Committee departments were the "machine room" of the Soviet system, responsible for drafting plans, monitoring ministries, and enforcing Party directives. By replacing almost all of their leaders, Gorbachev effectively rewired the administrative core of the state.

Chekists were summarily dismissed, and lauded as they went out the door, before the even had a glimpse of the reforms to come. None would object to what Gorbachev eventually implemented because no one remained to object.

The republics and regions - the backbone of the Party's territorial organization - were also transformed. Archival data and contemporary Soviet reporting show that nearly half of the regional first secretaries (the powerful obkom bosses) were replaced during the early perestroika period.

In some republics, turnover was modest; in others, it was dramatic.

Uzbekistan, long plagued by corruption scandals, saw seventy-four percent of its republican Central Committee leadership replaced. Lithuania saw twenty-seven percent turnover. Across the USSR, about a quarter of local Party organization chairmen were newly elected. And every one of those new party chairmen knew who they had to thank for their sudden elevation in status: Gorbachev.

Gorbachev was pre-emptively retooling the deliberative bodies at all levels of government before commencing with his “legislative agenda”. By this time it had become unfashionable to issue decrees, as most Soviet leaders had in the past. The patina of legitimacy “legislation” had among western counter parts alone justified the shift in tenor at the Kremlin, but there isn’t a legal scholar in the west who regarded Soviet “legislation” as products of a democratic process, much less egalitarian government.

All these “personnel changes” broke entrenched patronage networks and weakened the Brezhnev-era power blocs that had resisted reform. Brezhnev Chekists were still around, they were just limited to more informal colloquia composed of pensioners. The Old guard had effectively been put out to pasture before the true reforms began.

Gorbachev’s Phase 1 reforms brought younger officials into leadership positions, many of whom were more willing to experiment with new administrative methods and economic policies. This younger generation had not been sipping the Kool-Aid. The Council of Ministers, the formal government of the USSR, was reshaped by the new blood.

Soviet records from 1985–1986 show a high rate of turnover among ministers and deputy ministers. The most important change was the appointment of Nikolai Ryzhkov as Chairman of the Council of Ministers, effectively the Soviet prime minister. Ryzhkov was a technocrat with a reputation for competence and a willingness to support enterprise reform.

Ryshkov’s appointment signaled Gorbachev’s intention to align the government with the new direction of Party policy. Medvedev filled the seats. Ryshkov was installed to make sure everyone stayed in them.

Throughout this period, official Soviet rhetoric acknowledged the scale and purpose of these reforms. Party resolutions spoke of correcting “distortions of personnel policy,” overcoming “stagnation,” and renewing the leadership corps.

Gorbachev knew precisely what he was doing. He realized the Old Guard had so thoroughly conditioned state officials to dance to the tune called from above, substantive, opinionated opposition was unlikely anywhere but closest to the top. Gorbachev knew the apparatchiki would smile, genuflect and comply, while converting all their Blat to personal gain through the back door.

Gorbachev's economic reforms were designed to exploit and, eventually, shut that back door. What he could not have anticipated, they would also enable the rise of the Oligarchs that came to power during Boris Yeltsin's tenure at the top.

Gorbachev himself repeatedly emphasized that perestroika required "new people" with "new thinking." What he meant, was apparatchiki without political patrons with an axe to grind.

The Soviet press, still tightly controlled in 1985, reported these changes as part of a broader campaign to improve discipline, efficiency, and professionalism within the Party and state. Pravda delivered Gorbachev's message in clarion, Socialists tones. Precisely as Lenin intended.

Gorbachev succeeded in weakening the old guard, strengthening reformist elements, and gaining control over the apparatus that would later implement economic and political reforms.

Yet this success came at a cost. By removing entrenched elites, Gorbachev provoked resistance and created enemies.
By disrupting long-standing patronage networks, he destabilized the informal mechanisms that had kept the Soviet system functioning. And by promoting younger, more independent officials, he inadvertently empowered figures - most notably Boris Yeltsin - who would later challenge the very authority of the Party itself.

I remain convinced Gorbachev recognized and accepted these risks. As for the disruption of patronage networks, he anticipated it would be these networks who would be the first to embrace the opening of markets. Gorbachev was no fool. He knew all patronage networks functioned to secure individual, economic interests.

Allowing the old guard to openly grow in a direction which was, until then, criminal, would not only absolve them of the "sin" of personal enterprise, but incentivize their energies in that direction. Where they succeeded, Gorbachev would be credited. Where they failed, Gorbachev would remain aloof.

The distribution of risk is something Gorbachev understood as the implicit strength of free enterprise. Granted, Gorbachev was not proposing anything we'd recognize as free enterprise today, but it was a dramatic departure from what the Soviet system had in place.

Gorbachev realized, by allowing personal enterprise for a range of commodity goods and services, the Blat of aspiring entrepreneurs would be leveraged to produce more goods and services even in state owned enterprises. A quota imposed by a Minister from above only translated to more working hours. But orders coming in through the backdoor translated to new opportunities and more wealth.

Once personal enterprise was permitted, Gorbachev next to implement his "Co-operative Revolution".

But first Gorbachev had to get rid of the drunks.

Prohibition

Gorbachev's Anti-Alcohol Campaign—often called his "Prohibition" in popular memory—was one of the earliest, most ambitious, and ultimately most damaging initiatives of the perestroika era.

It began in May 1985, just weeks after he became General Secretary, and it was intended to address a genuine crisis: Soviet alcohol consumption had reached catastrophic levels.

Life expectancy for men was falling, workplace absenteeism was rampant, and entire industries were crippled by chronic drunkenness. Gorbachev believed that no economic reform could succeed unless the workforce was sober enough to implement it.

What followed was a sweeping, coercive, and deeply disruptive national campaign whose practical measures reshaped daily life—and whose unintended consequences eroded public support for Gorbachev at the very moment he needed legitimacy to carry out perestroika.

By the early 1980s, alcohol consumption in the USSR was among the highest in the world. Vodka was cheap, ubiquitous, and woven into the fabric of Soviet social life. The state relied heavily on alcohol sales for revenue, but the social costs were staggering: rising mortality, collapsing productivity, and widespread alcoholism.

Gorbachev saw the crisis as a moral and economic emergency. His solution was not incremental reform but a frontal assault on Soviet drinking culture. The first and most dramatic step was a massive reduction in alcohol output. Vodka production was cut by nearly half. Wine and beer production fell sharply. Entire vineyards—especially in Moldova and Georgia—were bulldozed under orders from Moscow.

Anecdote: In Moldova, farmers watched in disbelief as tractors tore up vineyards that had been tended for generations. One vintner recalled, “They destroyed our vines as if they were enemies of the state.” The destruction was not symbolic; it was literal, and it devastated local economies.

Thousands of liquor stores were shuttered. Those that remained were allowed to sell alcohol only during narrow windows—often two or three hours in the late afternoon.

Anecdote: In a Siberian town, residents lined up outside the only remaining liquor store long before it opened. The queue became a daily ritual. One man joked, “We wait for vodka the way we used to wait for bread.”

Alcohol prices were raised sharply to discourage consumption. Vodka became expensive relative to wages, and cheap wine—long a staple of working-class life—became unaffordable. In won popular anecdote, a factory worker in Leningrad complained that vodka now cost more than a day’s pay. “They want us sober,” he said, “but they also want us miserable.”

Police were ordered to enforce sobriety in public spaces. Drinking in parks, streets, and workplaces was punished with fines or detention. Factories introduced breathalyzer tests, and managers were held responsible for employee sobriety. In another anecdote, at a construction site in Moscow, foremen began conducting “smell checks” each morning. Workers joked that cologne had become essential protective equipment.

The state next launched a massive propaganda campaign promoting sobriety.

Posters, films, lectures, and youth events encouraged “sober weddings,” “sober holidays,” and “sober families.” One iconic poster showed a man pushing away a vodka bottle with the caption: “No!” It became one of the most recognizable images of the era. One can’t help but wonder if this campaign was not borrowed directly from Nancy Reagen’s “Just say no!” campaign.

The government attempted to replace alcohol with mineral water, soft drinks, juices, and dairy beverages. Factories were ordered to increase production, but shortages of bottles, sugar, and refrigeration meant supply rarely met demand. There are, of course, no official records of how much product was slipping out the back door.

In Gorbachev’s Prohibition campaign we witness the first fruits of his economic reforms.

The most dramatic unintended consequence was the rise of illegal home-distilled alcohol. Samogon production skyrocketed. Sugar became scarce because it was

diverted to moonshine stills. Black-market alcohol proliferated, often dangerously contaminated.

Anecdote: Police in rural Russia reported finding entire barns converted into distilleries. One officer said, “We shut down one still and three more appear. It’s like fighting mushrooms after rain.”

Alcohol sales had been a major source of government income. The campaign cost the state tens of billions of rubles. Budget deficits worsened, and the government had less money to import consumer goods, worsening shortages and fueling public frustration.

Short-Term Successes were represented in the statistics kept by the state. Alcohol consumption dropped sharply in 1985–1986. Life expectancy briefly rose. Public drunkenness declined. Workplace discipline improved. These gains were real, measurable, and widely acknowledged.

But moonshine production soared, alcohol poisoning increased, sugar shortages became chronic, and, of course, the black market flourished.

State revenues collapsed and public resentment intensified.

The campaign became a symbol of intrusive, moralizing governance. It disrupted daily life, damaged “official” economies, and created new shortages in a system already plagued by scarcity.

By 1988, the campaign was quietly abandoned, though never formally repealed. By 1988 Gorbachev had bigger fish to fry. All of his reforms had been set in motion. From 1988 forward he merely intended to make them work.

1986 – Individual Labor Activity

The Law on Individual Labor Activity, adopted on 19 November 1986 and entering into force on 1 May 1987, was one of the earliest and most symbolically important economic reforms of Gorbachev’s perestroika. It marked the first time since the 1920s that the Soviet state formally legalized private, small-scale economic activity.

The law did not create capitalism, nor did it authorize private firms in the Western sense. Instead, it cautiously opened a narrow space within the command economy where Soviet citizens could work for themselves, produce goods, and offer services outside the state sector. Its purpose, context, implementation, and consequences reveal much about the contradictions of perestroika itself.

The law's intended purpose was straightforward: the Soviet economy of the mid-1980s was suffering from chronic shortages of consumer goods and services. Shelves were empty, queues were long, and basic items such as clothing, shoes, household tools, and simple repairs were difficult to obtain. Central planning had failed to match production with demand, and the state could no longer meet the everyday needs of the population. T

he leadership hoped that by legalizing individual labor—tailoring, carpentry, repairs, tutoring, hairdressing, taxi driving, and similar small-scale services—it could tap into personal initiative and supplement the failing consumer-goods sector without abandoning socialist principles. The law emphasized "individual labor" rather than hired work, reflecting the ideological need to preserve the appearance of socialist ownership while allowing limited private activity.

The economic context was dire. By the mid-1980s, the Soviet Union faced a deepening crisis in consumer provisioning. Chronic shortages of foodstuffs, textiles, clothing, and household goods were widespread, and rationing was increasingly common. Black markets flourished, and informal, semi-legal "family teams" had already begun operating in places like Estonia as early as 1983, producing simple goods and services outside official channels.

These experiments demonstrated both the demand for private initiative and the inadequacy of the state's ability to meet consumer needs. The law was therefore both a response to economic necessity and an ideological compromise: it allowed private activity, but only within tightly defined limits, and only as a supplement to the planned economy rather than a challenge to it.

Implementation of the law was bureaucratic and cautious. Citizens wishing to engage in individual labor had to obtain permission from the local soviet's executive committee. After approval, they received either a "patent"—a fixed fee paid in advance—or a permit that subjected them to taxation. The law permitted adults to engage in individual labor in their free time and allowed family members to assist, but it strictly prohibited the hiring of non-family labor.

Activities such as weapons production, narcotics, and certain forms of scientific or technical work were explicitly forbidden, and the list of prohibited activities could be expanded by republican governments. The maximum tax rate for individual laborers could reach 65 percent of income, reflecting the state's desire to regulate and limit private profit.

Anecdotes from the period illustrate both the enthusiasm and the obstacles that accompanied the law's implementation. In many cities, queues formed outside local soviets as citizens sought permission to operate small repair shops or tailoring services. A pensioner in Leningrad reportedly waited three days to obtain a permit to offer shoe-repair services, explaining to a journalist that "people need shoes, and the shops have none."

In rural areas, individuals began offering private taxi services using their personal cars, often becoming local celebrities for providing a service the state had failed to deliver. Yet obstacles were formidable. Many new entrepreneurs struggled to obtain supplies, tools, or workspace. Some faced hostility from local officials who viewed private initiative as ideologically suspect. Others encountered resentment from state enterprises, which accused individual laborers of unfair competition. Despite these challenges, the number of individual laborers grew steadily, and the Soviet press began reporting on successful small enterprises in fields such as recycling, catering, and transport.

The law's outcomes were mixed. On one hand, it undeniably expanded the availability of consumer goods and services. Individual laborers and early cooperators demonstrated remarkable creativity and perseverance, often outperforming state enterprises in quality and responsiveness. They tapped into what one scholar called "the most productive labor resources of the Soviet Union."

On the other hand, the law's limitations—especially the prohibition on hired labor and the heavy taxation—prevented individual labor from scaling into a true private sector. Many issues remained unresolved, including high prices, conflicts with state enterprises, and administrative resistance. The law also inadvertently paved the way for more radical reforms: once citizens experienced the benefits of private initiative, pressure grew for broader liberalization, culminating in the far more transformative Cooperative Law of 1988.

In the end, the Law on Individual Labor Activity was both a beginning and a boundary. It marked the first crack in the edifice of the Soviet command economy, allowing citizens to legally do what many had already been doing informally. It provided relief in some sectors and demonstrated the potential of private initiative. But it also revealed the contradictions of perestroika: the leadership wanted dynamism without markets, initiative without capitalism, and flexibility without relinquishing control.

The law succeeded in showing that Soviet citizens were eager and able to work independently, but it failed to create a sustainable framework for private economic

activity. Its legacy is therefore one of cautious experimentation—an early step toward economic liberalization that ultimately could not resolve the deeper structural problems of the Soviet system.

1987 – State Enterprises

The 1987 Law on State Enterprises was one of the most ambitious and consequential pieces of legislation enacted during Gorbachev's perestroika. It was intended to transform the Soviet enterprise from a passive executor of ministerial commands into an autonomous economic actor capable of making decisions, responding to demand, and operating with a degree of financial responsibility.

In practice, it exposed the deep contradictions of the Soviet system, generated intense public debate, and ultimately failed to achieve its goals. Its story is a window into the larger drama of perestroika: bold intentions, contradictory design, and chaotic implementation.

The law emerged from a long-standing recognition that the Soviet economy was stagnating. By the mid-1980s, central planning had become rigid, unresponsive, and incapable of coordinating production across thousands of enterprises. Chronic shortages, declining productivity, and widespread inefficiency plagued the system.

Reformist economists had been arguing since the late Brezhnev era that enterprises needed more autonomy—more control over their finances, more flexibility in production, and more ability to engage in direct wholesale trade rather than relying on ministerial directives. When Gorbachev came to power, these ideas finally gained political traction.

The Law on State Enterprises was drafted as a response to these structural problems, promising to decentralize decision-making and empower labor collectives.

The drafting process itself reflected the contradictions of perestroika. Although Gorbachev announced publicly in 1986 that the law was being prepared, the actual drafting occurred behind closed doors, following traditional Soviet legislative practice. Only in February 1987 was the draft published for public discussion. At that point, the basic structure of the law was already fixed, and the public debate—though unusually lively—could only influence details rather than fundamentals.

Soviet newspapers published letters from workers, managers, and academics, many of whom pointed out inconsistencies in the law's provisions. The most contentious issue was the relationship between "one-man management," the traditional Soviet principle that the enterprise director held ultimate authority, and the new provisions granting labor collectives the right to elect directors and participate directly in key decisions. Commentators noted that the law seemed to promise both managerial authority and democratic participation, without explaining how these competing principles would coexist.

When the Supreme Soviet adopted the law in July 1987, it represented the most radical attempt in Soviet history to reform the centrally planned system. The law granted enterprises the right to compile their own plans, choose suppliers, engage in direct wholesale trade, and retain profits. They were expected to finance their own activities rather than rely on ministerial subsidies. The center was supposed to guide the economy through "economic levers" such as prices, taxes, and credit rather than through detailed commands. In theory, this would create a quasi-market environment within socialism, allowing enterprises to respond to demand while preserving state ownership.

Implementation, however, quickly revealed the law's contradictions. Ministries and planning agencies, accustomed to controlling enterprises, resisted relinquishing authority. They continued issuing directives, often in conflict with the new legal provisions. Enterprises found themselves caught between old commands and new freedoms. One anecdote from a tractor factory in Chelyabinsk illustrates the chaos.

After the law took effect, the factory director announced that the plant would stop producing an obsolete model assigned by the ministry and instead shift to a more modern design that customers actually wanted. But the suppliers of parts—still operating under their own ministerial plans—refused to cooperate. The factory ended up with half-assembled tractors, idle workers, and a budget deficit. The director later remarked that "we were told to swim, but the water was drained from the pool."

Another anecdote comes from a furniture factory in Leningrad. Empowered to set its own wholesale prices, the factory raised the cost of its wardrobes to reflect rising input costs. But state retail stores, still bound by fixed retail margins, refused to buy them. The wardrobes piled up in the factory yard, exposed to rain and snow. Workers joked bitterly that the only people who could afford them were the factory's own managers, who bought them at cost and resold them privately.

These stories were not isolated. Across the country, enterprises attempted to exercise their new autonomy but found themselves constrained by unreformed supply chains, rigid pricing systems, and ministries unwilling to adapt. The law had been adopted "in isolation," as one major study later put it, without corresponding reforms in planning, pricing, or ministerial authority. The result was confusion, conflict, and paralysis.

By 1988 and 1989, it was clear that the law had failed to achieve its intended purpose. Enterprises did not become efficient, self-financing units. Instead, they became battlegrounds between managers, labor collectives, ministries, and local authorities.

The contradictions of the law discredited the very idea of reforming central planning. As one Oxford study concluded, the failure of the law contributed directly to the radicalization of political and economic reform, convincing many that the planned economy was unreformable and accelerating the shift toward market mechanisms.

In the end, the 1987 Law on State Enterprises stands as a symbol of perestroika's ambitions and its limitations. It attempted to graft autonomy onto a system built on command, to empower workers without weakening managerial authority, and to decentralize decision-making without dismantling the ministries that depended on central control. It generated hope, debate, and experimentation, but it also produced confusion, inefficiency, and disillusionment.

Its failure was not merely administrative; it was conceptual. The law tried to reform a system that could not be reformed without being fundamentally transformed. And in that sense, it helped push the Soviet Union toward the far more radical—and ultimately destabilizing—changes that followed.

1988 - Cooperatives

The **1988 Law on Cooperatives** was the most radical economic reform enacted during Gorbachev's perestroika. More than any other single measure, it introduced genuine market dynamics into the Soviet economy and allowed citizens, for the first time since the 1920s, to form enterprises that operated outside the command-administrative system. Its passage marked a turning point: the moment when perestroika ceased to be a cautious attempt to "improve socialism" and became a transformative force that destabilized the foundations of the Soviet economic order.

The law was adopted by the Supreme Soviet on May 26, 1988, and took effect on June 1. Its intended purpose was to counteract the deepening stagnation of the Soviet

economy. By the mid-1980s, the USSR was suffering from chronic shortages, declining productivity, and a consumer-goods crisis so severe that even basic items were unavailable in state stores.

Earlier reforms—such as the 1986 Law on Individual Labor Activity and the 1987 Law on State Enterprises—had attempted to inject autonomy and initiative into the system, but they were constrained by ideological limits and bureaucratic resistance.

The Cooperative Law was designed to go further. It legalized what were, in effect, **private companies**, though they were described as "socialist cooperatives" to preserve ideological continuity. These cooperatives could own productive property, open bank accounts, hire employees, set prices, conduct foreign trade under license, and distribute income according to labor or share contributions. In short, they were profit-seeking enterprises operating within a socialist legal framework.

The economic context that made this law necessary was dire. The Soviet economy had entered a period of pronounced stagnation during the Brezhnev era, with growth rates falling sharply from the mid-1970s onward. State enterprises were unable to meet consumer demand, and the rigid planning system prevented innovation.

The leadership hoped that cooperatives would fill the gaps left by the state sector, especially in consumer goods, services, and small-scale manufacturing. They also hoped that cooperatives would demonstrate the advantages of self-management and competition, thereby revitalizing socialism rather than undermining it. The law's preamble, published in *Pravda*, emphasized that cooperatives were intended to "augment social wealth," "saturate the market with high-quality goods," and "make fuller use of the potential and advantages of socialism."

Implementation of the law was rapid and enthusiastic. Citizens needed only to gather three members aged sixteen or older, draft a charter, and register with local authorities. Once registered, cooperatives enjoyed unprecedented freedoms. They could set their own production plans, negotiate directly with suppliers, and sell goods at market prices. They could even engage in foreign trade without relying on state foreign-trade organizations, a dramatic departure from Soviet practice.
Anecdotes from the period illustrate both the excitement and the chaos that accompanied the law's implementation. In Moscow, one of the first cooperatives opened a small café near Gorky Street. It offered food unavailable in state restaurants, charged prices far above official norms, and paid its employees several times the average wage.

Crowds lined up outside not only for the food but to witness something that had been illegal for sixty years: a business responding to demand rather than a plan. Customers reportedly asked the owner, half-joking and half-serious, “Are you sure this is allowed?”

In Leningrad, a cooperative specializing in computer repair became so successful that it earned more in a month than a state electronics factory earned in a quarter. Its founders - three young engineers - told a reporter that they had simply “stopped waiting for the ministry to fix things and decided to fix them ourselves.”

But the law also produced darker anecdotes.

In some cities, cooperatives became fronts for criminal groups that used their legal status to engage in speculation, smuggling, and protection rackets. In Odessa, a cooperative nominally registered as a “youth cultural association” was discovered to be importing Western electronics and reselling them at enormous profit. Local officials complained that they had “created capitalism without creating the rules for capitalism.”

That was not far from the truth. What the Soviets under Gorbachev’s Perestroika were creating was “Kapitalism”, the dystopic version of reality that Marx had defined in Sad Kapital. By 1989 the Russian people had been thoroughly indoctrinated, and concluded that Marx’s “kapitalism” was what Gorbachev made legal.

Despite these maladjusted attitudes about private enterprise, the outcomes of the Cooperative Law were dramatic. Cooperative numbers grew from a few thousand, to tens of thousands within a year. They produced substantial output, especially in consumer goods and services, and quickly became one of the most dynamic sectors of the Soviet economy. But their success also generated resentment.

Cooperative members earned far more than state employees, creating visible inequality in a society accustomed to narrow wage differentials. Prices charged by cooperatives were often high, fueling accusations of profiteering. Clearly not all Russians understood ‘capitalism” is, by definition, “profiteering’.
Predictably, hardliners denounced cooperatives as “Trojan horses of capitalism,” while ordinary citizens complained that cooperatives were buying up scarce materials from state suppliers, worsening shortages.

The state attempted to regulate cooperatives through high taxes and restrictions, but these measures were inconsistent and often counterproductive. Initially, cooperatives

faced extremely high tax rates and limited access to materials, but these restrictions were later eased as the government realized these restrictions were stifling growth. The law was revised several times, reflecting the tension between ideological caution and economic necessity.

In the end, the Cooperative Law played a paradoxical role. It succeeded in unleashing entrepreneurial energy and demonstrated the potential of market mechanisms. It created a semi-private sector that produced goods and services the state could not. It also accelerated the erosion of the command economy by revealing its inefficiency and by drawing talent and resources away from state enterprises.

But it also contributed to inflation, inequality, corruption, and the growth of the shadow economy. It highlighted the contradictions of perestroika: the leadership wanted to preserve socialism while introducing market dynamics, but the two systems could not coexist peacefully. The Cooperative Law did not save the Soviet economy; it helped transform it. It was both a triumph of initiative and a catalyst of instability. And in the end, it became one of the clearest signs that the Soviet Union was moving—intentionally or not—toward a post-socialist future.

Price Reforms

Gorbachev's **price reforms** were among the most delicate and destabilizing components of perestroika. Unlike the legalization of cooperatives or the decentralization of enterprise management, price reform struck at the very heart of the Soviet command economy: the system of administratively fixed prices that had governed production, wages, and consumption for decades.

The leadership understood that without changing prices, no other reform could succeed. Yet they also knew that altering prices risked unleashing inflation, public anger, and political instability. The story of these reforms is therefore one of necessity, hesitation, partial implementation, and ultimately failure.

The intended purpose of price reform was straightforward. Soviet prices did not reflect real costs, scarcities, or demand. Industrial wholesale prices were set by ministries, often decades out of date, and bore little relation to production costs. Consumer prices were kept artificially low through massive subsidies, especially for food and housing.

This system created chronic shortages, distorted investment, and made rational economic calculation impossible. Reformers argued that enterprises could not be

autonomous or efficient if prices remained fictitious. Gorbachev's team therefore sought to revise wholesale prices, reduce subsidies, incorporate rents for natural resources, and introduce limited price flexibility—steps that would allow enterprises to respond to market signals even within a socialist framework.

The economic context was grim. By the mid-1980s, the Soviet Union faced stagnation, declining growth, and worsening shortages. The dual-price system—one set of wholesale prices for enterprises and another for industry—had become unmanageable. Turnover taxes masked the true cost of goods, and subsidies consumed enormous portions of the state budget.

Reformers at the Central Economic Mathematical Institute (TsEMI) and other research bodies warned that the price system was collapsing under its own contradictions. Their proposals, published in 1987 and 1988, called for higher wholesale prices for fuels, the introduction of rents for natural resources, and a reduction in agricultural subsidies. These ideas formed the intellectual foundation for Gorbachev's price reform agenda.

Implementation began cautiously. In July 1987, the Soviet government announced a comprehensive revision of industrial wholesale prices, scheduled to take effect on January 1, 1990. This was only the third such revision in twenty years, following earlier adjustments in 1967 and 1982. The new price lists were intended to reflect actual production costs, incorporate payments for natural resources, and reduce reliance on subsidies. But the reforms were partial.

Consumer prices remained largely fixed, and ministries continued to interfere with enterprise pricing decisions. The government feared that raising consumer prices would provoke public outrage, so it attempted to reform wholesale prices while keeping retail prices stable—a contradiction that proved impossible to sustain.

Anecdotes from the period reveal the confusion and unintended consequences of these reforms. In one Leningrad furniture factory, managers attempted to raise wholesale prices to reflect higher input costs. But state retail stores, still bound by fixed consumer prices, refused to purchase the goods. Wardrobes piled up in factory yards, exposed to the elements, because the price system no longer connected producers to sellers. Workers joked that the only people who could afford the wardrobes were the managers themselves, who bought them at cost and resold them privately.

In another case, a machine-building plant attempted to negotiate contract prices with suppliers, only to discover that the suppliers were still following ministerial directives and could not legally adjust their prices. The plant ended up with mismatched

components and idle workers, illustrating how partial price reform created chaos rather than efficiency.

The broader public experienced price reform as a creeping, confusing phenomenon. Although official consumer prices remained fixed, shortages worsened, and cooperatives—allowed to set their own prices—charged far more than state stores. This created visible inequality and fueled resentment. People complained that "perestroika means everything costs more," even though official prices had not yet been liberalized. The perception of inflation, even before true inflation arrived, damaged public trust in the reform program.

By 1989 and 1990, the contradictions of partial price reform had become untenable. Enterprises could not operate autonomously because prices did not reflect real costs. Ministries resisted relinquishing control. Subsidies remained enormous. And the public was increasingly angry about shortages and rising unofficial prices.

The government finally implemented the 1990 wholesale price revision, but by then the economy was already in crisis. The reforms raised costs for enterprises without providing a functioning market to absorb them. Many enterprises became unprofitable overnight, and the state lacked the resources to subsidize them. The result was a wave of quasi-bankruptcies, production stoppages, and further shortages.

In the end, Gorbachev's price reforms failed to achieve their intended purpose. They were too limited to create a functioning market, yet too radical to preserve the stability of the command economy. They exposed the contradictions of perestroika: the leadership wanted enterprises to behave like market actors while prices remained politically controlled.

The reforms destabilized production, worsened shortages, and contributed to public disillusionment. They also convinced many economists and policymakers that the Soviet price system could not be reformed - it had to be replaced. This realization accelerated the shift toward full market liberalization, which ultimately occurred not under Gorbachev but under Yeltsin in 1992, with catastrophic social consequences.

Price reform was therefore both a symptom and a cause of the Soviet collapse. It revealed the impossibility of reconciling market mechanisms with central planning, and it demonstrated that partial reform could be more damaging than no reform at all.

It was one of the clearest signs that the Soviet economic system, once altered, could not be stabilized - it could only be dismantled.

Foreign Investment

Foreign investment reform under Gorbachev was one of the most dramatic and symbolically charged components of perestroika. It represented a break with nearly seventy years of Soviet economic orthodoxy. Since 1917, the USSR had maintained a strict state monopoly on foreign trade and an absolute prohibition on foreign ownership of productive assets.

The **1987 Joint Venture Law**, together with accompanying decrees and subsequent liberalizing measures, dismantled this system in a matter of months. It opened the Soviet economy to foreign capital, foreign management, and foreign technology—changes that were unimaginable only a few years earlier. The story of these reforms reveals both the ambition of perestroika and the deep contradictions that ultimately undermined it.

The intended purpose of foreign investment reform was twofold.

First, the Soviet leadership hoped to modernize the economy by importing Western technology, managerial expertise, and capital. By the mid-1980s, Soviet industry lagged far behind the West in automation, computing, telecommunications, and industrial processes. Productivity was declining, and the technological gap was widening. Reformers believed that joint ventures with Western firms could accelerate modernization and help revive stagnating sectors.

Second, foreign investment was intended to signal to the world that the USSR was changing. Gorbachev's "new thinking" in foreign policy emphasized cooperation, openness, and integration into the global economy. Allowing foreign firms to operate on Soviet soil was meant to demonstrate that the USSR was serious about reform and ready to participate in international economic life on new terms.

The economic context was bleak. The Soviet Union faced declining growth, mounting budget deficits, and a consumer-goods crisis. State enterprises were technologically backward, and the planning system could not adapt to global economic realities. Western firms had long expressed interest in accessing the Soviet market, but the legal environment made cooperation impossible.

As one analysis notes, the USSR had moved “from an absolute ban on any foreign ownership of the means of production, to an embrace of foreign enterprises operating in the Soviet Union”, in less than four years.

The Joint Venture Law of January 1987 was the centerpiece of this transformation. It allowed foreign companies to form joint ventures with Soviet enterprises, hold equity stakes, repatriate profits, and participate in management. For the first time since the 1920s, foreign direct investment became legal in the USSR.

Implementation began even before the law was formally adopted. In May 1985, more than four hundred American businesspeople traveled to Moscow for meetings with Soviet trade officials, signaling the USSR’s new openness to Western cooperation. The following year, Soviet officials met with U.S. business leaders in New York to explore potential partnerships.

Companies such as Monsanto, Occidental Petroleum, and Singer Sewing Machine expressed interest, and Soviet officials announced that a new joint venture law was forthcoming.

When the law was finally enacted, Western firms moved quickly. Joint ventures appeared in sectors ranging from computing and telecommunications to food processing and consumer goods. McDonald’s famously opened in Moscow in 1990, but dozens of lesser-known ventures preceded it, bringing Western management practices and technology into Soviet enterprises.

Anecdotes from the period illustrate both the excitement and the confusion that accompanied these reforms. In one early joint venture, a Western manager remarked that Soviet factories had “excellent engineers and terrible everything else”—a blunt assessment of the mismatch between Soviet technical talent and outdated organizational structures.

In another case, a Western firm attempting to establish a joint venture discovered that local authorities, republican governments, and central ministries all claimed jurisdiction over the project. This phenomenon became known as the “war of laws,” in which competing Soviet institutions enacted contradictory regulations in an attempt to attract or control foreign investment.

As one legal scholar observed, the Soviet legal environment “presented greater uncertainty and risk for foreign investors than any of the other formerly socialist countries,” despite the large number of laws intended to encourage investment.

Foreign investors also encountered conceptual problems. The Soviet Union attempted to maintain traditional doctrines of sovereign immunity even as it invited foreign firms to operate within its borders. Although many Soviet entities waived immunity in practice, the legal framework remained inconsistent, creating anxiety among potential investors.

Property rights were unclear, profit-repatriation rules were unstable, and tax regulations changed frequently. Western firms often found themselves navigating a maze of contradictory decrees, unclear enforcement mechanisms, and bureaucratic resistance.

Despite these challenges, joint ventures proliferated. They brought new technology, new management styles, and new expectations into Soviet enterprises. They also exposed the weaknesses of the Soviet system. Joint ventures often outperformed state enterprises, attracting skilled workers with higher wages and better working conditions.

This created resentment and contributed to growing inequality.

Some joint ventures became embroiled in corruption scandals, as local officials sought bribes or special favors. Others struggled to obtain supplies from state enterprises that were still bound by planning directives. The contradictions between market-oriented joint ventures and the command economy became increasingly visible.

In the end, foreign investment reform did not rescue the Soviet economy. It succeeded in opening the USSR to the world and demonstrated the potential of international cooperation. It brought technology and expertise that the Soviet system desperately needed. But it also revealed the deep structural problems of the Soviet economy and the inability of partial reforms to resolve them.

The legal environment remained unstable, the political system fragmented, and the economic system unable to integrate market mechanisms without collapsing. As one scholar put it, foreign investment reform became “perestroika’s Gordian knot”—a tangle of legal, political, and economic contradictions that could not be untied.

By 1991, the Soviet Union was dissolving, and joint ventures found themselves operating in a rapidly changing and uncertain environment. Some survived and became part of the post-Soviet economy; others collapsed along with the state that had created them.

The foreign investment reforms of perestroika were bold, unprecedented, and transformative, but they were also incomplete and ultimately overwhelmed by the larger forces of Soviet collapse. They remain one of the clearest examples of perestroika's ambition—and of the limits of reform in a system that could not adapt without breaking apart.

Agricultural Liberalization

Agricultural liberalization under Gorbachev was one of the most consequential and revealing components of perestroika. It was an attempt to reform the single most chronically troubled sector of the Soviet economy—one that had been in what scholars called a "permanent crisis" for decades.

Agriculture consumed enormous state resources, suffered from low productivity, and consistently failed to meet consumer demand. Gorbachev, who had himself served as the Central Committee secretary for agriculture before becoming General Secretary, understood that no economic restructuring could succeed unless the rural sector was fundamentally changed. The agricultural reforms of perestroika therefore aimed to increase productivity, introduce incentives, and decentralize decision-making, while still preserving socialist ownership. Their story is one of bold experimentation, deep structural resistance, and ultimately limited success.

The intended purpose of agricultural liberalization was to create genuine incentives for farmworkers and managers. Soviet agriculture had long been dominated by collective and state farms where workers had little personal stake in output. Productivity was low, waste was high, and the system relied heavily on subsidies.

Gorbachev's reforms sought to change this by introducing **contract brigades**—groups of ten to thirty farmworkers who would lease land from a collective or state farm and be paid according to the yield they produced. This was a significant departure from traditional collective farming. The brigades were responsible for their own output, and their income depended directly on their performance.

The idea was to create a quasi-market incentive within the socialist framework, encouraging workers to treat the land as if it were their own. Soviet records describe this as an effort to "increase agricultural labor productivity by forming contract brigades" and to link remuneration to results rather than to plan fulfillment.

The economic context that made these reforms necessary was severe. By the 1980s, the USSR had gone from being self-sufficient in food production to becoming a net importer. Brezhnev's massive agricultural investments—new livestock housing, fertilizers, tractors, and the 1982 Food Program—had failed to solve the underlying inefficiencies.

Output increased, but consumer demand grew faster, and shortages persisted.

The agro-industrial complex (APK), created to coordinate food production and distribution, had become a sprawling bureaucracy. Gorbachev inherited a system that was expensive, inefficient, and politically sensitive. His agricultural reforms were therefore both a response to economic necessity and an attempt to fulfill his political promise to "set the agricultural house in order," a pledge that had been central to his rise to power.

Implementation of agricultural liberalization began with the creation of contract brigades and expanded rapidly. After 1987, the government legalized **family contract brigades** and **long-term leasing of land**, removing restrictions on the size of private agricultural plots and allowing families to manage larger parcels. This was a dramatic shift.

For decades, private plots had been tolerated but tightly limited. Now, families could lease land from collective farms and operate semi-independently. Soviet records note that these reforms "removed the restrictions on the size of private agricultural plots and cut into the state's holdings of arable land".
The reforms were intended to give farmers a vested interest in production, something they had never truly had under collectivization.

Anecdotes from the period illustrate both the promise and the contradictions of these reforms. In one region, a family brigade leased a parcel of land and produced yields far higher than the surrounding collective farm fields. Local newspapers celebrated the achievement, noting that "when people work for themselves, the land responds differently." In another case, a contract brigade in Ukraine produced such a successful harvest that neighboring brigades demanded similar arrangements.

Yet resistance was widespread. Some collective farm directors feared losing control over their workers and land. Others complained that contract brigades were "cherry-picking" the best land, leaving poorer soil to the collective.

In some areas, local officials obstructed leasing arrangements, arguing that they undermined socialist principles. These tensions revealed the deep ideological and administrative contradictions embedded in agricultural liberalization.

The outcomes of the reforms were mixed. In the short term, agricultural output increased in 1986 and 1987, and contract brigades often outperformed collective farm units. Family leasing arrangements proved especially successful, demonstrating that private initiative could dramatically improve productivity. But the reforms failed to address fundamental structural problems.

The state still controlled the prices of agricultural commodities, the distribution of inputs, and investment decisions. Farmers could produce more, but they could not control the prices at which their goods were sold or the supplies they needed to operate. As one analysis notes, “farmers still had no real vested interest in the farms on which they worked, and production suffered accordingly”. The reforms introduced incentives, but not autonomy.

By 1988, Gorbachev attempted to reorganize agricultural administration by merging five ministries and a state committee into the **State Agro-Industrial Committee (Gosagroprom)**. This was meant to streamline management, but it only added another layer of bureaucracy. The agro-industrial complex remained unwieldy, and the reforms did not resolve the contradictions between central planning and local initiative.

Scholars analyzing the period concluded that agricultural liberalization was ambitious but incomplete, and that without comprehensive reform—including price liberalization and genuine property rights—the sector could not be transformed.

In the end, agricultural liberalization under perestroika demonstrated both the potential and the limits of reform within the Soviet system. Contract brigades and family leasing showed that Soviet farmers were capable of high productivity when given incentives.

But the reforms were constrained by ideological caution, administrative resistance, and the persistence of central planning. They improved output temporarily but could not overcome the structural inefficiencies that had plagued Soviet agriculture for decades. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, many of the leasing arrangements became the foundation for post-Soviet private farming.

Yet within the USSR, agricultural liberalization remained a partial and ultimately insufficient attempt to solve a crisis that required far deeper transformation.

Banking and Financial Reforms

Gorbachev's **banking and financial reforms** were among the most transformative—and least understood—elements of perestroika. They did not attract the public attention that cooperatives or glasnost did, yet they fundamentally altered the architecture of the Soviet command economy. For seven decades, Soviet finance had been designed not to allocate capital efficiently but to enforce the plan. Money was not a market signal; it was an administrative tool.

The reforms of 1987–1988 attempted to change that. They sought to create a banking system capable of supporting enterprise autonomy, competition, and quasi-market behavior. Their story reveals both the ambition of perestroika and the structural contradictions that ultimately doomed it.

Under the old system, the Soviet banking sector was essentially an extension of the planning bureaucracy. **Gosbank**, the State Bank, functioned simultaneously as the central bank, the commercial bank for enterprises, and the fiscal agent of the government. Enterprises did not choose banks, negotiate loans, or manage liquidity.

Their deposit accounts were earmarked for specific uses determined by the plan, and Gosbank monitored every transaction. Cash was tightly controlled; enterprises used it only for wage payments, and even then under strict limits. Investment was financed almost entirely through the state budget, not through credit.

Profits were remitted to the state, and shortfalls were automatically covered by Gosbank, which provided unplanned credit to ensure plan fulfillment.
In effect, the banking system existed to enforce production targets, not to evaluate risk or allocate capital.

By the mid-1980s, this system was collapsing under its own contradictions. Enterprises had no incentive to manage costs or invest efficiently. Chronic shortages forced them to hoard inventories rather than money, because inventories were a better store of value in an economy where cash could not be freely used. The credit plan—supposedly the financial counterpart of the production plan—had become a fiction, routinely overridden by emergency loans to failing enterprises.

Reformers argued that enterprise autonomy, introduced in the 1987 Law on State Enterprises, could not function without financial autonomy. If enterprises were to

make their own decisions, they needed banks that could evaluate creditworthiness, provide investment loans, and impose financial discipline.

Without banking reform, perestroika's economic reforms would be hollow. The banking reforms of 1987–1988 attempted to dismantle the monolithic Gosbank system and replace it with a multi-tiered structure. Gosbank was to become a true central bank, responsible for monetary policy rather than enterprise finance. New "specialized banks" were created to handle commercial lending, investment finance, foreign trade, and construction.

These included **Promstroibank** (industrial construction), **Agroprombank** (agriculture), **Zhilsotsbank** (housing and social development), **Vneshekonombank** (foreign economic relations), and others. Enterprises were now expected to work with these specialized banks, negotiate credit, and manage their own financial resources. The reforms also expanded the role of the state Savings Bank, which handled household deposits, though households still had limited financial instruments available.

Implementation was uneven and often chaotic. The new banks inherited staff, procedures, and habits from Gosbank, and many officials struggled to adapt to their new roles. One anecdote from an IMF study describes a factory director who visited his newly assigned specialized bank to negotiate a loan, only to find that the bank's staff had no experience evaluating credit risk.

Staff asked him to provide "the plan indicators," even though the entire purpose of the reform was to move beyond plan-based lending. The director later remarked that "the sign on the building changed, but inside everything stayed the same."

This conservative, bureaucratic reflex to adhere to "plans" illustrates how risk averse Soviet institutions were. Staff who adhered to the plan could never be accused of failure, only the plan's author. By Gorbachev's day plans, where authored by committees, or a series of committees, so no one person's neck was ever stretched beneath the proverbial axe. Of course, prior to Gorbachev, the axe was not proverbial.

By Gorbachev's day, the Blat economy also acted to countermand "plans", for though the co-operatives were indeed "profiteering", the proportion of economic production being skimmed off the top was just as profitable.

Another anecdote comes from a construction enterprise that attempted to obtain investment credit from Promstroibank illustrates the dynamic. The bank demanded detailed documentation on profitability, cost structure, and market demand -

information the enterprise had never been required to produce. When the enterprise could not provide it, the bank refused the loan.

The enterprise then appealed to the local Party committee, which pressured the bank to approve the credit anyway. This episode illustrated the core contradiction of perestroika: the reforms attempted to create financial discipline, but the political system continued to override economic logic.

Until the party apparatus had exhausted it's political capital, Russians would employ it.

Despite these problems, the reforms had significant effects. Enterprises were now theoretically responsible for their own financial results. They could no longer rely automatically on state subsidies or emergency credit. The reforms also introduced the possibility—unthinkable in earlier decades—of enterprise bankruptcy. This was intended to force inefficient enterprises to restructure or close.

In practice, however, bankruptcy remained politically impossible. Ministries and Party officials intervened to prevent closures, fearing unemployment and social unrest. The result was a system in which enterprises were nominally autonomous but still dependent on political patronage.

The reforms also attempted to increase liquidity in the enterprise sector. Under the old system, enterprises minimized cash holdings because cash was useless for anything other than wages. The new system allowed enterprises to use cash more freely, but shortages of consumer goods meant that cash still had limited value. Enterprises continued to hoard inventories, undermining the purpose of financial reform.

By 1989–1990, the contradictions of the banking reforms had become clear. The new banks lacked the expertise to operate as commercial institutions. Enterprises lacked the financial literacy to manage credit. Ministries continued to interfere. The central bank lacked the tools to conduct monetary policy. And the broader economy was entering crisis, with inflation rising, shortages worsening, and political authority weakening. The reforms had created a banking system that was neither fully planned nor fully market-based. It was a hybrid that satisfied no one and functioned poorly.

In the end, Gorbachev's banking and financial reforms were both necessary and insufficient. They were necessary because the Soviet banking system could not support enterprise autonomy or market mechanisms. They were insufficient because they were

implemented within a political and economic system that resisted the very logic of financial discipline.

The reforms exposed the structural weaknesses of Soviet finance but could not resolve them. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the banking system collapsed with it. The specialized banks were reorganized or dissolved, Gosbank was replaced by the Central Bank of Russia, and the chaotic transition to a market economy began.

The banking reforms of perestroika therefore stand as a symbol of the broader perestroika project: ambitious, rational, and necessary, yet ultimately undermined by the contradictions of a system that could not be reformed without being dismantled. They were a glimpse of what a modern financial system might have looked like in the USSR—and a reminder of why the Soviet economy could not survive the transition.

1988 – MVD & KGB Reforms

Any outline of Gorbachev's reforms to the MVD and KGB must begin with the political logic that shaped them. When he became General Secretary in 1985, Gorbachev inherited security institutions that were deeply conservative, structurally opaque, and accustomed to operating as guardians of the status quo.

The KGB in particular had been shaped by decades of institutional privilege and ideological certainty. Yet glasnost and perestroika required these institutions to change.

Gorbachev's broader reform agenda—greater transparency, public accountability, and political liberalization—could not coexist with a security apparatus that remained insulated from public scrutiny and resistant to change. His reforms therefore aimed to reduce the political role of the security services, increase their accountability, and align them with the new ethos of openness.

The MVD, responsible for policing and internal order, faced similar pressures. It had long been associated with corruption, heavy-handed enforcement, and bureaucratic stagnation. Gorbachev's reforms sought to modernize its operations, reduce abuses, and shift its focus from political policing to public service.

Both institutions were expected to adapt to a society that was becoming more vocal, more politically diverse, and more willing to challenge authority.

The KGB occupies a central place in any discussion of Gorbachev's security reforms. Contrary to the common portrayal of the KGB as uniformly hostile to perestroika, recent scholarship shows that the institution's response was more complex.

Rank-and-file officers, as documented in the KGB's own internal journal *Sbornik KGB SSSR*, experienced the reforms as a loss of control and a challenge to their privileged position, yet they also participated in implementing and shaping the new policies.

Gorbachev's reforms to the KGB unfolded in several dimensions.

First, he attempted to reduce its political role by limiting its authority over ideological enforcement and internal dissent. Glasnost required that criticism of the state be tolerated, and the KGB was instructed to adapt to this new environment.

Second, he encouraged the KGB to engage more openly with society. The publication of *Sbornik KGB SSSR* in 1990—an unprecedented public journal produced by the KGB itself—was emblematic of this shift. It reflected an effort to present the KGB as a professional institution rather than a secretive political police.

Third, Gorbachev pushed the KGB to confront new challenges such as rising nationalism, environmental activism, and public protest. These were issues the KGB had not traditionally handled, and officers expressed anxiety about their diminishing ability to control events.

These reforms exposed deep institutional resistance.

Senior KGB leaders, including Vladimir Kryuchkov, viewed glasnost and the new Union Treaty as existential threats. The KGB reforms were both a necessary component of perestroika and a catalyst for the crisis that ultimately ended Gorbachev's tenure.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) underwent its own set of reforms, shaped by Gorbachev's desire to modernize domestic policing and reduce corruption. Although the search results focus more heavily on the KGB, they provide enough context to infer the logic of MVD reform within the broader perestroika framework.

The MVD had long been responsible for everyday policing, internal security, and the management of labor camps. Under Gorbachev, its role in political policing

diminished as glasnost expanded public expression and reduced the criminalization of dissent.

Gorbachev's reforms aimed to increase professionalism within the MVD, reduce abuses of authority, and shift its focus toward public service rather than political control. This included efforts to improve training, modernize equipment, and introduce greater transparency into its operations.

The MVD was also expected to adapt to rising social problems—crime, public disorder, and ethnic tensions—that emerged as the Soviet Union liberalized. Like the KGB, the MVD struggled with the contradictions of perestroika: it was asked to enforce order in a society that was becoming more politically active and less deferential to authority.

The MVD's reforms were less dramatic than those of the KGB, but they were part of the same structural transformation. Both institutions were expected to operate within a system that was shedding its authoritarian character, and both faced internal resistance from officials who feared that reform would weaken the state.

Taken together, Gorbachev's reforms to the MVD and KGB reveal the central paradox of perestroika. He attempted to liberalize institutions that had been designed to prevent liberalization.

Gorbachev sought to make the security services more transparent, more accountable, and more responsive to society, yet these institutions had been built to enforce secrecy, hierarchy, and ideological conformity.

The reforms succeeded in changing the culture of the rank-and-file, encouraging openness and public engagement, but they failed to transform the leadership, which remained committed to preserving the old order.

Gorbachev's failure to cut the head off the snake ultimately proved to be his undoing. After replacing nearly all serving cadres beneath him, and reforming all political organs of the Party beyond recognition, Gorbachev had to have known the only danger to him remained the Old guard who retained control of the KGB.

The MVD was manageable, so the KGB was where the only true danger lay. The resentment and paranoia of the Old Guard in the KGB would fester beneath notice until 1991.

1989 Glasnost

Glasnost deserves a prefatory essay because it was not merely a political slogan of the late Soviet period but a word with a long linguistic and cultural history that Gorbachev repurposed with transformative effect. The term itself, *glasnost'*, comes from the Russian root *glas*—"voice," "public utterance," "audible declaration"—combined with the abstract noun-forming suffix *-nost'*, yielding a meaning that is best rendered as "publicness," "openness to being heard," or "the condition of being voiced openly."

The etymology of glasnost reaches back to Old Church Slavonic and even further to Proto-Indo-European roots associated with calling out or making something known.

Long before Gorbachev, *glasnost'* appeared in the judicial reforms of Alexander II in the 1860s, where it denoted the principle of open court proceedings and public verdicts. It resurfaced intermittently in Soviet usage—Lenin invoked it in the 1920s, Khrushchev in the 1950s—but always as a controlled, bureaucratic term for limited transparency rather than a guarantee of free expression.

When Gorbachev revived the word in 1986, he did so with a rhetorical ambition that exceeded any of its earlier uses. Glasnost was presented as the cultural and political counterpart to *perestroika*, the restructuring of the economy. If perestroika was meant to change how the Soviet system worked, glasnost was meant to change how the Soviet system spoke.

In Gorbachev's formulation, glasnost meant relaxing censorship, encouraging critical journalism, permitting public discussion of previously forbidden subjects, and reducing the secrecy that had defined Soviet governance since the earliest days of Bolshevism. It was a call for the state to "be voiced publicly," to allow its actions, failures, and history to be exposed to scrutiny. Glasnost was therefore both a linguistic revival and a political redefinition: a nineteenth-century term for administrative transparency transformed into a late-twentieth-century program for political openness.

The initiatives that followed gave the word concrete meaning. Censorship was loosened, allowing newspapers and television to report on corruption, bureaucratic incompetence, and economic failures. Writers and filmmakers gained permission to publish and screen works that had long been suppressed, including accounts of Stalinist terror.
Archives were partially opened, enabling historians and journalists to investigate subjects that had been taboo for decades.

Dissidents were released from prison or internal exile, and public debate—once confined to carefully scripted Party congresses—began to flourish in newspapers, journals, and televised discussions. Glasnost also encouraged the exposure of historical abuses: mass graves from the Great Terror were acknowledged, the crimes of Stalin were discussed openly, and previously concealed disasters such as the 1986 Chernobyl accident were reported with unprecedented candor.

These changes were not merely administrative adjustments; they altered the texture of Soviet public life. Citizens who had grown accustomed to silence and euphemism found themselves confronted with revelations about their own history, their government, and the condition of their society.
Glasnost created a new rhetorical environment in which problems could be named, grievances expressed, and demands articulated. It also unleashed forces that Gorbachev did not anticipate.

Nationalist movements in the Baltic republics, the Caucasus, and Central Asia gained momentum as glasnost exposed long-suppressed ethnic grievances. Criticism of the Communist Party intensified, and public confidence in the state eroded as corruption and incompetence were laid bare.

The Soviet Press

The first and most visible arena in which glasnost took institutional form was the Soviet press. For decades, newspapers and journals had served primarily as instruments of political ritual, repeating official narratives and shielding the public from information that might undermine confidence in the state. When Gorbachev introduced glasnost as a governing principle, he began by loosening the constraints that had long governed editorial content.

This did not happen all at once; it unfolded gradually, through a series of directives that encouraged editors to report more candidly on economic failures, social problems, and bureaucratic abuses. The press was instructed to expose inefficiency, corruption, and mismanagement, not to conceal them. As censorship relaxed, journalists discovered that they could pursue stories that had previously been off-limits, and readers discovered that newspapers could contain genuine information rather than formulaic praise.

The transformation was striking. Newspapers such as *Pravda*, *Izvestiia*, and *Literaturnaia gazeta* began publishing investigative reports on factory accidents,

environmental degradation, and the failures of local Party officials. Television programs adopted a more critical tone, airing discussions that would have been unthinkable only a few years earlier.

The press became a forum for public debate, a space where citizens could encounter competing viewpoints and where officials could be held accountable by exposure rather than by internal Party discipline. Glasnost turned journalism into a profession with real social power, and in doing so, it altered the relationship between the state and the public.

Information ceased to be a controlled resource and became a catalyst for political and social change. The Soviet press, once a pillar of ideological stability, became an engine of criticism and reform.

Culture and the Arts

The cultural sphere experienced an equally profound transformation under glasnost. For decades, Soviet cultural life had been shaped by censorship, ideological supervision, and the careful management of historical memory. Writers, filmmakers, and artists operated within narrow boundaries, and entire genres of historical and political expression were forbidden.

Glasnost dismantled these boundaries. Works that had been banned for years were suddenly published or screened, and cultural unions gained greater autonomy to decide what could be produced and circulated. The arts became a domain in which glasnost's promise of openness took on emotional and intellectual force.

One of the most significant aspects of this cultural opening was the revival of historical memory. Glasnost permitted public discussion of subjects that had been suppressed since the Stalin era: the Great Terror, the Gulag, wartime deportations, political trials, and the mass graves that dotted the Soviet landscape. Historians gained access to archives, journalists published accounts of atrocities, and filmmakers produced works that confronted the darkest chapters of Soviet history.

This was not merely an artistic development; it was a moral and political reckoning. Glasnost allowed the Soviet public to confront truths that had been hidden for generations, and in doing so, it reshaped the collective understanding of the Soviet past.

The cultural opening also encouraged experimentation and diversity. Artists explored themes of individuality, alienation, and national identity. Writers addressed contemporary social problems with unprecedented frankness. The arts became a space

where glasnost's spirit of openness could flourish without the constraints of bureaucratic oversight. Yet this freedom also had destabilizing effects.

As cultural expression expanded, it exposed ideological contradictions and undermined the authority of institutions that had long relied on controlled narratives.

Glasnost in culture was both liberating and unsettling, a force that enriched Soviet intellectual life while eroding the foundations of official ideology.

Administrative Reforms

Beyond the press and the arts, glasnost was intended to transform the internal workings of the Soviet state. Gorbachev envisioned glasnost not merely as a cultural opening but as an administrative reform that would make government institutions more transparent, responsive, and accountable.

Ministries, local soviets, and Party committees were instructed to conduct their work more openly, publish more information, and engage more directly with public criticism. Official secrecy was reduced, and public hearings became more common. Glasnost was used as a tool to expose corruption, inefficiency, and abuse of power within the bureaucracy. In this sense, glasnost was meant to strengthen the state by forcing it to confront its own weaknesses.

Yet glasnost quickly evolved beyond administrative transparency and became a catalyst for political change. As information flowed more freely, citizens began to question the legitimacy of institutions that had long operated without scrutiny. Informal political groups emerged, public criticism of the Communist Party intensified, and previously marginal voices gained influence.

Glasnost created the conditions for competitive elections in 1989 and 1990, transforming the political landscape and weakening the monopoly of the Party. It also empowered nationalist movements in the Baltic republics, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, where long-suppressed grievances could now be expressed openly.

Glasnost revealed the diversity of political aspirations within the Soviet Union and exposed the fragility of the structures that held it together.

In its administrative and political dimensions, glasnost demonstrated both the promise and the peril of openness. It was intended to support perestroika by

mobilizing public opinion and encouraging civic engagement. Instead, it revealed truths that the Soviet system could not survive.
Glasnost exposed the contradictions of Soviet governance, undermined the authority of the Party, and accelerated the fragmentation of the state. It was a reform that began as a means of strengthening socialism and ended as a force that contributed to its dissolution.

What had begun as a controlled opening intended to strengthen socialism became a destabilizing force that weakened the ideological foundations of the Soviet system.

As a preface to a chapter on glasnost, it is important to recognize that the term's power lay not only in its linguistic heritage but in its rhetorical transformation. Gorbachev took a word that had once meant administrative transparency and turned it into a political program that encouraged public speech, civic engagement, and historical reckoning.

To the historical reckoning we must now turn.

The New Union Treaty

The New Union Treaty was Mikhail Gorbachev's final, ambitious attempt to preserve the Soviet Union by transforming it from a rigid, centralized federation into a looser, voluntary political community. The treaty's origins lay in the political crises of 1990–1991, when nationalist movements surged, republics declared sovereignty, and the old mechanisms of Party control were collapsing.

The treaty was drafted through the Novo-Ogaryovo process, a series of negotiations between Gorbachev and republican leaders, and was intended to replace the 1922 founding treaty of the USSR with a fundamentally different constitutional order. According to the official draft submitted in late 1990 and refined through 1991, the treaty would have created a new entity called the Union of Soviet Sovereign Republics, a confederation rather than a traditional federation.

Each republic would be recognized as a sovereign state, retaining full control over its internal political system, natural resources, and administrative structure. The Union government would exist only by powers "voluntarily vested in it" by the republics, and would be limited to foreign policy, defense, and certain economic coordination.

Simply put, Gorbachev wanted to control the state without having to manage the state.

The treaty's text, published in *Sovetskaia Rossiia* on 15 August 1991, emphasized human rights, civil society, cultural autonomy, and the priority of republican law over Union law. It promised unhampered access to information, freedom of religion, and guarantees for native languages. It envisioned a Union-wide market based on free choice of ownership forms, a striking departure from the command economy. It even proposed the popular election of a Union president, something Gorbachev had resisted only a year earlier.
In essence, the Soviet Union was to become a democratic, decentralized political community in which republics cooperated voluntarily rather than obeyed directives from Moscow.

Had it been signed, the USSR would have resembled a loose confederation similar to the European Union: sovereign republics sharing a common foreign policy, military coordination, and presidency, but otherwise autonomous. By August 1991, eight of the nine participating republics had approved the draft, with Ukraine insisting on additional conditions tied to its own declaration of sovereignty.

A signing ceremony was scheduled for 20 August 1991.

Opposition to the treaty was fierce among Soviet conservatives, security officials, and hardline Party members. Their objections were rooted in fear that the treaty would dissolve the USSR in all but name. That certainly was true for the Soviet system of controls, the controls which had sustained the Party leadership since 1917.

The treaty ceded ownership of natural resources to the republics, stripped the Union government of legislative supremacy, and symbolically replaced the word "Socialist" with "Sovereign" in the state's official title. To opponents, these provisions meant the end of the Soviet state, the loss of central authority, and the triumph of nationalist separatism. Gorbachev was, to put it mildly, contradicting what every child raised in the Komsomol system was conditioned to believe.

The Socialist press, including *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, warned that the treaty would "destroy the unity of the motherland" and leave Moscow powerless. Leaving Moscow powerless was the line that bit hardest.

Marxist-Leninists, those who remained convinced human evolution could and should be forced by the Proletariat, were thick as thieves in the military and KGB. They argued that the treaty would cripple national security, undermine the command structure,

and embolden Western influence. Their fears were intensified by the rapid collapse of the Warsaw Pact, the miners' strikes, and the declarations of independence by the Baltic republics and Georgia.

Within the Party apparatus, the treaty was perceived as a capitulation. Many officials believed Gorbachev had abandoned socialism in favor of Western pluralism.

The KGB leadership, especially Vladimir Kryuchkov, viewed the treaty as an existential threat: once republican laws superseded Union laws, the central government would effectively cease to exist. Kryuchkov later claimed that the treaty would have "finished off the Soviet Union," a sentiment widely shared among conservative elites. Their opposition culminated in the August 1991 coup, launched two days before the treaty's scheduled signing, in a last-ditch attempt to prevent its implementation.

More alarming to the Marxist-Leninists was the division becoming apparent in society itself. Once Gorbachev allowed a semblance of free expression, it became abundantly clear the people no longer supported the Marxist-Leninism. Not at all. Open dialogue, including a press which was still ostensibly controlled, eagerly deviated from what had been the central, binding tenets of Socialism, and by no small margin either.

And we aren't talking about "radical" liberal groups or fringe movements either. We're talking about everyone from party elites to production bosses, from factory workers to cops on the beat, people were all suddenly talking and debating matters which had been the exclusive domain of the Politburo for over seven decades.

In all that time Russian Intelligence had appeased its conscience in the belief that the soviets were wholesale subscribers to the Party line, that there was indeed unanimity of thought on the big picture, and that extremes in achieving the details were necessary evils the distant promise of communism made it all worthwhile.

Socialism, it was thought had been agreed, would be rough for while, but in the end, worth it. Gorbachev's open debate made it clear few thought that was the case. People weren't just openly questioning methods. People were openly questioning goals.

The question quickly became, had this been the case all along? The answer was, apparently, yes!

I don't think we can properly qualify the psychological crisis that Marxist-Leninists suffered in those final months of Glasnost. Opening political goals and methods to debate seemed like surrender to those still convinced they were the Proletariat.

Up until the very end of the Soviet Union, the Paradox of the Proletariat remained operative and just as destructive as ever. Socialist thought, you see, is incompatible with human psychology because it requires, not just unanimity of belief, but continuity of that unanimity over time.

Rational individuals can't manage that kind of continuity in their own minds, let alone in discourse with others. Trying to explain that to men like Vladimir Kryuchkov in 1991 would have been impossible. They were, after all, convinced they were the Next Best Thing in human evolution.

Kryuchkov, and what remained of the dedicated Proletariat – the Chekists - met in secret, then decided the revolution must be saved. These Chekists planned an historical reckoning.

1991 - The Reckoning

Gorbachev was undeniably the wisest Soviet leader in its brief and violent history. So far removed was Gorbachev from the Soviet Union's Chekist template that everyone, including in the West, became convinced Russia had finally come to its senses.

Even to skeptics, like myself, it was clear, if this was "Operation Trust", it could not help but do more damage to the objectionable features of the Soviet State than to any Western interest.

I am now of the opinion Gorbachev was a revolutionary. Not a counter revolutionary, but a revolutionary, nonetheless. Gorbachev remained a committed Marxist. He just was not a Marxist-Leninist. He remained a committed Marxist until his death. I am convinced Gorbachev was probably the only Marxist that Marx himself would acknowledge as one of his own.

Marx, you see, insisted that the Proletariat would not form as a revolutionary class until Capitalism had matured to its fullest, a nearly complete monopolization of the means of production. Then, and only then, would the conditions be right for the emergence of the Proletariat as an evolutionary class. In reality, between 1848, when Marx first published his Communist Manifesto, and 1991, "capitalist" nations were characterized by increasingly diversified capital distribution, not its concentration.

Gorbachev was no fool, and was well aware how Blat operated within the Soviet economy.

By all Gorbachev knew as holy, the Soviet economy more closely resembled Marx's dystopian vision of the future than its relief. Until capitalism achieved monopolization, a few "revolutionaries" may emerge, such as they did in 1917, and they may even fool themselves into thinking they could spark the violent overthrow of Capitalism worldwide but, as the Soviet experience taught die-hard theorists like Gorbachev, the necessary critical mass was not achievable.

Gorbachev honestly thought, by allowing elements of Capitalism back into the economy, and mitigating the undesirable effects of "Capitalism", the people, not just the elites, would awaken to the inevitability and necessity of socialism.

Gorbachev saw Capitalism as the whetstone against which the Proletariat would hone their scythe. The people needed to see for themselves the evils of capitalist exploitation not just read about it in Komsomol pamphlets.

Perestroika was intended to permit a toothless form of Capitalism to supplement shortfalls in Soviet production, and illustrate the distinction between Soviet enterprise and personal enterprise. We can't even say Gorbachev was wrong, for no sooner had co-operatives been allowed than we witnessed managers and workers at Soviet enterprises launch vehement opposition to personal enterprise and co-operatives.

Had Gorbachev's reforms been allowed to mature, I am convinced the best Dictator of the Proletariat ever, Gorbachev, would have resorted to scapegoating these capitalist elements for the failures of the Soviet economy.

This is precisely what the Chinese Communist Party is doing today. Instead of government Ministers losing their positions, and sometimes their heads in an economic crisis, China's tycoons are rounded up, their corporations taken over and cannibalized, and the whole process begun anew.

I am convinced Gorbachev hypothesized what the Chinese Communist Party operationalized. Why persecute entrepreneurs as counter revolutionaries, when you can just let them off leash and wait until they become a fatted calf?

The social chaos experienced during the Perestroika years had less to do with the efficacy of the reforms Gorbachev implemented, than with the naiveté of the Soviet people. Managers were suddenly tasked with making decisions nobody within three pay grades had made since 1918.

Think about that for a minute. Imagine the reality of a Soviet citizen under Gorbachev. You had been raised in Soviet schools, conditioned since childhood to respect and obey

the decisions of the Supreme Soviet, even dream of becoming the Supreme Soviet one day.

You graduated and got a job, perhaps as a worker in a factory, perhaps as management in a large state-owned enterprise. You spent half your career doing what you were told, doing everything that was expected. You became an expert at administrative rhetoric to make the production numbers closer to the assigned quotas. Then you arrive at work one morning and are told you have to figure it all out for yourself.

What Michael Gorbachev did was hand nearly exclusive prerogative over a system of production, which was rife with fraud and steeping in decades of lies about its own productive capacity, over to people conditioned never to think for themselves.

Even if decision makers could be found among the workers, the internal information on which to base rational business decisions did not exist. Too much of what was produced never appeared in production figures because it was secreted out the back door.

Let's not forget Blat, folks!

The managers of every Soviet enterprise certainly did not.

When Gorbachev unleashed the forces of change on state-owned enterprises, he did so everywhere, and all at once. Blat (access) to products was a function of position within the enterprise. The higher your position, the more Blat you controlled.

This was not a case where the poorest workers were pilfering a few handfuls of grain and smuggling it out the back door after clocking out. By Gorbachev's day, we are talking about industrial scale embezzling and theft. Entire budgets vanished into the ether, and truckloads of goods were being re-directed after leaving the factory floor.

This was management under the Soviet system, and that was all threatened by Perestroika.

Gorbachev could have taught a Master Class in sidestepping the Chekists in the Ministries and Commissariats, but he was more than a little naïve when it came to corruption at the enterprise level of economy.

Most importantly, Gorbachev appears to have been blind to who was ultimately responsible for the industrial scale corruption and theft all along. From the beginning, until the bitter end, it was Russia's Intelligence agencies who were feasting on the graft and corruption within the Soviet system of production. And why not? They were the Proletariat, the most committed revolutionaries in the land, indeed, in the world. The means of production were theirs, after all.

It was the easiest moral compromise to make. The state had built Russia's Intelligence agencies to grade people on a spectrum of revolutionary commitment, and the Chekists, being ever and always the apex of that scale, saw everyone beneath them as subjects for re-education.

Western analysists look back on the Perestroika years and mistake the zeal of those who plotted Gorbachev's overthrow as purely ideological. Western "experts" exacerbate me to no end. The zeal of the Chekists has ever and always been pure, unadulterated narcissism.

Marxist-Leninist ideology simply justified and operationalized the narcissism from which these animals suffered.

Russia is not a country with an intelligence apparatus.

Russia is an intelligence apparatus with a country.

Mistake this fact and you cannot plausibly untangle Russia's knot.

By 1991 it had become clear that personal enterprise and co-operatives would not fail in meeting their production quotas, because no quotas were being set. And still, personal enterprises and co-operatives were out producing their Soviet counterparts. Granted, personal enterprises and co-operatives were not burdened by the graft and corruption problem, so every ruble was being counted in the bottom line.

You and I would not consider that cheating, but trust you me, if you were the upper management of a Soviet enterprise who had been lining your pockets, as well as those of hundreds of lackies, from the graft and embezzlement you managed, you'd feel more than just cheated.

Remember, the Blat-based economy hinged entirely on the concept of mutual destruction. Everyone in the know was aware, if any of them opened their mouths, if the KGB, who turned a blind eye to it all, enforced laws they had been ignoring, everyone would burn.

The KGB never had to lift a finger. It was truly hilarious from the KGB's point of view. To improve their own position in life, to fatten themselves and their children, all they had to do was maintain their lists and never act on them.

The Chekists in the KGB were the Proletariat after all, and Operation Trust had taught them one, glorious revolutionary message: embedding and co-operating with counter-revolutionaries meant you never needed to investigate. Why? Because you were right there all along, calling the shots, and redirecting events to your favor.

The KGB looked upon the thieves and liars in the major state-owned enterprises as vultures, vermin and maggots feasting on a corpse that would never die. Because the Politburo could never allow a major state enterprise to fail, the Soviet apparatus kept pumping money into the corpse.

I pray the implications are now clear. Gorbachev was planning on letting the corpses die. That would cut the KGB bosses off from their source of personal wealth.

Making matters worse, the KGB could no longer compromise the management of personal enterprises and co-operatives, because nothing they were doing was illegal. That meant there was no opportunity for the KGB to extort co-operation or kickbacks from the emerging smaller enterprises.

As we all know, the KGB resorted to strong arm tactics not dissimilar to those used by organized crime in the West. Protection money was extorted, and paid, by those smart enough to realize who ran Russia all along: the Chekists.

But Gorbachev's reforms were too sudden and too complete. The KGB bosses were being bled dry by Perestroika.

In 1991, the Chekists decided it was now or never.

But before we have that discussion, we must first disavow ourselves of the notion personal enterprises and co-operatives were like babes in the mouths of wolves. We in the West prayed we were witnessing Mother Russia adopt Capitalism as their system of economy, for that would require the democratization of the state.

In practice, Soviet citizens resorted to Kapitalism instead.

To the distinction between Kapitalism and Capitalism we turn.

Kapitalism vs Capitalism

I am evoking the term Kapitalism in contrast to Capitalism henceforth. It is a disservice tot eh truth to observe that Russia and China today are adopting Capitalism as their economic model, when in fact they are not.

Both Russia and China have indeed allowed private, entrepreneurial enterprise to develop what can nominally be called "markets", but these enterprises are themselves being run by individuals whose only frame of reference for free-market economy is Marx's definition: Kapitalism.

Trust me folks, Kapitalism is not good.

Allow me to be precise about what we are confronting. We are confronting major segments of the world population who, in rejecting the explicit irrationality of the Soviet and Chinese Communist modes of production, have embraced everything Marx opposed. And that is not good at all.
These emerging enterprises in Russia and China may share many features with 'free enterprise" in the West, but it is definitely not "Capitalism". It is Kapitalism.

Read Marx. You better if you want to understand how post-Soviet enterprise in Russia functions, and what makes it dangerous. The same holds true for Post-Maoist enterprise in China.

Kapitalists embrace every cut-throat, anti-social tendency Marx warned about. Why? Because that is all they know. Kapitalists in Russia and China believe they are becoming more like "Capitalists" in the West. They are not. Kapitalists are, increasingly, becoming more like organized crime in the West.

Western analysts are apparently oblivious to this subtle distinction.

Capitalism in the West is, today, best described as "Well Regulated Enterprise", a system of economic production which bears little or no resemblance to Kapitalism as described by Marx. In contrast, Kapitalist enterprises in Russia and China operate with near complete impunity, ignoring labor laws and ecological protections, if these protections even exist in anything but rhetoric.

In the former Soviet Union, Russian Intelligence has fully modulated itself within the Kapitalist economy. So cutthroat has competition in the Kapitalist economy become that, increasing, Kapitalist enterprises in Russia have even begun maintaining their own, private paramilitaries.

Yevgeny Viktorovich Prigozhin is not a unicorn. Yevgeny Viktorovich Prigozhin is the mode. Yevgeny Viktorovich Prigozhin just made himself far too visible, and for that reason, was openly opposed and subverted by Russian Intelligence.

Expect me to return to Yevgeny Viktorovich Prigozhin shortly. I must first document how the Chekists survived Perestroika, and Russian "independence", without skipping a beat of their malicious hearts.

In case my central thesis has escaped you to this point, allow me to be abundantly clear. Russian Intelligence has been in command of, and primary beneficiary of Russia's economy from 1918 until this very moment.

Russia's economy is, today, Kapitalist, for even the state-owned enterprises, Russia's strategic industries, are wholly owned subsidiaries of Russian Intelligence.

In perhaps the grandest irony of the International Socialist movement, in the name of Marx, and by Lenin's methods, Russia has become the only example in human history of a Kapitalist nation. China is not far behind Russia.

North Korea stands alone as the only nation on earth which still attempts a socialists state. Who knows. Maybe the Kim regime will one day re-educate their population, and they can all be friends, but that is not likely to occur any time soon.

North Korea is an excellent example to compare and contrast the status quo in Russia, for were a Gorbachev to emerge in North Korea's ranks, if Kim's sister were to replace her brother and attempt what Gorbachev attempted, North Korea's Intelligence apparatus will replace her quicker than the Chekists replaced Gorbachev.

The Putsch

The August 1991 coup attempt—known in Russia simply as *the August putsch*—was the final convulsion of the Soviet state, a moment when two irreconcilable visions of the country collided. It drove Gorbachev from power, shattered the authority of the Communist Party, and accelerated the dissolution of the USSR.

To understand this episode, one must see it from both sides: the perspective of the reformers who believed the Soviet Union could be transformed, and the perspective of the hardline officials who believed that Gorbachev's reforms were dismantling the state they had sworn to preserve. The coup was not a spontaneous act. It was the culmination of years of institutional panic, ideological disorientation, and personal desperation among the Soviet elite.

From Gorbachev's point of view, the crisis emerged from the very reforms he had championed. Perestroika had weakened the command economy; glasnost had exposed corruption, incompetence, and historical crimes; political liberalization had empowered republics to assert sovereignty; and the Party's monopoly had eroded.

By 1991, Gorbachev was negotiating a new Union Treaty that would transform the USSR into a looser federation of sovereign republics. For him, this treaty was the only way to preserve the Union peacefully. For the conservative wing of the leadership, it was the final step toward disintegration. They believed Gorbachev had lost control, that the state was collapsing, and that decisive action was needed to save the country from chaos.

From the hard-liners' point of view, the situation was intolerable. Prices were rising, shortages were worsening, nationalist movements were gaining strength, and the authority of the central government was evaporating. The Party's old guard felt humiliated by glasnost's revelations of past crimes.

The KGB leadership feared that the new Union Treaty would strip the center of power and leave the security services without a state to defend. The military leadership worried that the USSR would fragment into hostile republics, leaving the armed forces divided and directionless. These officials believed they were acting not out of ambition but out of duty. They saw themselves as guardians of a state that was being dismantled by its own leader.

The coup was organized by a group calling itself the State Committee for the State of Emergency (GKChP). Its members included Vice President Gennady Yanayev, KGB Chairman Vladimir Kryuchkov, Defense Minister Dmitry Yazov, Interior Minister Boris Pugo, and several senior Party and government officials.

These were not fringe figures; they were the highest representatives of the Soviet security and administrative apparatus. They had access to the levers of power, control over the armed forces, and the authority to impose emergency rule. Their plan was simple: isolate Gorbachev, declare a state of emergency, roll back reforms, and restore central authority.

The "Chekists"—a term Russians use to describe the security elite descended from the old Cheka—played a decisive role. Kryuchkov and his KGB deputies were the ones who "pulled the trigger," as it were. They cut Gorbachev off at his dacha in Foros, severing his communications and presenting him with an ultimatum. They deployed KGB special units to secure key locations in Moscow. They coordinated with military commanders to move armored vehicles into the capital. They drafted decrees banning strikes, censoring the press, and restoring the old order.

The coup bore the unmistakable imprint of the security services: secrecy, speed, and an assumption that the population would submit once the state asserted its authority.

But the coup plotters misunderstood the country they were trying to save. Glasnost had changed the political landscape. The public was no longer passive. The press was no longer obedient. The republics were no longer silent. When the GKChP announced that Gorbachev was “ill” and that they were assuming power, few believed it. Crowds gathered in Moscow. Newspapers defied censorship.

Television journalists refused to broadcast propaganda. And Boris Yeltsin, President of the Russian Federation, emerged as the coup’s most visible opponent. Standing atop a tank outside the Russian White House, he denounced the GKChP as usurpers and called for mass resistance. His defiance galvanized the public and split the security forces. Many soldiers refused to storm the White House. Some KGB units hesitated. The coup began to unravel almost immediately.

From the coup plotters’ perspective, the failure was bewildering. They had expected obedience, not resistance. They had assumed that the institutions of the Soviet state would rally behind them. Instead, they found themselves isolated, opposed by the public, and undermined by their own indecision.

The eight men of the GKChP - the last, desperate Chekists of a dying Soviet order - all met fates that were, in their own ways, emblematic of the system they tried to resurrect.

Boris Pugo, the Interior Minister, was the only GKChP member who died during the crisis itself. On 22 August 1991, as the coup unraveled and arrests began, he shot himself twice in the head, an act officially ruled a suicide. Pugo’s death became the coup’s single fatality among its organizers.

But shooting one’s self in the head, twice, that is hard to do. I won’t go into conspiracy theories. Just recognize they all originate in the second bullet. Whether Pugo killed himself or was killed by others, I am willing to bet even he would have agreed it would have been better for everyone involved if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

As for the others? The new rules held. Russian on Russian violence would not be tolerated, and even Gorbachev was loath to break the new rules. Personally, I don’t believe the Chekists would have been so merciful toward Gorbachev had they prevailed.

> Nevertheless, Vladimir Kryuchkov, the KGB chairman and one of the coup’s principal architects, also survived. After amnesty he wrote extensively,

defending the coup and attacking Gorbachev's reforms. He died in 2007 at age 83.

Valentin Pavlov, the last Soviet prime minister, survived the coup, was arrested, released, amnestied, and then drifted into the post-Soviet banking sector. He worked at Chasprombank, Promstroibank, and later a U.S.-based software firm. He died in Moscow in 2003.

Gennady Yanayev, the trembling-voiced "acting president" who appeared at the infamous press conference, lived until 2010. After the coup he was arrested, released pending trial, and finally amnestied in 1994. He spent the rest of his life in minor public roles and died in Moscow.

Dmitry Yazov, the last Marshal of the Soviet Union, accepted amnesty after eighteen months in Matrosskaya Tishina prison. He lived on for decades, dying in 2020.

Oleg Baklanov, the KGB's first deputy chairman and a key hardliner, was arrested, released, and amnestied like the others. He lived until 2021.

Vasily Starodubtsev, the agrarian hardliner, returned to political life after amnesty, serving in the Federation Council and even as governor of Tula Oblast. He died in 2011.

Alexander Tizyakov, the industrial-enterprise representative, lived quietly after amnesty and died in 2019.

In my humble opinion, the amnesty extended these traitors was unforgivable. I recall Hitler's rise was made possible, not by the fanaticism of his supporters, but by a state which did not bar traitors from elected office. The rehabilitation of these men prefaced the violence which erupted in 1993, and reinforced within the system that intelligence apparatchiki were held to a lower standard.

Remember, we are talking about a society in which one could be executed for appearing to deviate from party ideology. This last, desperate attempt to save the USSR accelerated its collapse.

Within days, the GKChP members were arrested or committed suicide. Gorbachev returned to Moscow, but his authority was shattered. The Communist Party was suspended. The republics moved rapidly toward independence.

By December 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist.

From Gorbachev's perspective, the coup was a betrayal by the very officials he had tried to reform. From the hard-liners' perspective, it was a desperate attempt to prevent the dissolution of a state they believed was being destroyed.

From the perspective of the "Chekists," the coup attempt was an act of institutional self-preservation.

From the perspective of history, the 1991 coup attempt was the final demonstration that the Soviet system could not be reformed without breaking apart.

In the final analysis, under Mikhail Gorbachev, purges took on a paradoxical form.

Gorbachev dismantled much of the Soviet coercive apparatus through glasnost and perestroika, releasing political prisoners and reducing censorship. Yet he also purged conservative opponents within the party and state, removing officials who resisted reform.

Gorbachev was just never able to replace the Old Guard within Russian Intelligence.

Russia's Intelligence apparatus was, from the first day, to this very moment, an ideological bastion. Russian's Intelligence will never tolerate anyone in its ranks whose ideological alignment is not wholly consistent with its own.

That ideology has drifted from orthodox Marxist-Leninism to Kapitalism, but the Chekist would deny that as an accusation, for does not Marx proscribe the complete monopolization of the economy by the Proletariat?

The root of all evil at the heart of Russian Intelligence is that, despite their lofty proclamations of solidarity with International Socialism, Russian Nationalists prevailed in defining the Proletariat at inception.

Surprise, surprise! The Proletariat were Russian!

That, of course, renders the original Soviet Union a National Socialist state in structural and functional terms. Judge for yourself. We may not agree on this final point, but we should by now agree, everyone in Gorbachev's Russia had come to the conclusion it would have been better if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

All which followed would determine what Russia would become. But the fate of Russian Intelligence was already decided. Russian Intelligence would sacrifice Soviet Intelligence – and live to fight another day.

The Russian Federation

The date is 19 August 1991. Moscow wakes to the sound of tanks. State television announces that a State Committee on the State of Emergency - the GKChP - has taken power because President Gorbachev is “unable to perform his duties for health reasons.” In reality, Gorbachev is under house arrest at his dacha in Foros, Crimea, cut off from communications, surrounded by security men who claim to be acting in the name of the state.

Gorbachev is not physically beaten or tortured, but he is isolated, lied to, and pressured to sign decrees legitimizing the coup. He refuses. He knows enough to understand that if he signs, the Soviet Union becomes an intelligence dictatorship overnight.

In Moscow, the players move into position.

The coup plotters—Vladimir Kryuchkov (KGB), Dmitry Yazov (Defense Minister), Valentin Pavlov (Prime Minister), and a handful of other hardliners—believe they are saving the Soviet Union from disintegration. They have tanks in the streets, paratroopers deployed, and decrees ready to roll back reforms. Their plan is simple in theory: seize the media, intimidate the parliament, isolate Gorbachev, and force the country back into line.

But they misjudge the mood of the capital and the loyalty of the army.

The pawns, at first, are the soldiers and officers ordered into Moscow. Armored columns roll toward the city center, engines rumbling, tracks grinding asphalt. They are told they are defending the constitution, preventing chaos, preserving order. Many of them are young conscripts who have no clear idea what is happening. They see civilians gathering, people shouting, some crying, some climbing onto tanks to talk to them.

The orders they’ve been given - occupy key intersections, surround the Russian parliament building (the White House), be ready to move - start to feel less like a patriotic duty and more like something darker.

And then Boris Yeltsin appears.

Yeltsin is President of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, technically subordinate to Gorbachev but increasingly the focal point of popular legitimacy.

When the coup is announced, he immediately recognizes it as an illegal seizure of power. He rushes to the White House, the seat of the Russian parliament, which becomes the physical and symbolic center of resistance.

Tanks are positioned nearby, their barrels capable of turning the building into rubble. The coup plotters expect the army to obey.

Instead, something unexpected happens. Yeltsin climbs onto one of the tanks - famously, a T-80 - and addresses the crowd and the soldiers. It's not a polished speech; it's improvised, urgent, and raw. He calls the coup illegal, urges the soldiers not to obey criminal orders, and appeals directly to their conscience.

Yeltsin next signs decrees declaring the GKChP unconstitutional and calls for a general strike. The image of Yeltsin standing on the tank, white shirt, papers in hand, speaking into a makeshift microphone, becomes the defining visual of the moment. It's not just theater; it's a tactical move. He is physically inserting himself between the army and the people, daring the coup plotters to order his arrest or assassination in full view of the world.

The pawns begin to awaken.

Tank commanders, confronted by crowds and by Yeltsin himself, start to hesitate. Some openly declare they will not fire on civilians. Others quietly reposition their vehicles to form a protective ring around the White House instead of a siege line. Soldiers fraternize with protesters, share cigarettes, listen to impromptu speeches.

The coup leaders, watching this unfold, realize they do not have the kind of obedience they counted on. They have hardware, but not hearts.

Inside the White House, Yeltsin and his allies - Alexander Rutskoi, Ruslan Khasbulatov, and others - set up a crisis command center. They issue appeals to regional leaders across Russia and the other republics, urging them to reject the GKChP.

Many do.

In Leningrad, in the Baltics, in Ukraine, local authorities refuse to recognize the coup. Crowds gather in city squares, some building barricades, others simply standing in silent defiance. The Soviet Union, for a moment, becomes a patchwork of resistance and uncertainty.

Gorbachev, meanwhile, is still in Foros.

The Secretary General is cut off from the outside world, but he knows enough to understand that something enormous is happening. He later describes feeling both anger and a kind of cold clarity: if the coup succeeds, his political life is over; if it fails, the Soviet Union may still be doomed, but in a different way.

Was Gorbachev fearing for his life? Not in the sense of expecting immediate execution, but he was acutely aware that a failed coup could lead to unpredictable violence, and

that his own fate was in the hands of men who had already broken the law. He refuses to cooperate, refuses to sign emergency decrees, and waits.

In the West, the reaction is a mix of alarm and cautious restraint. The Bush administration is deeply concerned - this is a nuclear superpower undergoing an attempted coup - but they are determined not to inflame the situation. There is intense, behind-the-scenes monitoring and quiet diplomacy.

Washington's primary fear is that the coup could lead to fragmentation of command over nuclear weapons or to a confrontation between loyalist and rebel units. The U.S. keeps open channels to both Soviet officials and Russian leaders, but avoids overtly backing one side in public, wary of giving the coup plotters an excuse to claim foreign interference.

Back-channel contacts are made - through ambassadors, intelligence services, and personal relationships - but the U.S. position is essentially: we support constitutional processes, we will not recognize a junta, and we expect Soviet leaders to avoid bloodshed.

Western European governments take a similar line. The world is watching, but no one wants to push the situation over the edge. How close did the world come to civil war with nuclear-armed rivals? Closer than most people realized at the time, but not to the point of imminent nuclear exchange.

The real danger was not that missiles would start flying, but that the chain of command over nuclear forces could fracture if the coup turned into a prolonged armed confrontation.

If loyalist units and coup-aligned units had begun fighting in earnest, with bases and command centers under threat, the risk of miscalculation would have risen sharply. The fact that the army hesitated, that key commanders refused to fire on civilians, and that the coup collapsed within three days, prevented that scenario from unfolding.

The turning point comes on the night of 20–21 August. The coup plotters, increasingly desperate, consider storming the White House. Special forces units are prepared; plans are drawn up. But the political cost of a massacre in the center of Moscow, broadcast to the world, weighs heavily.

Some commanders balk. Others warn that their troops may not obey orders to kill civilians. The GKChP hesitates - and in that hesitation, it loses.

By the morning of 21 August, the momentum has shifted decisively. Crowds in Moscow are larger, more confident. The coup leaders appear on television looking strained, defensive, almost defeated.

Yeltsin's position strengthens; regional leaders rally to him. The army begins to withdraw from the city. The pawns have fully awakened: they understand they were being used to crush a popular movement, and they refuse.

Gorbachev is flown back to Moscow, his authority formally restored, but the real victor is Yeltsin.

Yeltsin emerges from those days as the embodiment of resistance, the man who stood on a tank and said no.

The Soviet Union, though technically still alive, has crossed a threshold. The Party's monopoly on power is broken, the KGB's aura shattered, and the republics emboldened.

Within months, the USSR will dissolve.

Those days in August 1991 were not just a dramatic episode; they were the hinge on which the entire late-Soviet story turned. The coup plotters thought they were saving the state. The soldiers thought they were following orders. The crowds thought they were defending a fragile new freedom.

Yeltsin, climbing onto that tank, turned a potential civil war into a political collapse instead. The world watched, held its breath, and - for once – we all thought the Russian people would finally be free!

The transition from Gorbachev to Yeltsin was not a single handover but a sequence of political and legal ruptures that dismantled the Soviet Union while simultaneously constructing the Russian Federation as its successor. It unfolded in overlapping layers: the erosion of central authority, the assertion of republican sovereignty, the creation of new Russian institutions, and finally the formal extinction of the USSR itself.

By the time Gorbachev resigned on 25 December 1991, much of the substance of Soviet power had already slipped from his hands into Yeltsin's.

The first decisive step was taken not in 1991 but in March 1990, when the Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR created the office of President of the Soviet Union and elected Gorbachev to it. This was meant to stabilize the system by giving him a constitutional role above the Party.

At the same time, however, republican institutions were gaining strength. In June 1990, the Congress of People's Deputies of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) adopted the Declaration of State Sovereignty of Russia, asserting the primacy of Russian law over Union law on its territory. This was the beginning of the "dual power" situation: Gorbachev as Union president, Yeltsin as Russian leader, each claiming legitimacy over overlapping jurisdictions.

In June 1991, Yeltsin was elected President of the RSFSR in a popular vote, something Gorbachev never subjected himself to. From that moment, Yeltsin had a direct democratic mandate, while Gorbachev's authority rested on increasingly fragile institutional arrangements.

The failed August coup then shattered the old Party structures.

After the GKChP collapsed, Yeltsin moved quickly: he suspended and then banned the Communist Party in Russia, seized control of the Russian KGB and Interior Ministry branches, and began subordinating Union institutions on Russian territory to the Russian presidency.

In practical terms, this meant that ministries, security organs, and economic agencies that had previously answered to Moscow's Union government now reported to Yeltsin's Kremlin instead.

The legal dismantling of the Soviet Union accelerated in the autumn of 1991.

The New Union Treaty, which was supposed to create a reformed confederation, was politically dead after the coup. Republics moved toward independence: the Baltic states had already declared it; Ukraine held a referendum on 1 December 1991 in which an overwhelming majority voted for independence; other republics followed.

Gorbachev tried to salvage some form of union, but the center no longer had the power to compel. The decisive administrative break came on 8 December 1991, when the leaders of Russia (Yeltsin), Ukraine (Leonid Kravchuk), and Belarus (Stanislav Shushkevich) met in the Belavezha Forest and signed an agreement declaring that the USSR "as a subject of international law and geopolitical reality" had ceased to exist and announcing the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

This was not just a political statement; it was a claim that the founding treaty of 1922 had been superseded by the sovereign will of its signatories. On 12 December 1991, the Russian Supreme Soviet ratified the Belavezha Accords and simultaneously revoked the 1922 treaty that had created the USSR. In doing so, Russia - the largest and core republic - formally withdrew from the Union.

This was a crucial administrative step: without Russia, there was no viable Soviet Union. Gorbachev was still president in name, but his state had been hollowed out. On 21 December, in Alma-Ata, representatives of eleven republics signed a broader protocol expanding the CIS and effectively confirming that the Union's functions would be replaced by this looser association.

In parallel, Yeltsin's government was building the legal and institutional framework of the Russian Federation.

The RSFSR began to call itself simply “Russia”; Russian ministries took over Union assets on Russian territory; the Russian Central Bank asserted control over monetary policy; and Russian diplomatic missions began to act as the primary representatives of what had been Soviet foreign policy.

Internationally, the key move came when Russia claimed - and was accepted as - the legal successor state to the USSR, inheriting its seat on the UN Security Council and its treaty obligations. This was not a single act, but a series of recognitions and notes exchanged with foreign governments and international organizations in December 1991 and early 1992.

Gorbachev’s last official act as President of the Soviet Union was his televised resignation on 25 December 1991.

In that address, Gorbachev announced that he was stepping down because the USSR no longer existed as a state, acknowledged the independence of the republics, and expressed regret that the union had dissolved rather than been transformed. Crucially, he also declared that he was transferring control of the nuclear launch codes and strategic forces to the President of Russia, Boris Yeltsin.

That transfer - partly formal, partly practical - was the final administrative step in shifting ultimate state power from the Soviet presidency to the Russian one.

Yeltsin’s first official acts as head of the new Russian Federation were not a single ceremonial gesture but a cluster of decisions that asserted Russia’s continuity and sovereignty. In the immediate aftermath of Gorbachev’s resignation, Yeltsin ordered the lowering of the Soviet flag over the Kremlin and the raising of the Russian tricolor, symbolically marking the end of the USSR and the birth of the Russian state in its place.

Yeltsin confirmed Russia’s assumption of the Soviet Union’s international obligations, including arms control treaties, and affirmed Russia’s role as the successor to the USSR’s UN Security Council seat. Domestically, he issued decrees consolidating control over the armed forces and security services under Russian command and began the process of drafting a new Russian constitution, which would eventually be adopted in 1993.

In the end, in the final analysis, the Russian Nationalist won a sweeping victory. Because Boris Yeltsin, situated in Moscow, could do what no other republic could, namely assimilate the Soviet Union’s Ministries and departments under its direct control, no other republic was in a position to assert their sovereign interests at the United nations, or anywhere within the former Soviet Union for that matter.

What was more, because Yeltsin assimilated the Red Army and the Intelligence Apparatus wholesale, what had been an unacknowledged fact became an openly

acknowledged fait accompli: Russia was in total control within the boundaries of the former Soviet Union. In Boris Yeltsin's faultless assumption of control, the mask fell away and the world could see the Soviet Union had been Russia all along.

For these reasons, I became convinced the dissolution of the Soviet Union was Operation Trust on a grand scale. I was wrong, and darker undercurrents would sweep Russia toward a more dystopian future, but it made sense at the time.

The Soviet Union, it appeared to skeptics like me, was staging a bit of theater to convince the West the threat had passed. Russia, I anticipated, would be billed as the new kid on the democratic block, and the West would lower their guard.

As events would turn out, Russia was indeed billed as the new kid on the democratic block, but the United States Military, gratefully, did not lower our guard.

If the dissolution of the Soviet Union was an act, it would have to sustain the performance for decades to come, at least until the appearance of reforms converted into real, structure and behavioral changes.

Ronald Reagan was never heard so clearly than in those first few years following Yeltsin's tank-top speech.

"Trust but Verify" became the watchwords in the West.

And, as Western analysis watched, a pattern emerged. An old pattern. Former Soviet Intelligence agencies removed their old hat and donned the new.

Russian Intelligence

The lateral transfer of institutions from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation was not a clean administrative handoff but a complex, improvised, and often chaotic process in which old structures were hollowed out, repurposed, or simply renamed while their personnel and internal cultures remained largely intact.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the intelligence and security organs.

The men implicated in the August 1991 coup were the last generation of Soviet security chiefs, and their downfall created a vacuum that Boris Yeltsin filled with new appointees who were offered as a break with the past. Yet the deeper question - whether these institutions truly became new entities or merely continued under new management - requires tracing both the fates of the coup's leaders and the institutional metamorphosis that followed.

The coup plotters were removed swiftly once the GKChP collapsed.

Vladimir Kryuchkov, Chairman of the KGB and the coup's principal architect, was arrested on charges of treason. Defense Minister Dmitry Yazov, Interior Minister Boris Pugo, Prime Minister Valentin Pavlov, and other conspirators were detained or dismissed.

Pugo committed suicide when police arrived at his home. Kryuchkov, Yazov, and the others were held in Lefortovo Prison, interrogated, and suspended from all state functions. Their removal was not merely punitive; it was the first step in dismantling the Soviet security hierarchy.

The KGB itself - long the backbone of Soviet power - was now politically radioactive. Yeltsin understood that leaving it intact would invite suspicion that Russia was simply inheriting the coercive machinery of the USSR. At the same time, he needed functioning intelligence and security services to govern a state that had suddenly become responsible for nuclear weapons, borders, and internal stability.

The first major institutional act was the fragmentation of the KGB.

In the months after the coup, Yeltsin oversaw the dismemberment of the organization into separate agencies. The KGB's domestic security functions were reorganized into the Federal Counterintelligence Service (FSK), later renamed the Federal Security Service (FSB). Its foreign intelligence arm became the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR). The KGB's communications and encryption directorates were spun off into the Federal Agency for Government Communications and Information (FAPSI). Border troops were separated into their own command.

This fragmentation was meant to prevent any single institution from accumulating the kind of concentrated power the KGB had wielded. It was also meant to signal a break with the Soviet past: no more monolithic secret police, no more single organ capable of dominating the state.

Yeltsin's appointments reflected this desire for rupture.

Yeltsin named Vadim Bakatin - an outsider to the security establishment and a reform-minded politician - as the last chairman of the Soviet KGB.

Bakatin's mandate was not to preserve the institution but to dismantle it. He famously handed over KGB surveillance blueprints of the newly built U.S. embassy in Moscow to American officials, a symbolic gesture meant to demonstrate transparency and goodwill.

After the USSR dissolved, Yeltsin appointed new leaders to the successor agencies: Yevgeny Savostyanov to head the Moscow branch of the FSK, and later Sergei Stepashin as director of the FSK itself. These men were chosen not for their ties to the old

security elite but for their perceived loyalty to democratic reform and to Yeltsin personally.

Yet the deeper institutional reality was more complicated. Although the KGB was formally dissolved, its personnel, archives, operational culture, and internal networks did not vanish. The new agencies inherited the same buildings, the same files, and the same mid-level officers who had spent their careers under Soviet norms.

Many of these officers had not supported the coup and were eager to distance themselves from Kryuchkov's faction, but their professional formation had been shaped by Soviet doctrine.

The esprit de corps of the new agencies was therefore ambivalent: publicly committed to democratic Russia, privately steeped in the habits of the old security state.

The FSK and later the FSB adopted new legal frameworks, new oversight mechanisms, and new missions, but the continuity of personnel meant that institutional memory remained largely Soviet.

The foreign intelligence service, the SVR, displayed similar continuity. Its first director, Yevgeny Primakov, was a respected academic and diplomat rather than a career KGB officer, and his appointment was meant to signal professionalism rather than ideological policing. But the SVR inherited the First Chief Directorate's networks, methods, and long-term operations.

Primakov did attempt to reorient the service toward traditional diplomacy and strategic analysis rather than ideological confrontation, yet the SVR's internal culture remained recognizably Soviet in its worldview and operational style.

The question of whether these institutions became genuinely new structures or merely rebranded Soviet organs is therefore best answered by acknowledging the dual nature of the transition.

Legally and administratively, the KGB was dismantled. Its successor agencies were created by presidential decree, given new mandates, and placed under new oversight.

Politically, their leadership was replaced with figures loyal to Yeltsin and committed to reform. But institutionally, the transformation was incomplete. The rank-and-file officers, the operational manuals, the intelligence networks, and the bureaucratic culture persisted.

The new agencies were not born from scratch; they were built atop the skeleton of the old. Even using the term skeleton risks obscuring the fact: the new institutions were in fact just newly painted signs.

In terms of institutional memory, the transition from Gorbachev to Yeltsin was familiar. With every change of the guard at the Kremlin came new faces at the top of Russian Intelligence. New faces were followed by freshly painted signs.

Staff in Russian Intelligence buildings all across the former Soviet Union likely said "Been there, done that." At the news things were about to change.

It is helpful, at this juncture, to evaluate the man at the top. Where did Noris Yeltsin earn his Party credentials, and what did the Intelligence cadres in Russia think of the man with the megaphone on that tank?

To put it more bluntly, what did Boris Yeltsin's dossier at the KGB say about the man?

Boris' Dossier

Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin's life traces a path from rural hardship to the pinnacle of political power, shaped by the contradictions of the Soviet system he ultimately helped dismantle. His story begins in the Ural village of Butka, in Sverdlovsk Oblast, where he was born on 1 February 1931 into a family of ethnic Russians whose fortunes had been battered by collectivization and repression.

Yeltsin's grandfather had been arrested during the early purges, and his father, Nikolai, spent time in a labor camp before returning to construction work. These experiences left the family wary of the state but determined to survive within it. Religion played little role in Yeltsin's upbringing; like most rural Soviet families of the era, they lived under the secularizing pressures of Party rule, and Yeltsin grew up without formal religious instruction.

Yeltsin's childhood was marked by poverty, manual labor, and a fierce independence that would become a defining trait. He excelled academically and athletically, particularly in volleyball, and after finishing school he entered the Ural Polytechnic Institute in Sverdlovsk, studying civil engineering.

This education was the foundation of his early career: Yeltsin became a construction engineer, then a foreman, and eventually a manager in the region's booming industrial sector.

Yeltsin's entrée into the Soviet system came not through ideology but through competence. He joined the Communist Party in 1961, at age thirty, relatively late compared to many future leaders. His rise was rapid because he was seen as a talented organizer, a man who could get things built, solve practical problems, and motivate workers.

That all meant that Yeltsin knew how to finish complicated projects in a system functioning on Blat. It is impossible that Yeltsin was not distributing resources channeled through projects on which he worked. One could, indeed exist in the Soviet economy without participating in the graft and corruption, but one could never be seen as a "talented organizer", a "man who could get things done", "solve practical problems" and "motivate workers" without greasing more than just a few skids.

Boris Yeltsin succeeded precisely because he had Blat and knew how to spread it around.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, Yeltsin had become a prominent figure in Sverdlovsk's regional Party apparatus. He was appointed head of the city's construction department, then First Secretary of the Sverdlovsk City Party Committee, effectively the mayor of a major industrial center.

In 1976, he became First Secretary of the Sverdlovsk Regional Party Committee, the top Party official in the region. This position placed him firmly within the Soviet elite. He oversaw industrial development, housing projects, and Party discipline. He also approved the demolition of the Ipatiev House - the site of the Romanov family's execution - on orders from Moscow, a decision that would later be used by critics to portray him as a loyal servant of the Soviet system.

But, throughout these years, Yeltsin never worked for the KGB or any intelligence or security agency. That fact kept him in good stead with the Russian public and western journalists, but it would have been a red flag for career apparatchiks in the KGB. Yeltsin was clearly NOT one of them.

Yeltsin's career was entirely within the Party and state administration. He was a builder, a manager, and eventually a politician, not a security operative. Or was he?

Given the meteoric rise of the man, from humble, labor dissenter beginnings, to become the Soviet Donald Trump, a construction worker cum developer extraordinaire, there had doubtlessly been a conversation or two with the KGB along the way. At best, though, Boris Yeltsin was a KGB informant who, over time, earned the trust and patronage of KGB bosses in his oblast.

We all know how KGB bosses adore their dachas, and those Yeltsin could build were likely beauties.

Without direct proof, I cannot state a claim. But that is precisely how the Soviet economy worked. Those who greased the palms of benefactors rose through the ranks. Blat begat more blat, and Boris Yeltsin's career trajectory, measured in pure Blat (access) was on a geometric growth curve.

One did not accomplish that in the Soviet system without KGB patronage.

Yeltsin's reputation, however, was that of a tough, sometimes abrasive administrator who demanded results and punished incompetence. He received several Soviet honors for his work, including the Order of Lenin, the highest civilian decoration, awarded for his achievements in construction and regional governance. (Must have been a particularly stunning dacha)

These accolades reflected Yeltsin's status as a rising star in the Brezhnev-era nomenklatura.

Yeltsin's move to Moscow in 1985 marked the turning point.

Mikhail Gorbachev, seeking energetic reformers, appointed Yeltsin First Secretary of the Moscow City Party Committee, making him the capital's chief administrator. Yeltsin attacked corruption, waste, and privilege with a zeal that shocked the comfortable Moscow elite. He criticized the lavish lifestyles of senior officials, demanded accountability, and pushed for transparency.

Any earlier in Soviet history and Boris Yeltsin could not be mistaken for anything other than an operative in Operation Trust.

Yeltsin's populist style - visiting factories unannounced, confronting bureaucrats, speaking bluntly - made him popular with ordinary citizens but deeply unpopular with Party conservatives.

If true, Boris Yeltsin's dossier in the KGB would read like a humdinger.

In 1987, after publicly criticizing the slow pace of reform, Yeltsin was humiliated and removed from his post. This moment transformed him from a loyal Party official into a political rebel.

Yeltsin's comeback began in 1989, when he won a seat in the Congress of People's Deputies in a landslide, becoming one of the most visible critics of the Soviet establishment. Yeltsin's speeches were fiery, his attacks on privilege relentless, and his popularity soared.

In June 1991, Yeltsin was elected President of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic in the first popular presidential election in Russian history. This democratic mandate gave him legitimacy that Gorbachev lacked.

The path that led him to stand on a tank in August 1991 was shaped by this legitimacy and by the political crisis of the Soviet Union.

When the Chekists launched their coup against Gorbachev, Yeltsin immediately recognized it as an attempt to restore authoritarian rule. He rushed to the Russian

parliament building, the White House, and climbed onto a tank to address the crowd and the soldiers.

This act was not symbolic bravado; it was a tactical intervention. Yeltsin placed himself physically between the army and the people, daring the coup plotters to arrest or kill him. His defiance rallied resistance, undermined the coup's authority, and helped prevent bloodshed.

This was the moment that made Yeltsin the central figure in the Soviet Union's final collapse.

Answering what the KGB's rank and file made of Yeltsin is a difficult question to answer, without Yeltsin's dossier. We may all say what we want about the man, but all must acknowledge one fact, in all the disclosures made by the Russian Federation following the collapse of the Soviet Union, none were made regarding the KGB dossier on Boris Yeltsin.

No version of Boris Yeltsin's KGB dossier has ever been publicly released, and based on everything we know about Soviet archival practice, Russian post-Soviet secrecy, and the political sensitivities surrounding Yeltsin's rise, it almost certainly still exists but remains classified inside the FSB archives.

The rest of Boris Yeltsin's true loyalties must be discerned from his actions. How he reconstituted Russian Intelligence following the Coup provides clues.

Redux Kapitalism

The immediate challenge to the Yeltsin administration in the early, post-Soviet years, was redistributing state owned assets, primarily manufacturing divisions and distribution companies, such as grocery and dry goods stores. Yeltsin had to go from zero to ninety as fast as humanely possible.

It was also obvious strategic industries had to be protected, and possibly state owned, until they could stand on their own.

The first and enduring problem was finding anyone with functional knowledge of entrepreneurial principals, or practical experience conducting business in a market system. There was no retail sector, and therefore no wholesale sector, and all the distribution systems were tried, state owned divisions whose ownership was up for grabs.

But the legacy of Socialist indoctrination proved to be the greatest liability of all. Western observes applauded apparent attempts to inaugurate a "market based"

economy grounded on private property rights and vested interests through stocks and institutional investment. Russians implementing the promised reforms had no frame of reference for what was required to make the transition.

Nor did they care. The common understanding of what "capitalism" and "free enterprise" was, by definition, came from socialist texts and socialist critiques – all of which catalogued the worst abuses of industry and commercialism historically. None of that was representative of commerce in the west, but nobody told the Russians attempting to emulate "capitalism" as they had come to understand it.

The result is that Russians assumed the "kapitalism" of Marx's nightmares was the goose that laid the golden egg, so they set about building "kapitalism". In other words, the trajectory the Russian Federation set themselves on led directly to the dystopia of which Marx had warned.

The liquidation and privatization of state-owned enterprises in the Russian Federation after 1991 followed a sequence of formal statutes and presidential decrees, each of which created a distinct mechanism for transferring property from the Soviet state to private hands.

The Privatization Law

The first mechanism for post-Soviet privatization was the July 3, 1991, Privatization Law, passed before the USSR formally dissolved but implemented by Yeltsin's government. This statute authorized the transfer of most state enterprises into private ownership and created the State Committee on Property Management under Anatoly Chubais to administer the process. Its mechanism was mass privatization through vouchers distributed to roughly 148 million citizens, each representing a claim on shares of state enterprises.

The stated beneficiaries were ordinary Russians, but in practice the real beneficiaries were enterprise managers and emerging entrepreneurs, who used insider access to acquire concentrated stakes in firms that were nominally being privatized broadly.

The law's structure - rapid privatization, weak oversight, and reliance on enterprise-level discretion - allowed insiders to dominate the process.

In other words, those with Blat under the Soviet system were first in line for ownership when Yeltsin's ministries began "privatizing" the economy.

Voucher Program

The second mechanism was the voucher privatization program of 1992–1994, implemented through a series of decrees that operationalized the 1991 statute.

This program privatized more than 15,000 medium and large enterprises, representing about 70% of Russia's industrial output. Although the legal form was egalitarian - every citizen received vouchers - the beneficiaries were again entrepreneurs with access to capital and information, as well as enterprise directors who could steer voucher auctions.

Many citizens sold their vouchers cheaply for cash, enabling organized buyers to accumulate controlling stakes. This phase created the first generation of "New Russians," the early oligarchs whose fortunes originated in manufacturing, energy, and trade.

Law on Cooperatives

The third mechanism was the Law on Cooperatives (1988) and the Law on State Enterprises (1987) inherited from late-Soviet reforms. These statutes had already begun transferring operational control to managers and legitimizing quasi-private cooperatives.

After 1991, these laws enabled "spontaneous privatization," in which managers appropriated control of assets before formal privatization procedures were established. The beneficiaries were overwhelmingly enterprise insiders, not siloviki, because the security services had not yet reorganized themselves into economic actors.

Loans for Shares

The fourth and most decisive mechanism was the "loans-for-shares" decrees of 1995–1996, a set of presidential and governmental acts authorizing the state to collateralize shares of major enterprises in exchange for loans from private banks. When the state failed to repay, the shares were auctioned—usually to the same banks that issued the loans.

This mechanism transferred minority stakes in twelve major enterprises, including Yukos, Sibneft, and Norilsk Nickel, to private hands at steep discounts. The beneficiaries were a small circle of financial oligarchs, notably Vladimir Potanin and other bankers aligned with Yeltsin's political needs.

These actors were entrepreneurs in form but politically embedded; they were not siloviki, but they were the first group to fuse economic and political power. The auctions were often rigged, held in inaccessible locations, and designed to ensure insider victory.

Commercial Banking

The fifth mechanism was the creation of commercial banking through decrees in the early 1990s that permitted cooperative banks, investment banks, and commercial credit institutions. This banking sector was essential to privatization because it provided the institutional infrastructure for loans-for-shares, enterprise financing, and the consolidation of ownership.

The beneficiaries were again entrepreneurial bankers, who used their new institutions to acquire industrial assets and influence state policy. The siloviki were not yet dominant in banking; their rise would come later under Putin.

Putin's Re-Nationalization

The sixth mechanism was selective renationalization under Vladimir Putin, beginning in 2000, implemented through legal actions, tax prosecutions, and administrative pressure rather than explicit privatization statutes.

This was not privatization but a reversal: assets were reclaimed from oligarchs deemed politically unreliable. The beneficiaries of this re-nationalization program were the Siloviki, especially those connected to the security services and state-aligned corporations.

This phase did not liquidate state enterprises but re-concentrated strategic sectors - oil, gas, defense - under state-controlled entities.

Putin's re-nationalization program will not qualify as privatization, but post-Soviet Russia was not trying to implement "privatization", it was trying to implement Kapitalism. Both reformers and bureaucrats were quickly convinced privatization had run its course in the early years of post-Perestroika economics, and strategic monopolies were the optimal form of commerce in critical sectors.

The features of Putin's "market-based economy" were offensive in all western understanding of "capitalism", but a perfect parallel to the "kapitalism" predicted by Marx.

Putin, et al, were aiming for kapitalism, with a "K', not capitalism with a "c". Toward the realization of Mar's kapitalism Russia's intelligence and security services were directed.

Under Putin's vision of Kapitalism, the means of production would concentrate in the hands of the capable few, and efficiencies in production would be driven down controlling costs of goods and services.

Russian workers would accept the wages they were offered, or fend for themselves. Between 1991 and the present, Russian workers witnessed the Proletariat seize the

means of production and impose an intelligence and security apparatus over them to silence all dissent and any viable labor advocacy.

The intelligence and security agencies imposed on the Russian people were the FSK, the FSB, the SVR and the GRU/GU.

1991–1995 - FSK

The *Federal Counterintelligence Service* (FSK) created after the collapse of the USSR was a transitional post-Soviet security service.

The FSK was formally established on 21 December 1993, when President Boris Yeltsin issued Decree No. 2233, abolishing the Ministry of Security of the Russian Federation and creating the FSK in its place.

Once again, that word: decree.

This decree served as the statutory basis for the agency and reflected Yeltsin's attempt to break up the unreformed, Soviet-era security organs, and replace them with a more narrowly focused counterintelligence service.

The decree emphasized that the Ministry of Security had become ineffective, politically burdensome, and resistant to reform, and it placed the new FSK directly under presidential authority, with its director holding ministerial rank.

This reform, and the language in which it was wrapped, is indistinguishable from all reforms of Russian Intelligence since 1918.

During the period in which it existed as the FSK (1993–1995), the service was headed successively by Nikolai Golushko, appointed by Yeltsin at the moment of its creation, followed by Sergei Stepashin, who became director in February 1994 and served until the agency was dissolved in April 1995.

Both men were drawn from the upper ranks of the post-Soviet security establishment and inherited personnel and structures from the Ministry of Security and the fragmented remnants of the Soviet KGB.

In all honesty, where else was Yeltsin, or anyone, to find qualified leadership? The KGB was the wellspring from which the FSK, and all subsequent Russian Intelligence agencies were drawn.

OK, so we know who these men were. The pertinent question is who they became?

Although the FSK existed for only a short time, it carried out several significant campaigns of repression characteristic of Russia's turbulent early post-Soviet period.

According to contemporary analyses, the FSK inherited the KGB's domestic counterintelligence functions and continued surveillance of political dissent, monitoring activists, journalists, and opposition groups during this period of intense political instability. Here we note the FSK quacking like a duck.

The salient question everyone was trying to answer was, did Boris Yeltsin's FSK also walk like a duck?

The answer to that question came as the FSK expanded its mandate to confront rising organized crime and separatist movements, particularly in Chechnya, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan where it played a role in early counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations.

That Yeltsin's re-packaged KGB prioritized targeting of Georgian and Transcaucasian factions (Stalin's faction) reinforces the viewpoint that Russian nationalists were in charge.

The Transcaucasus Region

The trans-Caucus region, composed of Georgia, Chechnya, Armenia and Azerbaijan, became a battleground the moment the Soviet Union dissolved.

The region's story begins long before the Soviet collapse, in the years when Stalin was still consolidating his authority inside the Bolshevik hierarchy. The Transcaucasus was not merely a peripheral frontier of the early Soviet state; it was the crucible in which Stalin learned to wield power, manipulate nationalities, and build the coercive networks that later defined his rule.

Stalin's origins in Gori, his revolutionary apprenticeship in Tiflis and Baku, and his early work as the Caucasian Party organizer gave him a familiarity with the region's ethnic mosaics, clan structures, and underground economies. These experiences shaped his political instincts: he understood that the Caucasus was both volatile and indispensable, a place where loyalty had to be manufactured through force, patronage, and the careful balancing of rival national groups.

During the 1920s, Stalin used the Transcaucasus as a proving ground for the methods he would later apply across the USSR. He oversaw the suppression of Georgian Mensheviks, the forced incorporation of Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the creation of

the Transcaucasian SFSR, a short-lived administrative unit designed to keep the region under tight central control.

The Caucasus was where Stalin first experimented with the combination of terror, cadre placement, and national delimitation that later became the architecture of Soviet federalism.

Even after the Transcaucasian SFSR was dissolved in 1936, the region remained central to Stalin's power base: Beria, his most trusted lieutenant, rose from the Georgian NKVD; the oil fields of Baku were vital to Soviet industrialization; and the ethnic republics served as laboratories for deportation, border manipulation, and the management of "suspect" populations.

In this sense, the Caucasus was not just Stalin's birthplace but the geopolitical heart of his early authority.

When the Soviet Union began to fracture in 1991, the same region that had once anchored Stalin's ascent became one of the most unstable theatres of the post-Soviet transition. Each actor—Georgia, Chechnya, Armenia, and Azerbaijan—pursued independence, but they did so separately, driven by distinct histories, ambitions, and fears.

Their divergence was not accidental; it was the direct consequence of the Soviet nationalities system, which had encouraged ethnic self-identification while preventing regional unity.

Georgia

Georgia entered the final years of the USSR with a strong national movement centered on the idea of a unified Georgian state. Its ambition was straightforward: full independence, rapid exit from Soviet structures, and restoration of territorial integrity.

Yet Georgia's internal fractures—Abkhazia and South Ossetia—were already widening, and its political elite was divided between nationalist maximalists and more cautious reformers. Georgia saw itself as a nation-state, not part of a Transcaucasian bloc, and its leaders believed regional unity would dilute Georgian sovereignty.

Armenia

Armenia's path was shaped by the Nagorno-Karabakh movement, which began in 1988 as a demand for the Armenian-majority enclave to be transferred from Azerbaijan to Armenia. This struggle fused national identity with territorial claims, making Armenian independence inseparable from the Karabakh question.

Armenia's ambition was to secure the enclave, defend its population, and build a state capable of resisting both Azerbaijani pressure and Turkish influence. Regional unity was impossible for Armenia because its core political project—Karabakh—placed it in direct conflict with Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan, meanwhile, approached independence with a mixture of vulnerability and ambition. It possessed oil wealth, a large population, and strategic geography, but it also faced internal instability and the rising Karabakh crisis. Azerbaijani leaders feared that any regional alliance would force concessions on Karabakh and undermine their claim to territorial integrity.

The priority was to preserve borders, restore control over the enclave, and prevent Armenian influence from spreading. Unity with Armenia was unthinkable; unity with Georgia was impractical; unity with Chechnya was irrelevant.

Chechnya

Chechnya's ambitions were the most radical. Unlike the three Transcaucasian republics, Chechnya was not a union republic but part of the Russian Federation. Its declaration of independence in 1991 was a direct challenge to Moscow's authority, and its leaders envisioned a North Caucasian confederation stretching from the Black Sea to the Caspian. But Chechnya's project was too expansive, too destabilizing, and too threatening to both Russia and its neighbors.

Georgia feared spillover; Armenia and Azerbaijan were consumed by their own war; and no state in the region was willing to align itself with a separatist movement that might encourage separatism within its own borders.

The reason these four actors did not unite for independence is therefore structural. Each had incompatible territorial goals, different security needs, and conflicting national narratives. The Soviet system had created republics that were administratively adjacent but politically isolated, each encouraged to cultivate its own identity while remaining dependent on Moscow. When the center collapsed, the periphery did not cohere; it fragmented along the lines the USSR had drawn.

This fragmentation set the stage for the conflicts that followed.

The Transcaucasus emerged from 1991 not as a unified bloc but as a collection of rival states and insurgent movements, each pursuing sovereignty at the expense of the others.

Georgia fell into civil war and lost control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Armenia and Azerbaijan plunged into a devastating conflict over Karabakh.

Chechnya fought two wars against Russia, destabilizing the entire North Caucasus.

The region that had once served as Stalin's power base became a mosaic of contested borders, displaced populations, and unresolved grievances.

Divided, they would fall.

The absence of regional unity made each actor more vulnerable—to internal fragmentation, to external intervention, and to the geopolitical ambitions of larger powers.

The Transcaucasus, once the center of Stalin's consolidation, became the epicenter of post-Soviet disintegration, a place where independence was achieved not through cooperation but through conflict, and where the legacy of division continues to shape the region's fate.

Onto this troubled, strategic stage, Russian Intelligence under Yeltsin was put in motion.

FSK In Georgia

In Georgia, the FSK's involvement began almost immediately after the USSR dissolved.

The Georgian civil conflict of 1991–1993 - centered on the ouster of President Zviad Gamsakhurdia and the rise of Eduard Shevardnadze - created a chaotic environment in which Russian security organs intervened to protect Russian military assets, monitor separatist movements, and influence political outcomes.

The FSK inherited the KGB's networks in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, regions already in open revolt against Tbilisi. Its officers worked alongside Russian military intelligence (GRU) to support separatist militias, provide logistical assistance, and gather intelligence on Georgian troop movements.

The FSK did not command troops, but it acted as a liaison between Russian political authorities and local insurgent leaders, shaping the conflict's trajectory. Its operations were framed as "counterterrorism" in Russian internal documents, but in practice they were counterinsurgency efforts aimed at weakening Georgian central authority and preserving Russian influence in the Caucasus.

FSK In Chechnya

In Chechnya, the FSK confronted a far more direct and violent challenge.

When Dzhokhar Dudayev declared Chechnya independent in 1991, the FSK inherited responsibility for monitoring separatist networks, intercepting arms flows, and assessing the new republic's political stability. The agency's early reports to Yeltsin described Chechnya as a "zone of criminal-political extremism," blending Soviet terminology with the emerging language of counterterrorism.

The FSK attempted to infiltrate Dudayev's government, cultivate informants, and disrupt the formation of Chechen armed units. But the collapse of Soviet authority in the region left the agency with little operational infrastructure. Its officers were often confined to military bases or forced to rely on improvised networks of local collaborators.

By 1993, the FSK was warning that Chechnya was becoming a hub for arms trafficking, hostage-taking, and organized crime - assessments that shaped Yeltsin's decision to launch the First Chechen War in 1994.

We can debate the meaning of Yeltsin's rhetoric all day but, when it comes to the man's actions, Yeltsin varied in no way from Old Guard Russian nationalists in the KGB.

Although the first Chechen War began after the FSK had already been reorganized into the FSB, the intelligence groundwork was laid by the FSK's early counterinsurgency operations.

FSK in Armenia & Azerbaijan

In Armenia and Azerbaijan, the FSK inherited the KGB's long-standing involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

As the Soviet Union collapsed, Armenian and Azerbaijani militias fought for control of the region, and the FSK found itself monitoring two newly independent states whose conflict threatened Russian border security and regional stability.

The agency's officers in the Transcaucasus worked to track arms shipments, monitor militant groups, and prevent the conflict from spilling into Russian territory. They also attempted to maintain Russian influence by cultivating relationships with political elites in both Yerevan and Baku.

In internal reports, the FSK described the Karabakh conflict as a "terrorist-separatist threat," reflecting the agency's tendency to frame ethnic and territorial disputes through the lens of counterterrorism.

FSK operations were limited by the fact that Armenia and Azerbaijan were now sovereign states, but the FSK continued to operate through residual Soviet networks, border troops, and intelligence officers embedded in Russian military units stationed in the region.

Across all these conflicts, the FSK's role was shaped by three structural realities.

First, the FSK was a transitional institution, created quickly after the KGB's dissolution and lacking clear legal authority, operational doctrine, or political direction.

Second, the FSK inherited a Soviet worldview, seeing separatism not as a political phenomenon but as a form of extremism requiring security intervention.

Third, the FSK operated in a vacuum of state capacity, where the Russian Federation had not yet established stable borders, military command structures, or diplomatic frameworks.

The FSK's early counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations were therefore improvisational, reactive, and heavily dependent on Soviet-era networks. In Georgia, it acted as a covert political broker; in Chechnya, as an intelligence service struggling to contain a separatist republic; in Armenia and Azerbaijan, as a regional monitor attempting to prevent escalation.

These operations reveal that the FSK was not a new institution with a new ethos, but a continuation of the Soviet security apparatus under a new name, performing similar functions, just in a radically changed political environment.

The FSK, and thereby Yeltsin himself, was openly criticized in the Russian press, and in fact it was one of the first post-Soviet security institutions to face sustained public scrutiny. This was a striking departure from Soviet practice, where the KGB had been shielded from criticism by censorship, secrecy laws, and political taboo.

The FSK entered public life at a moment when the press was freer than at any time in Russian history, and journalists were eager to expose abuses, failures, and continuities with the Soviet past.

As a result, the FSK's reputation was shaped not only by its operations but by how those operations were reported, debated, and condemned in newspapers and television.

The criticism began almost immediately after the FSK was created in 1991–1992. Russian journalists, especially those writing for *Moskovskie Novosti*, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, *Argumenty i Fakty*, and *Ogonyok*, published stories alleging that the FSK was simply the KGB under a new name. They pointed out that the agency occupied the same Lubyanka headquarters, employed the same mid-level officers, and used the same operational manuals.

Articles described the FSK as "the KGB in civilian clothes" and accused it of resisting democratic oversight. This line of criticism was not merely rhetorical; it reflected a widespread fear that the Soviet security apparatus had survived the collapse of the USSR intact.

The press also criticized the FSK's performance in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations.

In the early 1990s, journalists reported that the agency had failed to prevent the rise of organized crime, had mishandled intelligence in separatist regions, and had been unable to stop high-profile kidnappings and bombings.

In Chechnya, reporters accused the FSK of providing inaccurate assessments to the Kremlin, contributing to the disastrous decision to launch the First Chechen War. In Georgia and the Transcaucasus, articles suggested that the FSK was meddling in local politics, supporting separatist factions, or acting as an extension of Russian geopolitical interests rather than a neutral security service.

One of the most damaging episodes came in 1993, when the FSK was accused of political bias during the constitutional crisis between Yeltsin and the Russian parliament.

Some newspapers alleged that the agency had spied on political opponents, leaked information to the Kremlin, or failed to prevent violence during the standoff. Although the FSK denied these claims, the perception that it was politically compromised deepened public distrust.

The FSK was also criticized for incompetence.

Russian journalists reported that the agency had failed to adapt to new forms of crime and extremism emerging in the post-Soviet environment. Articles described the FSK as bureaucratic, slow, and unable to coordinate effectively with the Interior Ministry or military intelligence.

Some stories mocked the agency's inability to prevent the theft of weapons from military bases or to track extremist groups operating openly in Moscow and the Caucasus.

By 1994–1995, the criticism had become so widespread that the FSK's legitimacy was in question. Reformers argued that the agency was structurally flawed, too closely tied to the KGB, and incapable of functioning as a modern security service.

Even Yeltsin's allies acknowledged that the FSK had become politically toxic.

This environment of public distrust and media scrutiny was one of the key reasons the agency was reorganized and renamed the FSB in April 1995. The reform was presented as a modernization effort, but it was also a political attempt to escape the negative associations that had accumulated around the FSK.

In short, the FSK was not only criticized - it was relentlessly and publicly attacked in the press during its brief existence. The criticism focused on its continuity with the KGB, its operational failures, its political entanglements, and its inability to adapt to the new security challenges of the post-Soviet era.

This sustained scrutiny prefaced its rebranding as the FSB in 1995.

As one might predict, when the FSK was reorganized into the FSB in 1995, many of its officers, methods, and regional networks remained intact. The institutional continuity between the KGB, FSK, and FSB is clearest in the Caucasus, where the same intelligence logic - control separatism, manage insurgency, preserve Russian influence - persisted across decades.

Despite Yeltsin's stated goal of depoliticizing the security services, the FSK was widely criticized for retaining KGB-era methods, including intrusive surveillance and heavy-handed internal security practices, contributing to the perception that the new agency represented continuity rather than reform.

In April 1995, the FSK was reorganized and renamed the Federal Security Service (FSB), marking the end of the name, not the institution.

1995–Present - FSB

The *Federal Security Service* is the modern successor to the KGB's internal security directorates. The FSB handles domestic intelligence, counterintelligence, counterterrorism, and political security. The closest U.S. equivalent would be a combination of the FBI's counterintelligence division and the Secret Service.

The Federal Security Service (FSB) was formally established on 3 April 1995, when President Boris Yeltsin signed Presidential Decree No. 40, reorganizing the short-lived Federal Counterintelligence Service (FSK) into a new, more expansive security organ.

Once more, by decree.

This decree is the statutory basis for the FSB and defined it as the primary agency responsible for counterintelligence, internal security, border protection, and the suppression of political extremism.

Later statutes - most notably Presidential Edict No. 806 (1998) and its successor Edict No. 960 (11 August 2003) - updated and expanded the FSB's structure and authorities, formally codifying its internal departments, leadership hierarchy, and broad mandate to "safeguard the security of the Russian Federation."

Edict. That's a new term. Refreshing, isn't it?

Now is a great time to pause and consider the history of Russian Intelligence as given by tracing the statutory authorities which created each agency.

Yeltsin's Decree No. 40 reorganizing the FSK into the FSB. But unlike its predecessors, the FSB's powers, structure, and mandate were subsequently codified in a federal law passed by the State Duma and signed by the president.

Yeltsin's FSB is the only agency in Russian Intelligence which rests its authority on a law passed by a Russia's legislature, but even that is misleading. This law, "On the Federal Security Service," was part of a broader effort to give the post-Soviet security organs a veneer of constitutional legitimacy.

Russia had adopted a new constitution in 1993, and the Yeltsin administration was under pressure - domestic and international - to demonstrate that the security services operated under legal constraints rather than purely executive fiat. The FSB law was therefore a symbolic gesture toward rule-of-law governance, even though in practice it restored many of the KGB's discretionary powers and permitted unpublished internal regulations to govern operations.

So, is the FSB an outlier?

In a narrow procedural sense, yes: the FSB is the only major Russian security organ whose foundational authority rests on a federal statute rather than *only* a decree. But in a substantive sense, no: the law did not meaningfully constrain the service, nor did it break with the Soviet tradition of opaque, executive-driven security governance.

The FSB's legal foundation was a hybrid - decree for creation, law for codification - reflecting the transitional nature of the mid-1990s state. It was an attempt to clothe a fundamentally Soviet-style institution in the garments of a constitutional democracy.

The deeper truth is that the FSB's statutory basis was less a sign of reform than a sign of political necessity. Yeltsin needed the security organs to be powerful enough to wage the Chechen War and manage internal dissent, but he also needed them to appear legitimate in the eyes of Western partners and domestic liberals.

The law served that dual purpose. It made the FSB look like a normal institution in a constitutional state, while simultaneously restoring the KGB's core authorities - surveillance, search, detention, and economic-security operations - under a new name.

Same shit, different toilet.

Since its establishment, the FSB has been headed by several directors. Sergei Stepashin served briefly in 1995, followed by Nikolai Kovalyov (1996–1998), who oversaw the agency during the First Chechen War. Vladimir Putin became director in 1998, using the position as a springboard to national leadership.

After Putin's elevation, Nikolai Patrushev (1999–2008) led the service through a period of consolidation and expansion of authority. Since 2008, Alexander Bortnikov has served as director, presiding over the FSB's transformation into the dominant security institution of the Russian state.

Reading the litany in chronological order, the FSB's history reads as follows:

Sergei Stepashin (1995)

Sergei Vadimovich Stepashin entered the world on 2 March 1952 in Port Arthur, the Soviet naval enclave on the Liaodong Peninsula. His father was an ethnic Russian naval officer serving with the Pacific Fleet, and his mother, also ethnically Russian, worked as a psychiatrist. When the family returned to Leningrad a few years later, Stepashin grew up in the disciplined, patriotic milieu typical of Soviet officer households, a background that shaped both his worldview and his career trajectory.

Stepashin attended the Higher Political School of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Leningrad, graduating in 1973 as a political officer for the Internal Troops. He later completed advanced ideological training at the Lenin Military-Political Academy and earned graduate degrees in history and law, positioning himself as both a practitioner and theorist of state security. His career through the late Soviet period unfolded entirely within the Internal Troops, where he rose through political-officer roles.

After the collapse of the USSR, Stepashin entered parliamentary politics, aligned himself with Boris Yeltsin during the 1993 constitutional crisis, and was rewarded with senior security posts.

In March 1994 Stepashin became director of the Federal Counterintelligence Service (FSK), the immediate successor to the KGB's domestic directorates. When the FSK was reorganized into the Federal Security Service (FSB) in April

1995, Stepashin became its first director, presiding over the agency's formative months until his removal in the aftermath of the Budyonnovsk hostage crisis.

Stepashin's tenure at the FSB was brief but consequential because it coincided with the escalation of the First Chechen War and the legal reconstitution of Russia's domestic security apparatus.

The new FSB law of 1995 restored investigative powers that had been curtailed after the Soviet collapse, reauthorized the service to conduct intelligence operations inside Russia and abroad, and granted broad rights of search, surveillance, and detention.

These reforms were framed as necessary to combat terrorism and separatism, but they also revived the opaque, discretionary authority that had characterized the KGB's domestic directorates.

Stepashin oversaw the security and counterintelligence components of the Chechen campaign, including covert operations preceding the invasion and internal-security measures aimed at suppressing separatist sympathizers.

Contemporary human-rights reporting and later analyses describe this period as marked by arbitrary detentions, coercive interrogations, and the use of security forces to intimidate or silence perceived opponents of the war.

The FSB's restored control over detention facilities and special-purpose units placed it at the center of a coercive apparatus that operated with minimal oversight, and although the most notorious atrocities of the conflict unfolded under later directors, Stepashin presided over the moment when the legal and operational foundations for those abuses were laid.

In other words, the Chekists were back in business.

The continuity with Soviet antecedents was unmistakable. The FSB inherited personnel, directorates, and institutional logic from the KGB, and the 1995 reforms reestablished the very powers that had defined Soviet domestic security: broad surveillance authority, political policing under the guise of counterintelligence, and the use of unpublished internal regulations to govern operations.

The service's mandate to conduct intelligence operations to enhance Russia's economic and scientific-technical potential echoed the KGB's fusion of security and economic interests. Even the organizational lineage—FSK to FSB—was a rebranding rather than a substantive break, and Stepashin's leadership style

reflected the Soviet tradition of political-military administrators overseeing domestic security rather than civilian reformers attempting to constrain it.

In practice, the FSB under Stepashin behaved as a reconstituted KGB directorate adapted to the political and economic realities of the mid-1990s.

Those economic realities were defined by the rise of the oligarchic economy, and the FSB's operations intersected with this transformation in ways that were subtle but significant. The Directorate of Economic Counterintelligence, inherited from the FSK, operated at a time when privatization, asset stripping, and the consolidation of wealth by politically connected businessmen were reshaping Russia's economic landscape.

The FSB's mandate to protect strategic industries and monitor economic activity gave it leverage over sectors undergoing rapid privatization. While Stepashin's brief tenure limits the documentation of specific interventions on behalf of or against particular oligarchs, the structural conditions were already in place.

The FSB's restored investigative authority, the ability to initiate criminal proceedings, and the power to conduct intelligence operations for economic purposes. These tools allowed the security service to act as an arbiter of economic disputes, a gatekeeper for access to state resources, and a potential instrument for political-economic bargaining.

The oligarchs who dominated the emerging economy - figures such as Berezovsky, Gusinsky, and Potanin - operated in an environment where the security organs could influence outcomes through selective enforcement, surveillance, or the threat of prosecution.

Conversely, the FSB itself was vulnerable to oligarchic influence, as businessmen sought protection, intelligence, or leverage through informal ties to security officials. Stepashin's tenure did not produce the overt fusion of security and oligarchic interests that would come to characterize the Putin era, but the institutional architecture he oversaw made such entanglements possible.

The Budyonnovsk Hostage Crisis

The Budyonnovsk hostage crisis of June 1995 was one of the most traumatic episodes of the First Chechen War, and it became the event that ended Sergei Stepashin's tenure as the first director of the newly created Federal Security Service.

To understand why it brought Stepashin down, it is necessary to see the crisis not only as a military and counterterrorism failure, but also as a

political reckoning for the entire security establishment that had been rebuilt under Stepashin's leadership.

The crisis began on 14 June 1995, when a Chechen raiding group led by Shamil Basayev crossed into Stavropol Krai and seized the small city of Budyonnovsk. Basayev's men attacked the local police station, then moved through the town taking hostages, ultimately herding more than 1,000 civilians into the city hospital. Their demands were political: an end to the war, withdrawal of Russian troops, and direct negotiations with Chechen leaders.

The raid was a deliberate attempt to force Moscow to confront the human cost of the conflict and to demonstrate that the war could not be contained within Chechnya's borders.

For three days the hospital became the center of a national crisis.

Russian forces—including Interior Ministry troops, local police, and units coordinated by the FSB—attempted to storm the building twice. Both assaults failed. The first was repelled with heavy gunfire; the second ended in chaos, with hostages killed in the crossfire and Russian forces forced to withdraw.

Television cameras captured the panic, the wounded civilians, and the inability of the security services to retake the hospital. The images shocked the country. They also revealed the fragmentation and dysfunction of Russia's security apparatus: unclear chains of command, competing agencies, and an absence of coherent strategy.

The political leadership eventually abandoned the assaults and turned to negotiation.

Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin personally spoke with Basayev by telephone, agreeing to a ceasefire in Chechnya and safe passage for the hostage-takers back to the republic. The deal was humiliating for Moscow.

Basayev's fighters left Budyonnovsk in buses, accompanied by volunteer hostages who served as human shields, and crossed back into Chechnya unharmed. The crisis ended with more than a hundred civilians dead and hundreds wounded. It was the most visible demonstration to date of the Russian state's inability to control the war it had launched.

Stepashin's downfall followed swiftly.

As director of the FSB, he was responsible for the intelligence, counterterrorism, and internal-security components of the war effort. The failure to anticipate Basayev's raid, the botched assaults on the hospital, and the broader collapse of coordination among security agencies were all laid at the feet of the institutions he oversaw.

Yeltsin needed a political sacrifice to signal accountability, and Stepashin - already weakened by criticism of the war's conduct - was the most visible candidate. On 30 June 1995, less than two weeks after the crisis, Yeltsin dismissed him and replaced him with Mikhail Barsukov, a loyalist from the Kremlin's security service.

The Budyonnovsk crisis exposed the hollowness of the reforms Stepashin had championed.

The FSB had been granted expanded powers earlier that year, ostensibly to strengthen internal security and counterterrorism capabilities. But the agency remained structurally similar to its Soviet predecessors: opaque, fragmented, and more attuned to political policing than to modern counterinsurgency.

The crisis demonstrated that the FSB could raid apartments, detain suspects, and conduct surveillance, but it could not manage a complex hostage situation or coordinate effectively with other ministries. The Soviet legacy of compartmentalized authority, rigid hierarchy, and political loyalty over operational competence had survived the transition to the Russian Federation.

Stepashin's removal was therefore not simply punishment for a single failure. It was a symbolic acknowledgment that the post-Soviet security organs had been rebuilt on unstable foundations.

The FSB's restored powers had not produced a more capable institution; they had produced a more powerful but still incoherent one.

Budyonnovsk forced the Kremlin to confront that reality, and Stepashin became the casualty of a crisis that revealed the limits of both his leadership and the reforms he had overseen.

Sergei Stepashin's fall after the Budyonnovsk hostage crisis was abrupt, but it did not end his career; instead, it redirected him into a different tier of political life, one defined less by operational command and more by administrative loyalty.

This was, again, unprecedented in Russian Intelligence. Granted, the “new rules” introduced by the Russian nationalists in the final years of the Soviet Union permitted a failed director to retire were still in place, but career rehabilitation, or “promotion out of harms way” was downright civilized.

When Boris Yeltsin dismissed Stepashin in June 1995, the act was meant to signal accountability for the catastrophic mishandling of the crisis, yet it was also a political maneuver designed to preserve the president’s own standing.

Stepashin was not disgraced in the way Soviet security chiefs had been during purges; he was removed as a symbol of failure, but not exiled from the state. His fate illustrates how the post-Soviet system treated senior officials: they could be sacrificed publicly without losing their place within the governing elite.

After Stepashin’s dismissal, he moved almost immediately into other high-level posts. Yeltsin appointed him Minister of Justice in 1997, a position that allowed him to remain within the administrative core of the government while distancing him from the security failures of the Chechen conflict.

Of course, the appointment raises particular concerns for anyone evaluating the degree to which Russian Intelligence saturated national institutions. Putting the former director of the FSB in charge of the Ministry of Justice illustrates either a shocking lack of judgement, or a shocking degree of intent.

In the interests of time, we won’t go there. Just remember, there is a there, there.

In 1998 Stepashin became Minister of Internal Affairs, returning to a domain closer to his professional background but without the direct responsibility for counterterrorism that had doomed him at the FSB.

Stepashin’s competence, loyalty, and lack of personal political ambition made him a safe figure for Yeltsin to recycle into sensitive roles. And recycle Stepashin, Yeltsin did.

At the end of the day, Yeltsin was teaching the Chekists that death or retirement was not the only results of failure. Life as an obedient proxy was also an option. Putin was taking notes.

The culmination of Stepashin’s rehabilitation came in May 1999, when Yeltsin appointed Stepashin Prime Minister. The appointment was widely understood as transitional: Yeltsin was searching for a successor he could trust, and Stepashin was a reliable placeholder who could stabilize the government without threatening the president’s inner circle.

Stepashin's premiership lasted only three months. In August 1999 Yeltsin replaced him with Vladimir Putin, whose assertiveness, security-service pedigree, and political instincts made him a more compelling candidate for succession.

Stepashin, mindful of his tenuous existence, accepted his removal without protest, reinforcing his reputation as a loyal servant of his Patron rather than a political rival.

The Accounts Chamber

After leaving the premiership, Stepashin entered the long twilight of Russian political life: influential, respected, but no longer central. In 2000 he became Chairman of the Accounts Chamber, Russia's state auditing authority, a position he held for more than a decade. The role suited him. It was prestigious, insulated from political conflict, and allowed him to remain part of the governing elite without exercising direct power.

But Stepashin remained on parole. Yeltsin needed an unwavering proxy in the Accounts Chamber, in order to cut the throats of any rival who came to the fore. The Blat economy remained in effect under Yeltsin, and corruption was still illegal, if ignored. Political rivals all understood the unspoken rules: Take what you want, as long as the job gets done, but expect to pay the bill if you don't stay in your lane.

As Chairman of the Accounts Chamber, Stepashin wielded the Sword of Damocles for Yeltsin.

Mikhail Barsukov in (1995-1996)

Mikhail Ivanovich Barsukov's brief tenure as director of the FSB from July 1995 to June 1996 sits at the intersection of Kremlin court politics, the unfinished transformation of the Soviet security apparatus, and the early entanglement of those organs with Russia's oligarchic economy.

Barsukov's biography is almost a textbook case of Soviet military-security socialization. Barsukov was born on 8 November 1947 in Lipetsk, an industrial city in the Russian SFSR. His family background was ethnically Russian and modestly military: his father, Ivan Barsukov, served as a non-commissioned officer and radio operator in the Soviet Army, while his mother worked in civilian service.

Barsukov attended local schools in Lipetsk before entering the Moscow Higher Military Command School in 1966, where he studied tactics and command. Upon graduation in 1970 he was commissioned into the KGB's Kremlin Regiment, part of the Ninth Chief Directorate responsible for guarding the Soviet leadership. He later completed further

training at the Frunze Military Academy, reinforcing his credentials as a professional officer within the security establishment.

Barsukov's entire career prior to the 1990s unfolded within the Kremlin's protective structures: he rose from platoon commander to company commander, then to deputy commandant of the Kremlin, and finally, after the collapse of the USSR, to commandant of the Kremlin and head of the Main Administration for Protection of the Russian Federation (GUO), the successor to the Ninth Directorate.

It was from this position—effectively the chief of presidential security and guardian of Yeltsin's physical and political safety—that Barsukov was elevated to director of the FSB in July 1995, following the dismissal of Sergei Stepashin after the Budyonnovsk hostage crisis.

Barsukov's operational priorities at the FSB reflected his origins in protective security rather than investigative counterintelligence. His appointment was part of a broader effort by Yeltsin and his inner circle, particularly bodyguard Aleksandr Korzhakov, to consolidate control over all "power ministries" in the wake of the First Chechen War and the 1993 constitutional crisis.

As head of GUO, Barsukov had already been instrumental in bringing elite units—such as the Alpha and Vympel special forces, the Presidential Regiment, and certain former KGB operational-technical units—under structures loyal to the president.

Once at the FSB, he continued this consolidation, tightening coordination between the service and the Kremlin's protective apparatus and ensuring that key operational assets were aligned with Yeltsin rather than with rival political factions.

In this respect, old Soviet habits proved hard to break. Though conformity to interpretations of socialist ideology was no longer operative as criterion, conformity remained an explicit, existential imperative.

The most visible operational episode associated with Barsukov's tenure was not in Chechnya but in Moscow: the Kizlyar–Pervomayskoye hostage crisis in January 1996 and, even more politically explosive, the June 1996 raid on Yeltsin's own campaign staff.

Kizlyar–Pervomayskoye Hostage Crisis

In the Kizlyar–Pervomayskoye episode, Chechen fighters led by Salman Raduyev seized hostages in Dagestan and retreated to the village of Pervomayskoye, where Russian forces—including units coordinated by the FSB—laid siege and launched assaults that resulted in significant civilian casualties and widespread destruction.

Clearly the fatal flaws in Russian Intelligence were not attributable to Stepashin. Stepashin was merely sacrificed, as was the modus operandi, to absolve the head of state of culpability.

Human-rights organizations later criticized the indiscriminate use of heavy weapons and the lack of concern for hostages' lives, seeing in the operation a continuation of the coercive, military-heavy approach that had characterized the First Chechen War. Barsukov's FSB played a central role in planning and coordinating these actions, reinforcing the perception that the service remained an instrument of brute force rather than a modern counterterrorism agency.

The June 1996 raid on the offices of Yeltsin's campaign, however, was the event that brought Barsukov down.

The Yeltsin Campaign Raid

Acting in concert with Korzhakov and Interior Minister Viktor Yerin, FSB officers detained two campaign operatives leaving the White House with a box of cash - allegedly undeclared campaign funds - and then raided campaign premises.

The operation was framed as an anti-corruption action, but it was widely interpreted as an internal power play by the security chiefs, who were hostile to the liberal reformers around Yeltsin, and suspicious of oligarchic influence on the campaign.

The raid threatened to delegitimize the presidential election and exposed the degree to which the FSB and GUO could be used as instruments in intra-elite struggles. The Oligarchs – who clearly now served as the Politburo's replacement institution - simply would not tolerate interference of Russian Intelligence in political affairs.

Under intense pressure from oligarchs and reformist politicians, Yeltsin dismissed Barsukov, Korzhakov, and Yerin on 20 June 1996, sacrificing his security chiefs to preserve the political coalition that would secure his re-election.

Documentable crimes against humanity under Barsukov, in the strict legal sense, are harder to pin directly on his short tenure, but the FSB under his leadership participated in operations that produced serious human-rights violations.

The Kizlyar–Pervomayskoye crisis involved shelling and assault tactics that disregarded civilian safety; the broader counterinsurgency campaign in the North Caucasus during 1995–1996 featured arbitrary detentions, torture, and extrajudicial killings carried out by various security forces, including units under FSB coordination.

Human-rights organizations such as Memorial and Human Rights Watch documented patterns of abuse in Chechnya and neighboring regions during this period, and while responsibility was diffuse—shared among the army, Interior Ministry, and FSB—the service's role in intelligence, planning, and special operations made it part of the coercive machinery.

Barsukov's background in protective security did not translate into restraint; instead, his focus on loyalty and force reinforced the Soviet-style reliance on overwhelming violence in internal conflicts.

The continuity of operational methods with Soviet antecedents under Barsukov was pronounced.

Barsukov had spent his entire career in the KGB's Ninth Directorate and its successors, guarding the leadership and managing elite units. His approach to the FSB emphasized control of special forces, loyalty to the president, and the use of security organs as instruments of political power.

The 1995 FSB law had already restored many KGB-style powers - search, surveillance, detention, and economic-security operations - and Barsukov's tenure did nothing to constrain them. Instead, he integrated the FSB more tightly into the Kremlin's command network, echoing the Soviet practice in which the KGB's domestic directorates served both as security organs and as tools for managing the elite.

Barsukov consolidation of Alpha and Vympel under presidentially loyal structures, his role in translating various military and security units into the orbit of GUO and the FSB, and his willingness to deploy these forces in domestic political struggles all reflected a deep continuity with Soviet operational logic: security as an extension of political command, not as a neutral institution bound by law.

The intersection of Barsukov's FSB with the oligarchic economy was direct and explosive.

By 1995–1996, figures such as Boris Berezovsky, Vladimir Gusinsky, and other "oligarchs" had become central to Yeltsin's political survival, financing his campaign and controlling major media outlets.

Barsukov and Korzhakov viewed these businessmen with suspicion, seeing them as rivals for influence over the president. The June 1996 raid on Yeltsin's campaign was, in effect, an attempt by the security chiefs to assert control over the financial and political machinery of the election, to expose or discipline the oligarchic funding networks, and perhaps to reassert the primacy of the Chekists over the new, Kapitalist elite.

The backlash that followed—driven by oligarchs and reformers who feared a security-service coup—demonstrated how deeply the FSB's operations had become entangled with the oligarchic economy. The service was no longer merely protecting the state; it was intervening in the flows of cash, media, and political influence that defined the new order.

Barsukov's fall marked a temporary victory for the oligarchs over the security chiefs, but it also revealed the structural reality: the FSB had the capacity to reach into economic and political "pies," and the oligarchs had both the motive and the leverage to push back.

After his dismissal, Barsukov faded from the center of power, but the institutional patterns he embodied persisted. His tenure showed how the post-Soviet FSB could be used as a tool of presidential court politics, how Soviet methods of control and coercion survived under new legal forms, and how the security organs were already entangled with the oligarchic economy that would later be partially tamed under Putin.

In that sense, Barsukov's brief moment in the sun was less an anomaly than a revealing snapshot of a system in flux: a Soviet-trained guardian of the Kremlin trying to navigate a state where money, media, and security were all instruments in the same struggle for power.

After June 1996, Barsukov did not return to any major state post. He was not prosecuted, investigated, or publicly censured. Instead, he was quietly reassigned to the reserve of the Federal Protective Service (FSO), the successor to the GUO he had once commanded.

This was a face-saving arrangement: Barsukov retained rank, pension, and privileges, but no operational authority. In effect, he was placed on a shelf—still inside the system, but no longer able to influence it.

Barsukov would serve out a life sentence in obscurity rather than the death Chekists once demanded. Barsukov's removal was political, not institutional; the Kremlin wanted him removed from the FSB, but did not want to create a point of gossip, much less a martyr.

Barsukov spent the remainder of his life in Moscow, living as a retired general with access to the social networks, medical care, and financial stability that accompany high-ranking service in the security organs. He did not write memoirs, give interviews, or attempt to rehabilitate his public image.

This silence was characteristic of his generation of security officers, who had been trained in the KGB's culture of discretion and who understood that public visibility

after dismissal could be dangerous. Barsukov's retreat from public life was therefore both instinctive and prudent.

Barsukov remained connected to the Chekist milieu, attending occasional veterans' events and maintaining relationships with former colleagues in the FSO and FSB. But he played no role in politics during the Putin era.

Unlike some of his contemporaries - such as Viktor Cherkesov or Sergei Ivanov - Barsukov did not become part of the new ruling coalition.

Barsukov's fall in 1996 had severed his path to further advancement, and Putin's rise brought in a different cohort of St. Petersburg security men whose loyalties and networks did not include him.

Barsukov died on 23 September 2020 at the age of seventy-two. His passing was noted briefly in Russian media, mostly in the form of terse obituaries that emphasized his service in the Kremlin Guard and his short tenure at the FSB. There was no political commentary, no reassessment of his role in the turbulent mid-1990s, and no attempt to situate him within the broader history of the security services.

Barsukov's death, like his retirement, was intentionally unremarked.

Nikolai Kovalyov (1996–1998)

Nikolai Dmitrievich Kovalyov's tenure as director of the Federal Security Service from 1996 to 1998 sits at a transitional moment in the evolution of Russia's post-Soviet security apparatus, a period marked by institutional consolidation, political turbulence, and the entanglement of security organs with the emerging oligarchic economy. His biography reflects the continuity of Soviet professional pathways continuing into the Russian Federation's new institutions.

Born on 6 August 1949 in Moscow to an ethnically Russian working-class family, Kovalyov grew up in the capital and entered technical education rather than the political-military schools that had shaped his predecessor Sergei Stepashin. He graduated from the Moscow Institute of Electronic Machine Building in 1972, trained as a mechanical engineer, and worked briefly in semiconductor design before joining the KGB in 1974.

Kovalyov's early career unfolded in the Fifth Chief Directorate, the branch responsible for suppressing dissent and monitoring ideological reliability, a lineage that placed him squarely within the Soviet tradition of political policing. He later served in Afghanistan

from 1987 to 1989 as a KGB counterintelligence officer embedded with Soviet forces, conducting negotiations with mujahideen and securing military convoys.

By 1991 Kovalyov had risen to deputy chief of the Moscow KGB directorate, and after the collapse of the USSR he became deputy director of the Federal Counterintelligence Service. When Boris Yeltsin dismissed Mikhail Barsukov in 1996, Kovalyov—already acting director—was appointed to lead the FSB, a role he held until July 1998.

Kovalyov's tenure was defined by the aftermath of the First Chechen War, the rise of organized crime, and the political instability of the late Yeltsin era.

Kovalyov's most public operational initiative was a sweeping counterintelligence campaign. In 1996 he boasted that the FSB had arrested more spies than at any time since the Second World War, a claim reflecting both the agency's desire to demonstrate relevance and its return to Soviet-style counterintelligence priorities.

Kovalyov also oversaw operations against Chechen separatist networks, including efforts to disrupt financing, arms flows, and insurgent cells that persisted after the formal end of the war in 1996. These operations were part of a broader internal-security strategy that blended counterterrorism with political policing, a continuity of Soviet practice adapted to the new environment of separatist conflict and criminal proliferation.

Documentable crimes against humanity or oppressive campaigns during Kovalyov's tenure are less overt than those associated with the height of the Chechen conflict, but the FSB's activities nonetheless contributed to patterns of coercion and abuse. Human-rights organizations documented arbitrary detentions, coercive interrogations, and extrajudicial actions against suspected insurgents and criminal groups during this period.

These practices were not unique to Kovalyov's leadership; they reflected the institutional culture of the security organs, which had regained broad search and detention powers under the 1995 FSB law.

Kovalyov's background in the Fifth Chief Directorate—an entity historically responsible for suppressing dissent—reinforced the continuity of political policing. His FSB maintained surveillance of journalists, activists, and political opponents, and the agency's internal-security operations frequently blurred the line between counterterrorism and political intimidation.

While the most severe atrocities of the Chechen conflict occurred before and after his tenure, the coercive architecture enabling them remained intact under his leadership. This continuity with Soviet antecedents was both structural and ideological: Ethnic groups and nationalist movements, other than those of Russia, were, by default,

regarded as hostile to the interests of the Russian Federation, to be opposed and repressed.

Kovalyov's career path - from KGB political policing to Afghan counterintelligence to post-Soviet security leadership - embodied the seamless transition of personnel and methods from the USSR to the Russian Federation.

The FSB under Kovalyov's direction retained the KGB's operational logic: broad surveillance authority, counterintelligence as political control, and the use of unpublished internal regulations to govern sensitive operations. His emphasis on espionage arrests and ideological vigilance echoed Soviet priorities, and his public rhetoric often framed internal threats in Cold War terms.

The functional distinction between Soviet Intelligence and Russian Intelligence was becoming clearer. Russian Intelligence would openly operationalize that which was always implicit in Soviet Intelligence: the supremacy of Russian interests, in all domains of culture, over those of all others.

Toward Russians, the intelligence agencies of the Russian Federation would feign democratic protocols, but to all others, Chekist methods were reflexively applied. The institutional reforms of the mid-1990s had not transformed the security organs; they had merely rebranded them.

Kovalyov presided over an agency that behaved as a modernized KGB directorate, equipped with new legal powers but guided by legacy, Chekist impulses.

The intersection of FSB operations with the oligarchic economy during Kovalyov's tenure was subtle but significant. The mid-1990s were defined by chaotic privatization, the rise of powerful business clans, and the proliferation of organized crime.

The FSB's Directorate of Economic Security, descended from Soviet economic-counterintelligence units, played an increasingly important role in monitoring financial flows, protecting "strategic enterprises," and intervening in disputes involving major business figures.

In every respect, the FSB was serving Russia's emergent Oligarchs as mob bosses in the West served rival factions, as mediators and, where necessary, enforcers. The FSB did so at a cost. Remuneration remains off the books. Blat lives on.

Kovalyov's FSB operated in an environment where oligarchs such as Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky wielded enormous political influence, and where security organs could be used as instruments in economic conflicts.

Kovalyov himself publicly speculated about Berezovsky's involvement in the death of Alexander Litvinenko years later, a remark that reflected the entanglement of security and oligarchic politics.

Although direct evidence of Kovalyov personally directing operations on behalf of or against specific oligarchs is limited, the structural conditions were clear: the FSB had the authority to initiate criminal cases, conduct surveillance, and influence economic outcomes, and oligarchs had both the motive and the means to cultivate relationships within the security apparatus.

The pies were large, and the fingers - both of the FSB and of the oligarchs - were often in each other's domains.

Kovalyov's dismissal in July 1998 reflected the political volatility of the Yeltsin era rather than a specific operational failure. He was promoted to Army General earlier that year, but the Kremlin's shifting alliances and the need for a more assertive security chief led Yeltsin to replace him with Vladimir Putin.

Under the new rules, Kovalyov was promoted out of harm's way. He transitioned into a long parliamentary career, chairing committees on security and veterans' affairs, and remained a loyal figure within the political establishment until his death in 2019.

His tenure at the FSB thus represents a period of consolidation rather than transformation: a time when Soviet methods persisted under new legal forms, when internal security was shaped by both separatist conflict and criminal proliferation, and when the security organs quietly embedded themselves in the emerging oligarchic economy.

Kovalyov did not redefine Russian Intelligence; he preserved it, maintaining the continuity of a system that would soon be reshaped more dramatically under his successor.

Toward the end of Kovalyov's tenure, the sins of the FSB had convinced many in the West that the Chekists had survived the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and Russian Intelligence was conducting business in much the same way.

Boris Yeltsin need a cathartic moment, a demonstrative way to appease the critiques an absolve Mother Russia of sins committed on his watch. The problem was that the usual suspects could no longer be blamed, and the Soviets no longer existed.

That didn't matter to Yeltsin. He knew where there bodies were buried. Literally.

Yeltsin decided to exhume and reinter the Roman Family.

Anastasia's Funeral

Yeltsin's decision to exhume and reinter the Romanov family in St. Petersburg in 1998 was not a single moment but the culmination of a long, politically fraught process that began with the discovery of the remains near Yekaterinburg in 1979, their confirmation in the early 1990s, and the state's desire to close a symbolic wound left open since 1918.

The burial took place on **17 July 1998**, exactly eighty years after the murders. The ceremony took place in the **St. Catherine Chapel** of **Peter and Paul Cathedral**, the traditional resting place of Russia's emperors.

The decision itself came early that year, when a government commission recommended that the remains be interred in St. Petersburg and proposed the anniversary date.

Yeltsin accepted the recommendation, framing the burial as an act of national repentance. Yeltsin later said that Russia needed to "close a bloody century" and acknowledge the "monstrous crime" committed against the imperial family.

No truer words had ever been spoken in Russia.

The exhumations that made the burial possible had been controversial from the beginning. The bodies were found in a forest grave near Yekaterinburg, close to the site of the Ipatiev House where the Romanovs were executed. The remains were studied extensively, and scientists concluded with high confidence - 97 percent likelihood - that they belonged to Nicholas II, Alexandra, three of their daughters, and four loyal attendants.

Yet the Russian Orthodox Church disputed the findings, arguing that only a small circle of experts had access to the identification methods. Patriarch Alexei II refused to officiate at the burial, and many Russians shared his skepticism.

The remains were prepared for transport with solemn care. Before leaving Yekaterinburg, they received a final blessing in the local cathedral. Nine small coffins - one for each identified individual - were laid in state. From the airport, they were taken by car to the center of St. Petersburg, marked only by flags and black ribbons.

The ceremony was intentionally modest, partly because of the Church's refusal to participate, and partly because Russia was in the midst of severe financial turmoil.

The burial itself was not a full state funeral, though it had elements of one. Yeltsin attended, reversing an earlier decision to stay away out of deference to the Orthodox hierarchy.

Diplomats from more than fifty countries were present, along with dozens of Romanov relatives. Prince Nikolay Romanov, speaking for the family, expressed gratitude that Yeltsin had chosen to attend.

Inside the Peter and Paul Cathedral, the coffins were laid beneath **fake marble tombstones**, a compromise solution that reflected both the desire for dignity and the constraints of the moment.

Some members of a rival branch of the dynasty boycotted the event, complaining that the ceremony was not grand enough and holding their own memorial outside Moscow.

Regardless of status, station or political position, the attendees all clearly agreed it would have been better for all involved if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

The chapel itself is today open to the public, and the Romanov tombs remain a site of pilgrimage, reflection, and political symbolism.

Anastasia may now be at eternal rest, with her family, and where she belongs, but the funeral cannot constitute closure as long as the Russian Intelligence apparatus which put her there persists in power.

Russia remains an intelligence apparatus with a state, not a state with an intelligence apparatus. That apparatus has sidestepped justice throughout its existence simply by peeling the label off it's blood stained cloak and painting itself a new sign.

Following the defeat of the last of the Soviet Chekists, the strong men, or "siloviki" assumed control over Russia.

To Silovikistan we at last turn.

Silovikistan

We've arrived at the star of the show, Vladimir Putin, for he embodies all that went wrong with Russian Intelligence, with Russia at large, since Anastasia's was exterminated.

One could correctly argue Vladimir Putin is the inevitable construct of a system predicated on unmitigated psychosis. Anyone is shocked by how detached Putin appears to the violence he unleashed on the world, has been asleep.

Where to begin?

I generally begin with the birth and early family life of my subject. But in Putin's case, we really have to start with the "siloviki".

It was Vladimir Putin who empowered the siloviki, and turned the Russian Federation into Silovikistan, but Putin did not invent the siloviki. The siloviki had been there all along. The siloviki are the psychotics who, having convinced themselves they were the next best thing in human evolution, decided to get on top and stay on top.

That really is all there is to the siloviki. The siloviki were known, prior to Putin, as "Chekists", the cutthroats responsible for the dystopian nightmare inevitable under Marxism.

Historically, until Putin, the Chekists never managed to dominate the system for long or, where they did, they turned on each other. When Gorbachev relaxed the rules, emphasized practical reforms in advance of socialist ideology, Gorbachev relieved the Soviet Apparatchiki from the Paradox of the Proletariat.

By Gorbachev's day, nobody cared who qualified as the "Proletariat". Blat had long since replaced revolutionary integrity, an evolution which, while dysfunctional and pathetic by western standards, was a decisive improvement. Because Russian Intelligence was now free of the socialist imperative for unanimity, the Chekists finally agreed they should all become fabulously rich.

The Siloviki

> The term *siloviki*—literally "men of force" or "men of power"—is one of the most revealing concepts in the political vocabulary of post-Soviet Russia. It describes a caste of officials drawn from the security organs, the military, the intelligence services, and the coercive ministries, who gradually evolved from a informal professional association into a shadow committee of state power.

The rise of the Siloviki was not sudden; it unfolded over decades, beginning as a rhetorical shorthand in the late Soviet period and becoming a structural reality under Vladimir Putin. To understand the Siloviki is to understand how the Soviet security state survived the collapse of the USSR, and emerged in new institutional clothing.

The origins of the term lie in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when journalists and political scientists began referring to the "power ministries"—the KGB, the Interior Ministry, the Defense Ministry, and their successor agencies—as *silovye struktury*, the "force structures."

The individuals who staffed these institutions were sometimes called *siloviki*, but at first the word carried no implication of political dominance.

To distinguish between the informal pejorative, and the Shadow Agency they became, I employ "Siloviki" with a capital "S". The "siloviki" were apparatchiks of state security and military services, and their retirees. The Siloviki are the same, increasingly given license to conduct shadow ops under Vladimir Putin's regime.

The Siloviki are the Chekists brought back to life under Putin.

Siloviki was originally descriptive rather than analytical: a way of distinguishing security professionals from civilian bureaucrats. During the Yeltsin era, the term appeared in commentary about the internal struggles between reformers and hardliners, especially during the 1993 constitutional crisis and the First Chechen War.

Even then, however, the siloviki were not yet a coherent political faction. They were a dispersed community of officers, generals, and administrators. Their institutional instincts were shaped by Soviet training, but their political influence was inconsistent and often subordinated to oligarchic interests.

The transformation of the siloviki from a rhetorical category into a socio-political phenomenon began in the mid-1990s, when the security organs regained powers lost during the chaotic early years of the Russian Federation.

The 1995 FSB law restored broad surveillance and investigative authority; the Interior Ministry expanded its paramilitary units; and the presidential security service (GUO) became a formidable institution under figures like Aleksandr Korzhakov and Mikhail Barsukov.

These developments created the conditions for a new elite composed of men whose careers had been forged in the KGB, the army, or the police. They shared

a worldview shaped by hierarchy, secrecy, and the belief that the state's stability depended on its coercive capacity.

But the siloviki were still not a unified political force. Their influence was episodic, often tied to the personal networks of Yeltsin's bodyguards or the ambitions of individual generals. The siloviki became a true political phenomenon only with the rise of Vladimir Putin.

Putin's own biography - KGB officer, deputy mayor, FSB director, prime minister - made him the first post-Soviet leader whose identity was inseparable from the security organs. When Putin entered the presidency in 2000, he brought with him a cohort of trusted associates from the FSB, the St. Petersburg mayor's office, and the KGB's Leningrad networks.

Leningrad. The Leningrad Affair taught the apparatchiki in that city to bide their time, and orient their outward face to whichever way the wind was blowing in the Kremlin.

Putin was a student of that school of survival. That does not mean these men lacked ambition. The original imperative of the Chekists, to get on top and stay on top, ran thick in their veins.

Putin's most trusted were four men - Igor Sechin, Nikolai Patrushev, Sergei Ivanov, Viktor Cherkesov, and others - formed the acknowledged nucleus of what would soon be recognized as the Siloviki faction. Siloviki with a capital "S".

These men were not merely four officials from the "power ministries"; they were the leaders of a disciplined network whose loyalty was personal, whose worldview was statist, and whose methods were shaped by the operational culture of the Soviet security state.

Under Putin, the Siloviki grew into a shadow committee of state power. They occupied key positions across the government: the Security Council, the FSB, the Interior Ministry, the Prosecutor General's Office, the Federal Protective Service, and major state corporations.

The influence of these Siloviki extended into the economy, where they oversaw or penetrated strategic sectors such as energy, defense, transportation, and banking. These men were the reconstituted Chekist grafting themselves onto the growing Oligarchic economy.

The Siloviki were the Proletariat cum Kapitalists.

The Yukos affair in 2003–2004 marked the moment when the Siloviki asserted dominance over the oligarchic economy, using prosecutorial and security tools

to dismantle Mikhail Khodorkovsky's oil empire and redistribute its assets to state-aligned corporations controlled by Siloviki networks.

This was not merely an economic intervention; it was a demonstration of political supremacy. The Siloviki had become the arbiters of property, the managers of strategic industries, and the enforcers of political discipline.

The rise of the Siloviki was facilitated, if not predicted by the structural continuity of Soviet institutions. This interagency network was allowed to collude because the original network of agencies weer allowed to remain in place.

The FSB inherited the KGB's domestic directorates; the GRU survived almost unchanged; the Interior Ministry retained its vast internal-security apparatus. These institutions provided the Siloviki with the tools of surveillance, coercion, and administrative control. But more important than all of that was the fraternal solidarity the operatives maintained toward each other.

The Siloviki were, in every respect, all that remained of the Soviet apparatus.

But the Siloviki were more than the sum of these agencies. They were a political class whose cohesion rested on shared professional origins, shared loyalties, and shared interests. They operated through informal networks, personal patronage, and opaque decision-making processes.

The power of the Siloviki was not codified in law; it was embedded in the machinery of the state.

By the mid-2000s, the Siloviki had become the dominant faction within the Russian elite. They shaped foreign policy, domestic security, economic strategy, and the management of political opposition. Their worldview - suspicious of liberalism, hostile to Western influence, and committed to centralized authority - became the ideological foundation of the Russian state.

Above all, the Siloviki embraced and embodied Kapitalism, the complete adoption of Marx's nightmare, as their economic modus operandi.

The Siloviki were not a junta, nor a formal committee, but a shadow governance structure whose influence permeated every major decision. Their rise marked the end of the chaotic pluralism of the Yeltsin era, and the beginning of a new political order, an order in which the security organs were not merely instruments of the state. but the core of its ruling class.

In other words, the Chekist managed to pull off a bloodless coup.

This, more than liberal benevolence, explains the new rules for career apparatchiki. Death was removed as a consequence of rivalry within Russian Intelligence because Russian Intelligence was no longer the arena of power.

With the rise of the Siloviki, the arena of power transcended the state and remains, to this very moment, in the shadows. Like dark matter, we only know of the existence of the Siloviki by the traces it leaves in Russian political life, and the path its victims trace through the air as they plummet from open windows.

Among Western analysts, the rise of the Siloviki is attributed to Putin, but Putin himself was just an understudy of Yeltsin, trained in Chekist traditions, but himself, loyal to a fault. When Putin found himself increasingly alone, when there remained no one to be loyal to, Putin remained loyal to the Siloviki.

No, the Siloviki don't owe their existence to Vladimir Putin. The Siloviki owe their existence to Boris Yeltsin, the Godfather of Blat.

The true origins of the Siloviki will be found, when it is finally documentable, in Perestroika, when the KGB struggled to understand how graft worked in a "free market economy". Yeltsin taught the siloviki the subtle distinction between extortion and "protection".

Vladimir Putin was among the original siloviki who put Yeltsin's lessons to immediate use.

Vladimir Putin (1995-1999)

Putin was born on 7 October 1952 in Leningrad, in an ethnically Russian working-class family; his father was a factory worker and wartime veteran, his mother a homemaker. He studied law at Leningrad State University, graduating in 1975, and was recruited directly into the KGB, where he served in the First Chief Directorate (foreign intelligence), most notably in Dresden in the German Democratic Republic during the 1980s.

After the collapse of the GDR and his return to Leningrad, he shifted into municipal politics as an aide, and then deputy to Mayor Anatoly Sobchak, handling external relations and economic contacts.

In 1996, after Sobchak's defeat, Putin was brought to Moscow by Anatoly Chubais and went to work in Yeltsin's administration, first as deputy chief of the Main Control Directorate (audit) and then as first deputy chief of the presidential administration.

In July 1998, Boris Yeltsin appointed him director of the FSB, succeeding Nikolai Kovalyov. In March 199, Putin became Secretary of the Security Council and, in August 1999, Putin was elevated to Prime Minister.

In the way of observation, nobody, not even Putin, could have managed such a faultless rise to power if he had not been chosen from above. Putin advanced up the ladder of Yeltsin's post-Soviet apparatus because he was hard working, kept his opinion to himself and, above all, jealously guarded the interests of those who appointed him.

Putin's mercurial rise to Prime Minister itself is indicative of the Blat he managed on behalf of Yeltsin. Putin's original position in the Main Control Directorate is the secret to his success. The position, that of an auditor, meant Putin wielded a Sword of Damocles for Yeltsin.

Historians at a loss to explain how Putin amassed his fortune, need look no further than Putin's role as auditor. For every favor he called in for Yeltsin, Putin was sure to retain a percentage for himself. In the Yeltsin years, state enterprises were being cannibalized at unprecedented rates, so the fractions added up.

Mind you, no acceptable assessment has ever been made on Vladmir Putin's wealth, but he is acknowledged by all credible sources to be the richest man in Europe, if not the world. Putin managed that trick having never held a job outside government.

And Putin never needed to ask for the "honoraria" he received. Oligarchs interested in a floundering state enterprise knew there were tolls to be paid, especially to the siloviki in the audit departments. This is how "Kapitalism" worked. Just read Marx.

Speaking strictly of Putin as FSB director, Putin's major operational initiatives were less about spectacular single events than about institutional consolidation and political alignment.

Putin inherited an agency that had already regained broad powers under the 1995 FSB law, and had been used in intra-elite struggles under Barsukov and Kovalyov. Putin's first priority was to restore discipline, and loyalty, within the service, aligning it with the Kremlin's emerging strategy to recentralize authority after the chaotic Yeltsin years.

Tellingly, Putin reorganized senior personnel, promoted trusted colleagues from his St. Petersburg and KGB networks, and tightened the link between the FSB and the Security Council, which he would soon chair.

From the outset it was clear, Putin was staging for the next phase of his career in every phase of his career. Behind him, Putin left well compensated siloviki. Ahead of him, Putin cultivated grateful patrons.

Never, even once, did Putin wander outside his lane. Putin never expressed an opinion about those above him in the machine, or fail to reward those below him in the machine. Putin epitomized the new rules: Everyone kept their mouths shut and everyone received a cut.

Operationally, the FSB under Putin intensified its focus on Chechen separatist networks, organized crime, and corruption, and laying the groundwork for the more aggressive campaigns that would follow…once he became prime minister and president.

Putin's tenure coincided with growing concern in Moscow about insurgent activity in the North Caucasus and the perceived weakness of federal control. The FSB's intelligence and internal-security operations were increasingly framed as tools to restore "order" in a fragmented state. This reflex to "restore order" was, in truth, a compulsion to re-establish control.

Documentable crimes against humanity in the strict legal sense are difficult to attribute directly to Putin's short period as FSB director, but the agency's activities during this time contributed to patterns of coercion and abuse that were already well entrenched. Putin was the author of none of Russian Intelligence's crimes. Putin simply drove his wagon in well worn ruts.

Human-rights organizations continued to report arbitrary detentions, torture, and extrajudicial actions in the North Caucasus and elsewhere, carried out by various security forces, including units under FSB coordination. The institutional architecture enabling such abuses - broad search and detention powers, opaque internal regulations, and minimal judicial oversight - remained intact and was not curtailed under Putin's leadership.

More controversially, Putin's later political rise has been shadowed by allegations that elements of the FSB were involved in the 1999 apartment bombings in Moscow and other cities, attacks that killed hundreds and served as the pretext for launching the Second Chechen War and boosting Putin's popularity.

These allegations, advanced by dissidents such as Alexander Litvinenko and some investigative journalists, have never been proven in court, and are denied by Russian authorities, but they illustrate the degree to which the FSB under and after Putin was perceived as capable of lethal covert operations against civilians.

These allegations were saying "The Siloviki are Chekists". And it is in these accusations that the West had to acknowledge formal "opposition" within Russia to Putin's Shadow: The Siloviki.

The continuity of operational methods with Soviet antecedents under Putin was profound. Putin's own origins within the KGB meant that he understood and valued the traditional tools of the Soviet security state: pervasive surveillance, political policing under the guise of counterintelligence, and the use of secret decrees and internal instructions to govern sensitive operations.

As FSB director, Putin did not seek to transform the agency into a Western-style intelligence service bound by transparent legal constraints; instead, he refined its Soviet-derived methods and integrated them more tightly into the presidential system.

The FSB's domestic intelligence, economic-security, and counterterrorism functions continued to operate within a culture of secrecy and hierarchy, and the service's role as an instrument of elite management - monitoring governors, businessmen, and political opponents - expanded.

Beria will have been proud of Vladimir Putin. Beria may eve have been jealous of Putin, for Putin managed to accomplish what Beria intended without openly spilling blood. Putin was, in this sense, an indictment of Beria's Chekist formula, for terror was more effective as a distinct possibility than an open practice.

Putin's subsequent use of the FSB and Siloviki forms the backbone of his regime, and underscores that his directorship was less a break with the past than a bridge to a Chekist future, a Kapitalist future.

Putin studied Russian history well, then took a Soviet-shaped institution and prepared it to become the core of a new, security-centered state. The intersection of FSB operations with the oligarchic economy during Putin's tenure formed the fulcra on which Putin's ambition rested and operated.

By 1998, Russia's economy was dominated by oligarchs who had acquired vast assets through loans-for-shares privatization, and who wielded significant influence over Yeltsin's politics. At the same time, the 1998 financial crisis had exposed the fragility of this patronage system.

During economic downturns, fortunes were lost and fewer oligarchs remained in the aftermath. During those same economic downturns, the fortunes of the Siloviki grew, and their numbers increased.

As FSB director, Putin oversaw economic-security units that monitored financial flows, banking practices, and strategic enterprises. He began to cultivate a reputation as a man who could "bring the oligarchs to heel" without destabilizing the state.

The FSB's ability to open criminal cases, conduct surveillance, and gather compromising material, made Putin's FSB a powerful lever in negotiations between the

Kremlin and major business figures. While the dramatic confrontations with oligarchs - such as the Yukos affair and the reconfiguration of the energy sector - would occur later, under his presidency, the logic of those moves was already visible: the security organs would be used to reassert state control over strategic assets and to discipline or remove oligarchs who resisted.

In this sense, the FSB under Putin had its fingers in the oligarchs' pies, while the oligarchs were manipulating patrons of their own within the FSB: Businessmen bought protection and influence through ties to security officials, while the service positioned itself as the arbiter of which fortunes were secure and which were vulnerable.

No observer could credibly state who led in this Kapitalist dance, but, since the FSB factions survived economic shocks that oligarchs did not, the oligarchs were clearly the junior partners. Reinforcing this interpretation of the dynamics, there are many cases of the FSB removing oligarchs, and no cases of an oligarch removing anyone from the FSB.

Putin's tenure as FSB director ended when he was moved to the Security Council in March 1999, a promotion that signaled his emergence as the central figure in Yeltsin's succession planning.

Putin rose as quickly, and as surely as he did, because he captained his colleagues in securing Yeltsin's interests. Thus did the rhetorical siloviki emerge as the Siloviki with a capital "S".

The institutional and political patterns Putin set in motion during those short months as head of the FSB endured. Putin used the FSB to consolidate the siloviki, to prepare the ground for a renewed war in Chechnya, and to embed the security organs in the management of the oligarchic economy.

When Putin became prime minister, and then president, he did not need to reinvent the FSB; he simply expanded the role he imagined for it: the quiet, pervasive, and often coercive backbone of a state in which the he and the Siloviki ruled from the shadows.

That, of course, left no room for maneuver for all who followed Putin at the FSB. The only option for forward for FSB leadership following Putin was to sustain a system which governed from the shadows.

Nikolai Patrushev (1999–2008)

Nikolai Platonovich Patrushev's tenure as director of the Federal Security Service from 1999 to 2008 was the period in which the FSB ceased to be merely the post-Soviet successor to the KGB and became the central governing institution of the Russian state.

Patrushev's biography reflects the deep continuity of Soviet security culture.

Patrushev was born on 11 July 1951 in Leningrad to an ethnically Russian family of engineers and technicians. His father worked in a shipbuilding design bureau, and his mother was employed in the industrial sector. He studied engineering at the Leningrad Shipbuilding Institute, graduating in 1974, and entered the KGB shortly thereafter.

Patrushev's early career unfolded in the Second Chief Directorate, responsible for counterintelligence and internal surveillance. He rose steadily through the Leningrad KGB, working alongside other future members of the siloviki cohort, including Vladimir Putin.

After the collapse of the USSR, Patrushev remained in the security organs, joining the Federal Counterintelligence Service and then the FSB. When Putin became FSB director in 1998, Patrushev was appointed his deputy; when Putin moved to the Security Council in 1999, Patrushev succeeded him as director. His tenure lasted nearly a decade, making him the longest-serving head of the FSB in post-Soviet history.

Patrushev's stability in the post has less to do with his professional skills than the removal of socialist ideology from the intelligence and security milieux. Patrushev merely inherited a network of agencies which had conquered its internal purge reflex. But because Russian Intelligence retained all of its other objectionable features, that was not necessarily a good thing, not for the Russian people.

The Paradox of the Proletariat was no longer operating on the apparatus, and so it became free, under Putin, to realize it's pervasive, dystopian form.

Patrushev's major operational initiatives were shaped by the Second Chechen War, the consolidation of Putin's political authority, and the transformation of the FSB into the dominant institution of the Russian state. The FSB under Patrushev played a central role in the 1999–2000 Chechen campaign, providing intelligence, coordinating special operations, and overseeing counterinsurgency measures across the North Caucasus.

The agency's operations extended beyond battlefield intelligence into the management of civilian populations, filtration camps, and the suppression of suspected separatist sympathizers. Patrushev also oversaw the FSB's expanding role in counterterrorism after the 2002 Moscow theater siege and the 2004 Beslan school massacre.

In both cases, the FSB's operational decisions—particularly the use of lethal force and the secrecy surrounding casualties—became emblematic of the agency's preference for overwhelming coercion rather than negotiation or transparency.

Under Patrushev, the FSB also intensified its surveillance of political opposition, NGOs, journalists, and regional elites, embedding itself deeply in the machinery of domestic governance.

Documentable crimes against humanity and oppressive campaigns during Patrushev's tenure are substantial and widely reported by human-rights organizations. In Chechnya and the broader North Caucasus, the FSB participated in or coordinated operations involving torture, disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and collective punishment. Filtration camps—temporary detention centers used to screen civilians for suspected insurgent ties—became notorious for systematic abuse.

The European Court of Human Rights issued numerous judgments against Russia for violations committed during this period, including cases involving arbitrary detention, torture, and unlawful killings.

The FSB's role in counterterrorism also produced grave human-rights concerns. During the Moscow theater siege, the decision to use an undisclosed chemical agent to incapacitate hostage-takers resulted in the deaths of more than a hundred hostages; the FSB refused to disclose the agent's composition, hindering medical treatment.

At Beslan, the chaotic assault by security forces, including FSB special units, contributed to the extraordinarily high civilian death toll. While responsibility for these events was shared among multiple agencies, Patrushev's FSB was central to planning, execution, and post-incident secrecy.

The continuity of operational methods with Soviet antecedents under Patrushev was explicit and ideological. Though 'socialism" had been abandoned as a compelling interest of the state, socialist ideology was the origins of the narratives of ethnic extremism driving the Chechen War.

Patrushev was a career KGB officer whose worldview was shaped by Cold War counterintelligence. He saw internal dissent, foreign influence, and separatism as interconnected threats requiring preemptive and often covert action. Under his leadership, the FSB revived and expanded practices characteristic of the late Soviet security state: pervasive surveillance, political policing, the use of kompromat, and the reliance on secret decrees and internal regulations.

The agency's mandate broadened to include "protecting Russia's constitutional order," a phrase that, in practice, meant monitoring and constraining political opposition.

The FSB was again tasked with surveilling, then mitigating, dissidents, even those who would have been regarded as "loyal opposition" under western systems of government.

Patrushev also strengthened the FSB's role in economic security, echoing the KGB's historical fusion of intelligence and economic oversight. His tenure marked the moment when the FSB ceased to be merely a security organ and became the institutional backbone of Putin's emerging system, a role reminiscent of the KGB's position in the late Brezhnev era.

The intersection of FSB operations with the oligarchic economy during Patrushev's tenure was profound. The early 2000s were the period in which the Kremlin reasserted control over strategic industries, most dramatically through the destruction of Yukos and the imprisonment of Mikhail Khodorkovsky. The FSB played a central role in these processes, gathering intelligence, initiating investigations, and providing the coercive leverage necessary to discipline or eliminate oligarchs who challenged the state.

Patrushev's FSB also oversaw the expansion of state corporations controlled by Siloviki networks, including Rosneft, Gazprom, and Rostec. Figures such as Igor Sechin, a close ally of Patrushev and Putin, became dominant actors in the energy sector, while FSB-linked executives took control of banks, shipping companies, and defense industries.

The FSB's economic-security directorates monitored financial flows, enforced compliance, and ensured that strategic assets remained under state or Siloviki control.

In this sense, the FSB had its fingers in the oligarchs' pies, and the oligarchs - at least those aligned with the Kremlin - had their fingers in the FSB's. The agency became both an instrument of economic coercion and a gatekeeper of access to wealth.

But still, it would only be Oligarchs which were sacrificed when sacrifice became necessary. By the time Patrushev left the FSB in 2008 to become Secretary of the Security Council, the agency he had shaped was no longer merely an intelligence service. It was the core institution of a new political order in which the Siloviki formed the ruling class.

Alexander Bortnikov (2008 – Present)

Alexander Vasilyevich Bortnikov's long tenure as director of the Federal Security Service, beginning in May 2008 and continuing to the present, represents the mature phase of the siloviki state: a period in which the FSB is not merely an intelligence service but a central governing institution, deeply embedded in domestic politics, foreign policy, and the oligarchic economy.

Bortnikov was born on 15 November 1951 in Molotov, as Perm was then called, in the Russian SFSR. His family background was ethnically Russian and typical of a provincial Soviet milieu; he grew up in an industrial environment and entered technical higher

education rather than elite party schools. In 1973 he graduated from the Leningrad Institute of Railway Engineers and worked briefly as a railway engineer in Gatchina.

Two years later Bortnikov joined the KGB and completed training at the Higher School of the KGB in Moscow, beginning a career in counterintelligence in the Leningrad region. Through the late Soviet and early post-Soviet years he remained in the same institutional stream, moving seamlessly from the KGB to its successor agencies, the Federal Counterintelligence Service and then the FSB, always based in Leningrad/Saint Petersburg.

Bortnikov's rise accelerated in the early 2000s.

In 2003 Bortnikov became head of the Saint Petersburg and Leningrad Oblast FSB directorate; in 2004 he was brought to Moscow as chief of the FSB's Economic Security Service, a deputy director's post that placed him at the intersection of security and high finance. In May 2008, President Dmitry Medvedev appointed him director of the FSB, succeeding Nikolai Patrushev, and he soon became a permanent member of the Security Council and chairman of the National Anti-Terrorism Committee.

The conveyor belt Putin had constructed was working as intended.

Operationally, Bortnikov's FSB has been central to Russia's major security campaigns of the past decade and a half. The agency under his leadership has continued counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations in the North Caucasus, overseeing the suppression of remaining insurgent networks in Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia, and coordinating special operations that often blur the line between policing and warfare.

Bortnikov's FSB has played a significant role in the 2008 war with Georgia, the intervention in Syria, the conflict with Ukraine in 2014, and, most dramatically, the full-scale invasion of 2022.

In these contexts, the FSB has provided intelligence, managed occupation and filtration structures, and overseen internal security in annexed or occupied territories. But it is in the initiation of hostilities with Ukraine that we witness Silovikistan begin to act in an expansionist manner. By 2014, the domestic Russian economy had reached saturation, and only internal cannibalization of oligarchic enterprises could finance the growth the FSB machine demanded.

Remember, the loyal apparatchiki were loyal only because of the promise of increased Blat and personal wealth it brought. The FSB had grown into a shark that had to continue feeding, or it might turn on itself. The FSB's attentions turned where Vladimir Putin's ambitions had always inclined, toward control of Eastern Europe's emerging markets.

In fact, eastward expansion of Silovikistan was the only viable solution. To the east of Moscow lay the great natural wealth of Mother Russia, but that pie was already divide, and mostly controlled by state-controlled enterprises anyway. To the east lay consistent revenue streams, but no growth opportunities.

Crimea became the first objective. The premise of the Siloviki annexation of Crimea was identical to that justifying the NAZI annexation of Austria and Czechoslovakia: Alleged racism directed against ethnically speaking Russians in the region. Adding insult to injury, the FSB framed its annexation of Crimea as necessary to defeat "fascism" on the peninsula.

The "free press" in the West lapped up that excuse like a kitten laps up milk. In videotaped reports from Crimea, both sides were documented employing fighters prominently displaying neo-fascist or NAZI tattoos. Half of them were just operatives once employed in honeypots not dissimilar to "Operation Trust". All were nationalists, that can't be doubted, but to suggest there was ever a similarity between the AZOV Fighters of Ukraine and the Nationalist Socialist Worker's Party is simply absurd.

But the "free press" welcomed the opportunity to produce "exposes" of fascism in Ukraine and Russia for domestic audiences. It was the kind of news that drew eyeballs to the screen, truth be damned.

Ukrainians who were stunned at Western apathy toward Russia's later invasion underestimate the damage done by clickbait journalism during the Crimean annexation. The international journalist community made certain there was nothing worth fighting for, or anyone worth fighting with when Crimea was annexed.

Most disturbing, though, was the line asserted from the Kremlin: Ukraine was a fiction which never existed, and Crimea was part of Russia. In other words, Putin at last revealed himself to be an unapologetic Chekist.

Ask anyone who lived in Crimea prior to 2014 and they will agree, it would have been better for all involved if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

Within Russia, Bortnikov's FSB has since driven the expansion of "extremism" and "foreign agent" legislation, using these categories to target opposition figures, independent media, NGOs, and religious communities.

The agency has also intensified counterintelligence operations against Western states, publicly claiming large numbers of disrupted espionage cases and framing Russia as under constant external threat.

The record of human-rights abuses and oppressive campaigns during Bortnikov's tenure is extensive.

In the North Caucasus, FSB-linked operations have been associated with torture, disappearances, and extrajudicial killings, continuing patterns established in earlier phases of the Chechen conflict. In Crimea and the occupied parts of eastern and southern Ukraine, the FSB has been implicated in the establishment of filtration camps, mass detentions, forced deportations, and the persecution of Crimean Tatars and Ukrainian activists.

International bodies and human-rights organizations have documented arbitrary arrests, politically motivated prosecutions, and ill-treatment of detainees in these regions, often attributing operational responsibility to the FSB or to structures it coordinates.

Inside Russia, the agency has been at the center of campaigns against political opposition, including the repeated arrests and eventual imprisonment of Alexei Navalny and the suppression of protest movements in 2011–2012 and after 2019.

Western governments at last sanctioned Bortnikov personally, in connection with Russia's war in Ukraine, and with the poisoning of Navalny, reflecting the perception that the FSB under his command is both an instrument of external aggression and a tool of internal repression.

Allegations of FSB involvement in the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko and other high-profile incidents predate his directorship but have continued into his tenure, reinforcing the image of an agency willing to use lethal covert methods against perceived enemies.

The continuity of operational methods with Soviet antecedents under Bortnikov is striking. He is a career KGB officer whose entire professional life has been spent in the security organs, and his leadership style reflects the culture of Soviet counterintelligence: secrecy, hierarchy, and a broad conception of "state security" that encompasses political, economic, and ideological domains.

The FSB under Bortnikov's direction continues to rely on pervasive surveillance, political policing, and the use of secret decrees and internal instructions to govern sensitive operations. The agency's remit has expanded, but its methods remain rooted in the KGB tradition: monitoring citizens and elites, collecting kompromat, managing information flows, and treating dissent as a security threat rather than a political phenomenon.

Bortnikov has publicly defended aspects of Soviet history, including offering revisionist interpretations of Stalinist repression, which underscores his ideological continuity with the security state's self-image. The FSB's role in shaping narratives about history,

patriotism, and external enemies further echoes the KGB's function as both an intelligence service and an ideological guardian.

The intersection of FSB operations with the oligarchic and state-corporate economy during Bortnikov's tenure is deep and multifaceted. His own path through the Economic Security Service before becoming director positioned him at the heart of the system that monitors and influences financial flows, banking practices, and strategic enterprises.

Under Bortnikov's leadership, the FSB has continued to act as a gatekeeper and enforcer in the economy, overseeing compliance in sectors such as energy, banking, and defense, and providing leverage in disputes involving major business figures. The agency's economic-security directorates have been involved in corruption investigations, asset seizures, and the protection of state corporations, often in ways that reinforce the dominance of Siloviki-linked enterprises.

Bortnikov's family ties illustrate this entanglement: his son Denis has held senior positions in VTB, one of Russia's largest state-controlled banks, and has himself been sanctioned by Western governments, feeding accusations of family-linked corruption and the fusion of security and financial elites.

More broadly, the FSB under Bortnikov has helped manage the redistribution of economic power away from independent oligarchs and toward state-aligned corporations and networks, using legal and extralegal tools to discipline business actors and ensure that strategic assets remain under Siloviki control.

In this sense, the FSB's fingers remained in many pies, and those who wish their pies to remain intact often seek accommodation with the security organs.

Over more than fifteen years at the helm, Bortnikov has presided over the consolidation of a system in which the FSB is simultaneously an intelligence service, a domestic security apparatus, an economic regulator, and a political arbiter.

Bortnikov's tenure has seen major operations, grave abuses, and the deepening fusion of security and economic power. Under him, the FSB has not broken with its past; it has perfected it, adapting Soviet methods to a twenty-first-century state in which the men of the organs sit at the center of power.

Ask any of the FSB's victims. I am sure they'll all agree, it would have been better for all involved if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

1991–Present - SVR

In the interest of being complete, I can't neglect the SVR. Just let it be known the Siloviki of modern Russia regard the FSB as their feeder school. The SVR, for all intents and purposes, is regarded as a sub-function, except where it is leveraged for industrial espionage. In that capacity, the SVR is a strategic center of power.

The *Foreign Intelligence Service* (SVR) was created from the KGB's First Chief Directorate which handled foreign intelligence.

The Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation (SVR) was formally established on 18 December 1991, when President Boris Yeltsin issued Presidential Decree No. 293, dissolving the KGB and creating successor agencies for its major directorates.

Once again by decree.

This decree provided the statutory basis for the SVR by designating it as the direct institutional successor to the KGB First Chief Directorate, the branch responsible for all Soviet foreign-intelligence operations. The SVR inherited the First Chief Directorate's headquarters at Yasenevo, its personnel, its archives, and its operational doctrine, making it the only post-Soviet security organ that preserved its predecessor's structure almost intact.

Same shit, different toilet.

Well, not entirely true. The Siloviki have turned the SVR into a wholly owned subsidiary of their Kapitalist Industrial complex. The Siloviki's use of the SVR for industrial espionage is not an accidental by-product of Russia's security culture; it is a deliberate, structured, and deeply rooted strategy that draws directly from Soviet intelligence doctrine and has been adapted to the needs of a twenty-first-century state whose political economy is dominated by security elites.

To understand how the SVR became an instrument of industrial espionage, one must see it not as a standalone foreign intelligence service but as part of a coordinated ecosystem in which the FSB, GRU, and SVR operate in parallel, often with overlapping mandates, to secure strategic advantage for the Russian state and for the siloviki networks that dominate it.

The origins of this system lie in the KGB's First Chief Directorate, whose mission included the acquisition of Western scientific and technological secrets.

Soviet intelligence doctrine treated industrial espionage as a core component of national security, essential for catching up with Western technological development.

When the USSR collapsed, the SVR inherited this mission almost intact. What changed was not the doctrine but the beneficiaries: in the post-Soviet era, the intelligence services increasingly served the interests of state-aligned corporations, Siloviki-controlled conglomerates, and political factions whose power depended on controlling strategic industries.

Under the Siloviki, the SVR's industrial espionage functions expanded and became more tightly integrated with domestic economic strategy. The SVR collects proprietary information on energy technology, aerospace engineering, advanced materials, pharmaceuticals, telecommunications, and dual-use technologies. It targets Western corporations, research universities, government laboratories, and international regulatory bodies.

The intelligence the SVR gathers is not simply archived; it is fed directly into Russian state corporations such as Rosneft, Gazprom, Rostec, United Aircraft Corporation, and Rosatom. These entities are often led by Siloviki or individuals closely tied to them, ensuring that intelligence flows serve both state strategy and elite interests.

The methods used by the SVR reflect a blend of traditional espionage and modern cyber operations. Human intelligence remains central: officers under diplomatic cover cultivate sources in Western corporations, recruit insiders, and exploit diaspora networks. But cyber espionage has become increasingly dominant.

SVR-linked groups, such as APT29 (Cozy Bear), conduct long-dwell intrusions into corporate networks, quietly exfiltrating research data, proprietary algorithms, and internal communications.

These operations are designed to be stealthy rather than disruptive, reflecting the SVR's preference for patient, low-signature intelligence collection. The stolen data is routed through secure channels to analysis units and then to state corporations or ministries that can use it to accelerate domestic development or gain leverage in international negotiations.

The Siloviki's use of the SVR for industrial espionage is not merely about technological catch-up; it is also about economic power. Intelligence gathered by the SVR can be used to influence market conditions, anticipate regulatory changes, or undermine competitors. In sectors such as energy, where Russia's geopolitical influence is tied to its resource exports, the SVR's insights into Western energy policy, pipeline planning, and technological innovation give the siloviki a strategic advantage.

In defense and aerospace, stolen research can shorten development cycles or compensate for domestic weaknesses. In pharmaceuticals and biotechnology, intelligence can accelerate vaccine development or support state-driven initiatives.

This system also serves internal political purposes. The siloviki use the SVR's industrial intelligence to monitor the activities of Russian oligarchs, ensuring that major business figures do not develop independent foreign ties that could threaten state control. Intelligence can be used to pressure oligarchs, shape corporate mergers, or justify state takeovers of strategic assets. In this sense, industrial espionage is both outward-facing and inward-facing: it strengthens Russia's position abroad while reinforcing the Siloviki's dominance at home.

The continuity with Soviet antecedents is unmistakable. The SVR's industrial espionage operations follow the same logic that guided the KGB: the belief that technological superiority is inseparable from national security, and that intelligence services must play a direct role in economic development. What has changed is the political context. In the Soviet era, intelligence served the state; in the siloviki era, it serves a fusion of state and elite interests. The SVR's operations are shaped not only by national strategy but by the priorities of the security-corporate complex that governs Russia.

In sum, the siloviki use the SVR to conduct industrial espionage through a coordinated system that blends human intelligence, cyber operations, and economic strategy. The intelligence gathered supports state corporations, strengthens Russia's geopolitical position, and reinforces the power of the security elite. It is a modernized continuation of Soviet doctrine, adapted to a political economy in which the boundaries between state, corporation, and security organ have largely dissolved.

During the period in which it has been known as the SVR (1991–present), the service has been headed by a series of directors appointed by presidential decree. The founding director was Yevgeny Primakov, who served from 1991 until 1996, guiding the service through the turbulent post-Soviet transition.

Primakov was succeeded by Vyacheslav Trubnikov (1996–2000), who oversaw a period of retrenchment and reorganization. Later directors included Sergey Lebedev (2000–2007) and Mikhail Fradkov (2007–2016). The current director is Sergey Naryshkin, who has held the post since 2016.

The one characteristic which bound all of these men together was their shared, Russian ethnicity. Let's take a look at their respective tenures.

Primakov (1991-1996)

> The early years of the Russian Federation's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) under Yevgeny Primakov, who led the service from its creation in December 1991 until January 1996, were defined by institutional survival, doctrinal continuity, and strategic retrenchment. The SVR emerged directly from the KGB First Chief

Directorate, inheriting its headquarters at Yasenevo, its personnel, its archives, and its operational doctrine almost intact.

Primakov, appointed first by Gorbachev as chief of the First Directorate in September 1991, and then confirmed by Yeltsin as head of the newly formed SVR, presided over a service that was simultaneously a new institution and a continuation of its Soviet predecessor.

The SVR's operational environment during Primakov's tenure was shaped by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the fragmentation of its foreign networks, and the defection of numerous officers and agents. According to the Conflict Studies Research Centre, "defectors revealed a great many Russian secrets" in the early 1990s, forcing the SVR to reorganize its methods of scientific and technical intelligence collection and to rebuild compromised networks abroad.

Primakov's first priority was therefore institutional stabilization: preventing the loss of personnel, preserving foreign agent networks, and reasserting the SVR's relevance in a drastically weakened Russian state. He was described as "highly experienced in bureaucratic combat and manipulation at every level," a skill that proved essential in defending the SVR's autonomy during a period of political volatility.

Primakov's leadership team consisted largely of veterans of the KGB's foreign intelligence apparatus. General Gurgenov, General Kirpichenko, and Vyacheslav Trubnikov—each with decades of experience in Middle Eastern or South Asian operations—were appointed to senior positions and helped define the SVR's early policy orientation.

This continuity of personnel ensured that the SVR's operational doctrine remained closely aligned with that of the First Chief Directorate: reliance on "legal" residencies under diplomatic cover, long-term "illegal" officers operating without diplomatic protection, and a sustained emphasis on political, economic, military, and scientific intelligence collection abroad.

The question of lethal force - whether the SVR attempted or carried out assassinations or violent operations during Primakov's tenure - must be approached with caution.

The retrieved sources do not document any specific SVR operations involving lethal force between 1991 and 1996. This absence is, itself, meaningful.

The SVR, as the foreign intelligence successor to the First Chief Directorate, was not primarily tasked with domestic coercion or counterinsurgency; those functions fell to the FSK/FSB and the GRU. Moreover, Primakov's public strategy

emphasized distancing the SVR from the KGB's reputation and presenting it as a "Westernized, liberal" intelligence service in the Russian media.

Primakov opened a press office, encouraged transparency, and sought to rehabilitate the service's image. These efforts suggest that overt lethal operations - if they occurred - would have been politically counterproductive and therefore unlikely to be acknowledged.

Based on the sources, the SVR's documented activities during Primakov's tenure were non-lethal intelligence operations: rebuilding agent networks, collecting political and economic intelligence, and reorganizing compromised technical-intelligence programs.

The SVR also maintained the Soviet tradition of "illegals," deep-cover officers operating abroad without diplomatic protection, but the sources do not attribute any violent operations to these networks during the early 1990s . If lethal operations occurred, they are not reflected in the available documentation.

What can be assessed with confidence is the degree of continuity between the SVR and its Soviet predecessor. The SVR was, in structural and doctrinal terms, the most continuous of all post-KGB successor agencies. It inherited "essentially the whole" of the First Chief Directorate's institutional structure, including personnel, archives, liaison relationships, and operational doctrine.

Primakov's efforts to strengthen the service—bringing intelligence personnel back from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, lobbying Yeltsin for resources, and stabilizing the officer corps—were aimed at preserving this continuity rather than transforming it. At the same time, Primakov attempted to modernize the SVR's public image and adapt its methods to the post-Soviet environment. He encouraged SVR officials to present themselves as professional analysts rather than ideological operatives, and he sought to distance the service from the coercive reputation of the KGB.

But these changes were cosmetic rather than structural. The SVR's operational doctrine—human intelligence collection through legal and illegal residencies, long-term cultivation of foreign agents, and strategic analysis for the Kremlin—remained fundamentally unchanged from its Soviet antecedent.

In summary, the SVR under Primakov (1991–1996) was a continuity institution, not a revolutionary one. It preserved the foreign intelligence traditions of the First Chief Directorate, maintained its personnel and networks, and focused on rebuilding capacity after the shocks of the Soviet collapse.

The public domain record does not document any SVR operations involving lethal force during this period, and Primakov's public posture suggests that such operations would have been inconsistent with his strategy of institutional rehabilitation.

Nevertheless, the SVR's methods did not substantially diverge from those of its Soviet predecessor; rather, the service adapted those methods to the geopolitical realities of a weakened Russian state seeking to retain influence abroad while projecting an image of professionalism and restraint.

Trubnikov (1996–2000)

The tenure of Vyacheslav Ivanovich Trubnikov as Director of the Russian Federation's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) from January 1996 to May 2000 marked a period of consolidation, professionalization, and strategic recalibration within Russia's external intelligence apparatus.

Trubnikov, a veteran of the KGB's First Chief Directorate with decades of experience in South Asia, inherited an institution that had survived the chaotic early post-Soviet years under Yevgeny Primakov but still faced the challenge of redefining its mission in a Russia weakened economically, politically, and diplomatically.

Trubnikov's leadership was shaped by his background: a graduate of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) with expertise in Oriental studies, fluent in Hindi and English, and seasoned by long undercover assignments in India and Bangladesh between 1971–1977 and 1984–1990.

These experiences gave Trubnikov a reputation for deep cultural knowledge, patient cultivation of agents, and a preference for human intelligence over technological collection.

When Trubnikov assumed command of the SVR, the service was still recovering from the collapse of the USSR. The early 1990s had seen defections, exposure of networks, and the loss of Soviet diplomatic infrastructure abroad. As first deputy director under Primakov from 1992 onward, Trubnikov had already played a central role in rebuilding Russia's intelligence apparatus, emphasizing the need to penetrate "foreign leaders' intentions" through human sources rather than relying on compromised technical systems.

Trubnikov's promotion to director in 1996 therefore represented continuity rather than rupture: the SVR remained staffed by career officers of the old First

Chief Directorate, and its operational doctrine continued to reflect Soviet traditions.

The documentable operations of the SVR during Trubnikov's tenure, as reflected in available sources, center on foreign intelligence collection, strategic analysis, and reconstruction of long-term agent networks, particularly in regions where Trubnikov himself had deep expertise.

Trubnikov's leadership coincided with Russia's attempt to reassert influence in the post-Soviet space and maintain strategic relationships in South Asia. After leaving the SVR, he became First Deputy Foreign Minister for CIS affairs, a role in which he continued to apply intelligence-driven approaches to diplomacy.

This career trajectory underscores the SVR's close integration with Russian foreign policy during his tenure.

However, public domain sources do not document any SVR operations involving lethal force - whether assassinations, targeted killings, or violent covert actions - between 1996 and 2000. This absence is notable. It does not prove that such operations never occurred; intelligence services rarely disclose such activities. But it does mean that no publicly verifiable cases of lethal SVR operations during Trubnikov's leadership appear in the available record.

The few available sources emphasize Trubnikov's role in analysis, diplomacy, and long-term cultivation of agents, not violent covert action. His operational philosophy, as described in the retrieved material, favored "pragmatic espionage" and strategic intelligence over coercive or kinetic operations.

Lethal force, when used by the Russian state, has historically been associated with other organs: the GRU (military intelligence), the FSB (domestic security), or specialized units under presidential or military command. The SVR's mandate, both Soviet and post-Soviet, has been oriented toward political, economic, scientific, and diplomatic intelligence collection.

Trubnikov's career was built on undercover diplomatic postings, agent cultivation, and regional expertise, not violent operations. This is why he was hired, and what he emphasized during his tenure.

Still, the SVR under Trubnikov remained deeply rooted in the traditions of the First Chief Directorate. He himself was a product of that system, having served in the Directorate's central office from 1977 to 1984 and again in South Asia from 1984 to 1990.

Trubnikov's appointment as director ensured continuity in operational doctrine: reliance on "legal" residencies under diplomatic cover, long-term "illegal" officers embedded abroad, and strategic analysis for the Kremlin.

The SVR's internal culture, shaped by officers who had spent decades in Soviet intelligence, remained largely unchanged. What changed was the political environment in which the SVR operated.

Russia in the late 1990s was economically fragile, diplomatically constrained, and internally unstable. The SVR's mission therefore shifted toward supporting Russian foreign policy goals in the CIS and maintaining strategic partnerships, particularly with India - a country where Trubnikov later served as ambassador from 2004 to 2009.

Lebedev (2000-2007)

Sergey Nikolaevich Lebedev assumed leadership of the Russian Federation's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) on 20 May 2000, appointed by presidential decree at the beginning of Vladimir Putin's first term. His tenure lasted until 9 October 2007, after which he became Executive Secretary—and later General Secretary—of the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Lebedev's background made him a quintessential product of the late-Soviet intelligence elite: born in 1948 in Jizzakh, trained in counterintelligence and foreign intelligence at KGB institutions, educated at the Diplomatic Academy of the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and seasoned through extensive foreign postings in East Germany, West Germany, West Berlin, unified Germany, and finally the United States, where he served as the SVR's official representative from 1998 to 2000.

Lebedev's career trajectory placed him squarely within the lineage of the KGB's First Chief Directorate, and his appointment signaled continuity rather than rupture in Russia's foreign intelligence doctrine.

Lebedev took command of the SVR at a moment when Russia was reasserting itself on the world stage after the chaotic 1990s. The agency he inherited had already stabilized under Primakov and Trubnikov, but it faced new geopolitical challenges: NATO expansion, the second Chechen war, rising tensions with the United States, and the need to rebuild Russia's influence in the post-Soviet space.

Lebedev's leadership style reflected his training - methodical, diplomatic, and oriented toward long-term human intelligence rather than dramatic covert

action. His foreign postings, especially in Germany and the United States, had given him deep experience in political intelligence, liaison work, and the cultivation of networks in Western capitals.

The documentable operations of the SVR during Lebedev's tenure, based on available sources, center on foreign intelligence collection, strategic analysis, and post-Soviet geopolitical monitoring. The retrieved material describes Lebedev's career focus on European operations and his role in overseeing intelligence activities in Germany and the United States before becoming director.

As director, Lebedev led the SVR "during a period of post-Soviet reconfiguration," a phrase that reflects the agency's efforts to adapt Soviet-era networks to new political realities. His promotion to Army General in 2003 underscores the Kremlin's confidence in his stewardship of Russia's external intelligence apparatus.

However, the public domain record provide no documentation of SVR operations involving lethal force - no assassinations, targeted killings, or violent covert actions - during Lebedev's tenure. This absence is significant. It does not prove that such operations never occurred; intelligence services rarely disclose such activities. But it does mean that no publicly verifiable cases of lethal SVR operations between 2000 and 2007 appear in the available record.

The record emphasizes Lebedev's diplomatic rank, his foreign postings, and his administrative leadership, not violent covert action. His career path - culminating in his appointment as General Secretary of the CIS - reinforces the image of a diplomat-intelligence officer rather than a paramilitary operator.

This pattern aligns with the SVR's institutional identity. As the successor to the KGB's First Chief Directorate, the SVR is responsible for foreign intelligence, not domestic repression or kinetic operations.

Historically, lethal force—when used by the Russian state—has been associated with the GRU (military intelligence), the FSB (domestic security), or specialized units under presidential or military command.

The SVR's mandate has always been oriented toward political, economic, scientific, and diplomatic intelligence collection. The retrieved sources reinforce this continuity: Lebedev's career was built on foreign postings, diplomatic training, and intelligence liaison work, not violent operations.

Evaluating whether SVR methods under Lebedev differed substantially from those of its Soviet predecessor requires examining the structure and personnel

of the service. Lebedev himself was a product of the Soviet intelligence system, having served in the KGB's counterintelligence and foreign intelligence directorates since 1973 and having received specialized training at the Kyiv KGB school and the Red Banner Institute of the KGB.

Lebedev's appointment ensured continuity in operational doctrine: reliance on "legal" residencies under diplomatic cover, long-term "illegal" officers embedded abroad, and strategic analysis for the Kremlin. The SVR's internal culture, shaped by officers who had spent decades in Soviet intelligence, remained largely unchanged.

The political environment, like that under Trubnikov, evolved.

Russia under Putin was more assertive internationally, more centralized domestically, and more willing to use intelligence as a tool of statecraft. The SVR's mission therefore expanded to include supporting Russia's geopolitical resurgence, monitoring Western political dynamics, and strengthening Russia's position in the CIS.

Lebedev's later role as General Secretary of the CIS reflects this integration of intelligence and diplomacy: he became a key figure in coordinating political, economic, and security cooperation among former Soviet republics, a role that built directly on his SVR experience.

In sum, the SVR under Sergey Lebedev (2000–2007) was a continuity institution, preserving the methods, personnel, and worldview of the Soviet First Chief Directorate while adapting to the geopolitical ambitions of the early Putin era.

Public domain sources document no known cases of lethal force attempted or used by the SVR during his tenure. Instead, they portray a service focused on rebuilding networks, conducting human intelligence, and supporting Russian foreign policy through analysis and diplomacy.

Lebedev's leadership did not fundamentally alter the SVR's operational doctrine; rather, it reinforced the long-standing traditions of Soviet foreign intelligence in a new political and economic context.

Fradkov (2007–2016)

Mikhail Yefimovich Fradkov assumed leadership of the Russian Federation's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) on 6 October 2007, becoming the longest-serving director in the agency's post-Soviet history. His appointment marked a striking departure from the traditional pattern of SVR leadership:

unlike Primakov, Trubnikov, or Lebedev, Fradkov was not a career intelligence officer.

Fradkov was a Soviet-trained diplomat and economic administrator who had served as Russia's Prime Minister from 2004 to 2007 before being moved directly into the SVR by Vladimir Putin. This unusual transition signaled a shift in the Kremlin's approach to intelligence leadership - placing a trusted political loyalist at the helm of the foreign intelligence apparatus rather than a veteran of the KGB's First Chief Directorate.

Fradkov's background shaped the SVR's institutional trajectory during his tenure. Born in 1950 near Samara, he studied at the Moscow Machine Tool Design Institute and later at the Foreign Trade Academy, entering Soviet foreign economic service rather than the security organs. His early postings included work in the economic section of the Soviet embassy in India in the 1970s, followed by senior positions in Russia's foreign economic ministries throughout the 1990s.

By the early 2000s, Fradkov had become Russia's representative to the European Union and then Prime Minister. This career path gave him deep experience in diplomacy, trade, and international negotiations - but no documented background in clandestine operations.

When Fradkov took command of the SVR in 2007, the agency was entering a period of expansion and modernization. Satellite imagery published in 2016 shows that the SVR's headquarters complex at Yasenevo doubled or possibly tripled in size during the nine years following Fradkov's appointment.

Multiple new buildings were added to the existing Y-shaped office block and 21-story tower, and parking capacity quadrupled. Analysts suggested that this expansion was directly connected to Fradkov's leadership, reflecting increased resources, personnel growth, or a broadening of the SVR's mission. This physical enlargement of the headquarters is the most concrete, documentable indicator of institutional change during his tenure.

The SVR's operational environment under Fradkov was shaped by Russia's increasingly assertive foreign policy. According to U.S. government assessments, by 2007 Russian espionage activity in the United States had returned to Cold War levels, carried out primarily by the SVR and the GRU.

Russian intelligence operations included human intelligence through officers and recruited agents, long-term deep-cover operatives, cyberespionage, and active measures intended to influence American politics and public opinion.

These activities represent the broad operational landscape in which the SVR functioned during Fradkov's tenure, though the sources do not attribute specific operations directly to him.

Crucially, the retrieved sources provide no documentation of SVR operations involving lethal force - no assassinations, targeted killings, or violent covert actions - during Fradkov's tenure. This absence is significant. It does not prove that such operations never occurred; intelligence services rarely disclose such activities.

But it does mean that no publicly verifiable cases of lethal SVR operations between 2007 and 2016 appear in public domain sources. The record emphasizes espionage, cyber operations, and political influence, not violent covert action. Moreover, the SVR's institutional mandate—foreign intelligence collection—has historically been distinct from the kinetic or paramilitary operations associated with the GRU or the FSB.

The SVR is the direct successor to the KGB's First Chief Directorate, and its mission "remains the same"—to collect secrets abroad and provide intelligence to the president. The Yasenevo headquarters, built in the 1970s for the First Chief Directorate, continued to house the entire SVR apparatus during Fradkov's tenure.

This physical continuity mirrors doctrinal continuity: reliance on legal residencies under diplomatic cover, long-term "illegals," human intelligence networks, and strategic analysis.

Once again, all that evolved was the political context of SVR operations.

The headquarters expansion suggests increased operational capacity, while Russia's foreign policy during this period—marked by renewed confrontation with the West—created greater demand for intelligence.

Fradkov's background as a diplomat and prime minister meant that the SVR under his leadership was closely aligned with Kremlin policy priorities, particularly in Europe and the United States.

Fradkov's tenure coincided with major Russian intelligence operations abroad, including deep-cover agent networks and cyberespionage campaigns, though the sources do not specify which of these were directed personally by the SVR.

In sum, the SVR under Mikhail Fradkov (2007–2016) was a continuity institution in doctrine but an expanding institution in scale.

This brings us, at long last, to Naryshkin.

Naryshkin (2016-present)

Sergey Yevgenyevich Naryshkin became Director of the Russian Federation's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) in September 2016, appointed directly by President Vladimir Putin after serving as Chairman of the State Duma. His appointment marked a return to the longstanding pattern of placing trusted political allies — rather than career intelligence officers — at the helm of Russia's foreign intelligence apparatus.

Unlike his predecessors Primakov, Trubnikov, and Lebedev, Naryshkin's career was primarily political, though according to unofficial information he had served in the KGB's First Chief Directorate in the 1970s. This background, if accurate, would place him within the lineage of Soviet foreign intelligence, but his public career was shaped far more by legislative leadership and political loyalty than by clandestine operations.

The SVR Naryshkin inherited was already a mature institution. Established in 1991 as the direct successor to the KGB's First Chief Directorate, the SVR remained headquartered in the Yasenevo district of Moscow, operating through legal residencies in Russian embassies worldwide and maintaining long-term agent networks abroad.

Under Naryshkin, the SVR continued to emphasize human intelligence, signals interception, and strategic analysis, adapting its methods to what Russian officials describe as "hybrid threats" — cyber operations, influence campaigns, and political destabilization efforts directed at Russia.

The agency's structure under Naryshkin includes operational directorates, analytic centers, cyber units, and training institutions such as the SVR Academy, reflecting a broad modernization of capabilities while retaining Soviet-era tradecraft.

The documentable operations of the SVR during Naryshkin's tenure, based on available sources, center on espionage, agent recruitment, cyber and technical intelligence, and active measures, including disinformation campaigns.

Under Naryshkin's direction, Western governments have repeatedly accused the SVR of illicit activities, including cyber intrusions and influence operations, though Russia denies these allegations.

These accusations form part of the public record, but they do not constitute confirmed operational disclosures. The SVR itself highlights its role in countering

foreign espionage, supporting Russian foreign policy, and providing intelligence to the Kremlin on political, economic, and military matters.

Crucially, the retrieved sources provide no documentation of SVR operations involving lethal force - no assassinations, targeted killings, or violent covert actions - during Naryshkin's tenure. This absence is consistent with the SVR's institutional mandate. As Russia's civilian foreign intelligence service, the SVR is tasked with information collection, not paramilitary operations.

In the interest of expository consistency, I reiterate that, historically, lethal force - when used by the Russian state - has been associated with the GRU (military intelligence), the FSB (domestic security), or specialized units under presidential or military command.

The SVR's primary accomplishment between 1991 and the present has been to stay in its lane. The SVR's doctrine, inherited from the First Chief Directorate, emphasizes long-term agent networks, political intelligence, and strategic analysis rather than kinetic action.

Under Naryshkin, the SVR remained, doctrinally, a continuity institution. Its operational modalities — human intelligence, diplomatic cover, illegal officers, and strategic analysis — are directly inherited from the KGB's First Chief Directorate. The agency's headquarters, organizational structure, and tradecraft reflect Soviet foundations refined for post-Cold War realities. Even the emphasis on long-term agent networks mirrors Soviet practice, adapted to contemporary geopolitical competition.

As can be expected, the political context evolved. The SVR now operates in a world defined by cyber espionage, information warfare, and geopolitical confrontation with the West.

Under Naryshkin, the agency has expanded its cyber and technical intelligence capabilities, aligning with Russia's broader use of intelligence in influence campaigns and strategic messaging. These adaptations represent an evolution in emphasis rather than a departure from Soviet doctrine.

The SVR remains exclusively focused on foreign intelligence collection, but the tools and targets have shifted to reflect twenty-first-century threats and opportunities.

Because the SVR is a foreign intelligence service, its activities are not oriented toward domestic or foreign repression in the manner of the Cheka, NKVD, or KGB's internal directorates. Its mandate is espionage abroad, not political policing at home.

However, the SVR has conducted major covert operations that have had repressive or coercive effects internationally. These include long-term “illegal residency” operations, in which deep-cover officers operate abroad without diplomatic protection - an approach inherited directly from the KGB.

Two glaring examples are representative of what the SVR engaged in during the post-Soviet period.

The first is then the most publicly exposed example in 2010 of a U.S. illegals network, often called the “Anna Chapman group”. The agents’ whose arrest and subsequent spy swap revealed the SVR’s continued use of clandestine infiltration methods. It also best documents the opportunistic inclination in Russian political influence operations.

The second example are known cyber-espionage and influence operations, including political interference and disinformation campaigns aimed at shaping foreign political environments.

Anna Chapman Group

> The so-called Anna Chapman group—the ten Russian “illegals” arrested by the FBI in June 2010—was the most visible modern expression of a very old Russian intelligence tradition. Although the case became a media spectacle because of Chapman’s glamour and the theatrical nature of the arrests, the underlying operation was a classic SVR long-term infiltration program.
>
> Its purpose was not dramatic espionage, not the theft of classified documents, and certainly not sabotage or violence. Instead, it was a patient, generational effort to embed Russian intelligence officers into American society so deeply that they could influence, access, and shape political and economic networks from within.
>
> The group was the product of the SVR’s Directorate S, the branch responsible for “illegals”—officers who live abroad without diplomatic cover, using fabricated identities, forged biographies, and carefully constructed personal histories.
>
> This doctrine dates back to the Soviet era, when the KGB’s First Chief Directorate cultivated “deep cover” agents who could operate for decades undetected. The Chapman ring was a direct continuation of this tradition.
>
> Each member had been trained to live as an ordinary American or Canadian, to raise families, to buy homes, to attend universities, and to blend seamlessly into middle-class life. Their espionage was not meant to be visible; it was meant to be indistinguishable from normality.

The FBI's decade-long investigation, Operation Ghost Stories, revealed the group's strategic purpose with unusual clarity. The SVR's goal was to position its officers close to American policymaking circles, not necessarily to steal secrets immediately, but to cultivate relationships that could later be activated.

Chapman herself was tasked with penetrating elite social and financial networks in New York and London. She moved easily in Manhattan's social scene, presenting herself as a young entrepreneur, while quietly transmitting coded messages to Moscow through encrypted wireless bursts.

Others in the group focused on academia, think tanks, and political circles, seeking proximity to individuals who might one day hold influence in Washington.

The FBI assessed that the ring's "long-range assignment from Moscow" was to burrow deep into U.S. society, cultivate contacts with academics, entrepreneurs, and policymakers, and eventually gain access to strategic information.

One member was reportedly close to a friend of an unnamed Cabinet official, a detail that alarmed counterintelligence officers because it suggested the group was approaching the threshold of meaningful political penetration. Yet the spies were not tasked with obtaining classified documents directly. Their mission was subtler: to build trust, to gather atmospherics, to understand decision-making environments, and to position themselves for future influence.

The Chapman group's activities were therefore non-lethal, non-violent, and non-technical. They did not attempt sabotage, coercion, or assassination. They were not saboteurs or paramilitary operatives. Their value lay in their potential, not in any immediate operational output.

This is consistent with the SVR's doctrine: the service is a civilian foreign intelligence agency, not a kinetic arm of the Russian state.

When Russia has used lethal force abroad, those operations have historically been associated with the GRU or the FSB, not the SVR. The Chapman ring fits squarely within the SVR's traditional mission of political intelligence and long-term infiltration.

The group's exposure in 2010 was not the result of operational incompetence but of a long FBI counterintelligence campaign that had tracked them for years. When the arrests finally occurred, the United States and Russia quickly negotiated a spy swap, returning the ten illegals to Moscow in exchange for four prisoners held in Russia.

Chapman's celebrity status after her return - magazine covers, television appearances, and political involvement - was an ironic coda to an operation designed to be invisible.

In retrospect, the Chapman group illustrates the enduring logic of Russian intelligence. The SVR does not rely solely on dramatic operations or rapid theft of secrets. It invests in time, in identity, and in proximity.

Russian Intelligence builds networks that may take decades to mature. The Chapman ring was a modern expression of this philosophy: a quiet, patient infiltration effort aimed at embedding Russian officers into the fabric of American life.

Chapman's mission was not to act immediately, but to be ready when needed, positioned inside the social and political structures that shape American decision-making.

Cyber-Espionage

Across the period from 1991 to 2026, the SVR's cyber and influence operations evolved from modest, inherited Soviet-era computer-network exploitation capabilities into one of the most sophisticated, long-dwell espionage apparatuses in the world.

What makes the SVR distinctive is not noisy disruption or theatrical hacks, but its preference for stealth, patience, and strategic intelligence collection. Its cyber arm - known variously as Cozy Bear, APT29, The Dukes, Nobelium, Midnight Blizzard, and other vendor labels - has maintained persistent access to Western government, diplomatic, defense, and research networks for decades.

Its influence operations, while less overt than those of the GRU, have nonetheless shaped foreign political environments through targeted espionage, disinformation, and strategic leaks.

The SVR's cyber lineage begins with the KGB First Chief Directorate's late-Soviet computer-network collection capability, which transitioned almost intact into the SVR after 1991.

This continuity matters: unlike the GRU's more aggressive cyber units, the SVR's mission remained foreign intelligence collection, emphasizing long-duration access, selective exfiltration, and operational security. Its cyber footprint is described as "the most stealthy of the major Russian cyber actors," characterized by long dwell times, low signature, and high operational discipline.

By the mid-2000s, SVR cyber operations had matured into a globally active espionage program. The group now known as APT29 was active by at least 2008, possibly earlier, and began targeting Western governments, NATO allies, foreign policy research institutions, and defense sectors.

Its mission was strategic: to collect intelligence on Western internal deliberations, diplomatic communications, defense procurement, and—critically—what Western security services knew about Russia. This last objective shaped its target selection and operational behavior, reinforcing the SVR's preference for quiet, long-term access rather than noisy disruption.

The SVR's most visible cyber operations fall into several major campaigns. The 2014–2015 intrusions into the White House and U.S. State Department demonstrated the group's ability to penetrate high-value government networks and maintain access despite defensive efforts.

In 2015–2016, APT29 quietly infiltrated the Democratic National Committee, remaining inside for roughly a year before the GRU's noisier Unit 26165 arrived. Unlike the GRU, which exfiltrated and leaked material for influence purposes, the SVR's intrusion was purely collection-oriented - silent, patient, and focused on intelligence rather than public manipulation.

In 2020, the SVR executed the SolarWinds / SUNBURST supply-chain compromise, the most consequential supply-chain attack in Western cyber history. By compromising SolarWinds' Orion software updates, the SVR gained access to U.S. government agencies, defense contractors, technology firms, and critical infrastructure networks.

This operation exemplified SVR tradecraft: stealthy, technically sophisticated, and oriented toward long-term intelligence collection rather than immediate disruption. The same year, APT29 targeted COVID-19 vaccine research organizations in the U.S., U.K., and Canada, seeking strategic biomedical intelligence during the global pandemic.

In 2024, the SVR breached Microsoft corporate email systems, demonstrating a counterintelligence capability that extended beyond data collection into understanding how Western security services tracked Russian operations. This reflects a broader SVR priority: learning what adversaries know about Russia, and adjusting tradecraft accordingly.

By 2025, U.S. and allied intelligence assessments described Russian foreign intelligence services—including the SVR—as engaged in election interference, cyber operations, espionage, sabotage, and disinformation campaigns globally,

with activity increasing since 2022 and described by a UK intelligence chief as "committed to causing havoc and destruction".

The SVR's influence operations are more subtle than those of the GRU. The GRU conducts hack-and-leak campaigns designed to shape public opinion; the SVR focuses on strategic positioning, long-term infiltration, and selective intelligence release when it serves Russian foreign policy.

The SVR's role in the 2016 U.S. election interference was primarily the quiet collection of political intelligence (e.g., the DNC breach), while the GRU handled the public-facing leaks. This division of labor reflects institutional doctrine: the SVR collects; the GRU disrupts.

Across the 1991–2026 period, SVR cyber operations show remarkable continuity with their Soviet predecessor. The KGB's First Chief Directorate emphasized human intelligence, illegals programs, and deep-cover infiltration; the SVR has extended these principles into cyberspace.

Its cyber operations mirror its human tradecraft: long-term access, careful cultivation, minimal noise, and strategic intelligence rather than tactical disruption. Even its naming conventions - multiple vendor labels for the same cluster - reflect its stealthy operational profile.

In sum, the SVR's cyber and influence operations from 1991 to 2026 form a coherent, evolving tradition. Beginning with inherited Soviet capabilities, the SVR developed into a world-class cyber espionage service defined by patience, stealth, and strategic focus.

Its major operations—from the White House intrusions to SolarWinds—were not designed to shock but to observe, understand, and position Russia advantageously in global affairs.

Its influence operations, though less overt than those of the GRU, nonetheless shaped foreign political environments through targeted espionage and selective intelligence manipulation.

Throughout this period, its methods remained fundamentally consistent with its Soviet lineage: quiet, persistent, and deeply embedded in the structures of foreign power.

Taken together, these SVR operations, represent the modern evolution of coercive intelligence activity in service of Russian state objectives. In the post-Soviet era, priority shifted from obtaining Cold War advantage over the west, and primarily the

United States, to industrial espionage to improve Russia's Oligarchic Industries, and to political influence campaigns to expand Russia's access to markets.

1992–Present – GRU/GU

The *Main Intelligence Directorate* (now *Main Directorate*) Military intelligence, continuous from the Soviet era to the present. Although not part of the "Cheka lineage," it is part of the Russian Intelligence apparatus.

The distinction between the GRU and the GU is simpler than it looks, because it is not a change of mission but a change of *name and administrative status*. The organization itself—Russia's military-intelligence service—remains the same.

The Glavnoye Razvedyvatel'noye Upravleniye (GRU) – or Main Intelligence Directorate - was the name of Soviet military intelligence from 1942 until the end of the USSR, and it continued to be used informally in Russia after 1991.

In 2010, however, the Russian Ministry of Defense carried out an administrative reorganization and officially renamed the service the Glavnoye Upravleniye (GU) – or Main Directorate. The change removed the word "intelligence" from the title, but it did not alter the agency's structure, mission, or operational culture.

The GU still conducts foreign military intelligence, signals intelligence, cyber operations, covert action, and special operations through units such as the Spetsnaz brigades.

In practice, Russian officials, foreign governments, journalists, and even Russian officers continue to call it the GRU, because the older name is deeply entrenched and more descriptive. Thus, the distinction is primarily bureaucratic: GRU is the historic and widely used name; GU is the modern official name, and both refer to the same military-intelligence organization.

For Westerners fore familiar with the US Intelligence community, the SRV serves as the CIA in the United States while the GRU/GU serves as Defense Intelligence Agency does for the U.S. Defense Department.

The GRU, known officially since 2010 as the GU, was formally established on 5 November 1918, when the Revolutionary Military Council of Soviet Russia created the *Registration Directorate* (Registrupravlenie) as the Red Army's centralized military-intelligence organ. This decree provided the statutory basis for an intelligence service responsible for gathering information on foreign armies, conducting strategic reconnaissance, and supporting Soviet military planning.

Over the 1920s and 1930s, the Registration Directorate was reorganized several times - becoming the *Fourth Directorate* and later the *Intelligence Directorate* of the Red Army - but its mission remained continuous.

In 1942, amid the pressures of the Second World War, it received the name by which it became famous: GRU, the *Main Intelligence Directorate* of the General Staff. After the collapse of the USSR, the GRU survived intact, and in 2010 the Russian Ministry of Defense officially renamed it the GU (*Main Directorate*), though the older name remains widely used.

The Siloviki's relationship to the GRU/GU, to Wagner, and to Yevgeny Prigozhin is best understood as a story of overlapping networks rather than formal hierarchies. The Russian security state is not a single pyramid but a constellation of power centers—FSB, GRU, SVR, FSO, Interior Troops, National Guard—whose leaders cooperate, compete, and occasionally sabotage one another. Within this constellation, the siloviki are the dominant caste, and the GRU/GU and Wagner have been deeply entangled with them, though never fully subordinated.

The siloviki have long been implicated in GRU/GU operations because the GRU is itself part of the siloviki world. The GRU is the military intelligence arm of the Ministry of Defense, and its officers share the same professional culture, training, and worldview as their counterparts in the FSB and SVR. In practice, the GRU's covert operations—cyber intrusions, assassinations, sabotage, and paramilitary deployments—often intersect with the strategic priorities of the broader siloviki faction.

The poisoning of Sergei Skripal, the operations of Unit 29155 in Europe, the annexation of Crimea, and the covert military support to separatists in Donbas all involved coordination or parallel action by Siloviki networks. The GRU is not "controlled" by the FSB or the Security Council, but its leadership is part of the same elite cohort, and its operations often serve the same political objectives: weakening Western cohesion, expanding Russian influence, and reinforcing the security-centered model of governance at home.

The Wagner Group occupies a more ambiguous position. Wagner was not a subsidiary of the siloviki in a formal sense; it was a private military company operating in the gray zone between state and non-state power. But Wagner was absolutely a creature of the siloviki system. It was armed, supplied, and protected by the Ministry of Defense and the GRU. Its training grounds were on GRU bases. Its deployments—to Syria, Libya, the Central African Republic, Mali, and Ukraine—aligned with Russian foreign policy objectives.

Wagner was a tool for deniable operations, a way to project force without formal attribution, and a mechanism for securing resource concessions abroad. In this sense,

Wagner was not outside the siloviki system but an auxiliary force operating at its margins, useful precisely because it was not bound by the legal constraints that govern official military units.

Yevgeny Prigozhin's relationship to the siloviki was even more complex. He was not a Siloviki himself; he had no background in the KGB, GRU, or FSB. He was a businessman who rose through patronage networks, first as a caterer to the Kremlin and later as a contractor for military and intelligence operations. His power came from proximity to Vladimir Putin and from his ability to deliver results—whether through Wagner's battlefield effectiveness or through the Internet Research Agency's influence operations.

Prigozhin was tolerated, protected, and occasionally empowered by the Siloviki, but he was never fully accepted by them. To the traditional security elite, he was an outsider, a useful instrument but not a member of the caste. His growing public profile, his attacks on the Ministry of Defense, and his attempt to position Wagner as an independent political force threatened the Siloviki's monopoly on coercive power.

Prigozhin's June 2023 mutiny was the moment when he crossed the invisible boundary between tolerated irregular and unacceptable rival. Prigozhin's death - widely attributed to a Siloviki-sanctioned assassination - was the final demonstration of that boundary.

In short, the Siloviki are implicated in GRU/GU operations because the GRU is part of their world. Wagner was not a subsidiary but an auxiliary force operating under Siloviki protection. And Prigozhin was a client of the Siloviki system who mistook proximity for membership, ultimately paying the price for challenging the monopoly of the men in the Shadows.

Across its history as the GRU/GU, the service has been headed by a succession of directors whose tenures reflected the shifting priorities of Soviet and Russian military strategy.

Early chiefs included Semyon Aralov (1918–1920), Alexander Nikonov (1920–1921), and Yan Berzin (1924–1935), who built the GRU into a formidable intelligence organization before being purged.

Later leaders included Ivan Proskurov (1939–1940), Filipp Golikov (1940–1942), and Pyotr Ivashutin (1963–1987), whose long tenure shaped Cold War military intelligence.

In the post-Soviet era, directors have included Fyodor Ladygin (1992–1997), Valentin Korabelnikov (1997–2009), Igor Sergun (2011–2016), and Igor Kostyukov, who has led the GU since 2018.

Unlike the Cheka, NKVD, or KGB, the GRU/GU is not a domestic political-repression organ. It does not run prisons, conduct purges, or to police internal dissent. Its campaigns of coercion have been external, and mostly directed abroad in support of Soviet and Russian military objectives.

Historically, these operations include clandestine operations during the Second World War, Cold War espionage against NATO, support for communist insurgencies, and covert military assistance to allied regimes.

In the modern era, the GU has been linked to cyber-operations such as the Sandworm and Fancy Bear units, sabotage and assassination operations abroad, and covert military interventions in Ukraine, Syria, and other conflict zones.

In my evaluation of institutional continuity and operational merit, I'll focus only on GRU leaders from the post-Soviet era.

Fyodor Ladygin (1992–1997)

Fyodor Ivanovich Ladygin's tenure as head of the Russian GRU from 1992 to 1997 sits at a hinge point between two eras: the late-Soviet military-intelligence tradition and the improvised, often chaotic security structures of the new Russian Federation.

To understand what the GRU was doing under his command, you have to start with who he was, because his biography is unusually revealing about the kind of officer the post-Soviet state chose to entrust with its main military intelligence organ.

Ladygin was born on 10 March 1937 in the village of Mazikino in the Korochansky district of Kursk Oblast, in what was then the RSFSR. His family background was rural Russian; there is no indication in any Russian or Western source that he belonged to a minority nationality or that his origins lay outside the ethnic Russian core of the Soviet officer corps.

Ladygin came up through the classic Soviet technical-military pipeline. In 1954 he finished a special Air Force school in Kharkov with a silver medal, then entered the Zhukovsky Air Force Engineering Academy, graduating in 1959 as an engineer officer. His early career was not in intelligence at all but in the Strategic Rocket Forces and their research institutes: he served in operational missile units, then as an engineer-tester and later as a researcher at NII-4 and other defense research centers.

In the 1960s and early 1970s Ladygin moved steadily upward through the ranks of the Ministry of Defense's central scientific institutes, becoming a senior researcher and deputy head of a department. Only in 1973, as a lieutenant colonel, was he invited into the Main Directorate of the General Staff - the GRU - where he began the second half of his career.

Inside the GRU, Ladygin's path was analytic and doctrinal rather than purely operational. By the late 1980s he was head of a directorate, and in 1989 he became deputy chief of the GRU in charge of information and analysis, effectively running its analytic service.

In 1990 Ladygin moved to head the International Treaties Department of the General Staff, where he played a significant role in arms control diplomacy: he was involved in the preparation of the CFE Treaty, START I, the Open Skies Treaty, and the Chemical Weapons Convention.

This combination of technical, analytic, and treaty experience made him a natural candidate for senior leadership in a period when Russia's military intelligence had to navigate both the collapse of the USSR and a dense web of new arms control obligations.

In August 1992, Boris Yeltsin appointed him chief of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation - head of the GRU and deputy chief of the General Staff for intelligence.

What, then, did the GRU do under Ladygin, and how was his tenure judged?

The open record is thin on specific operations, because GRU activities are rarely acknowledged in detail, but Russian and Western commentary allows some contours to be drawn.

On the "triumph" side of the ledger, Ladygin's GRU played a central role in supporting Russia's arms control posture. His background in treaty work meant that military intelligence was tightly integrated into verification, compliance assessment, and strategic planning. The GRU provided data, assessments, and technical expertise for Russia's implementation of CFE and START I, and for its negotiating positions in the early 1990s.

In Russian specialist circles, Ladygin is remembered as one of the officers who helped translate the Soviet strategic-intelligence tradition into a post-Soviet framework of formal agreements and mutual inspections, and his later writings on arms control and U.S. military doctrine reflect that continuity.

Operationally, the GRU under Ladygin had to manage the disintegration of the Soviet military footprint abroad. Bases were lost, Warsaw Pact structures dissolved, and long-standing networks in Eastern Europe and the Third World were disrupted.

One of his quiet achievements was simply keeping the GRU functioning as a global collection service in the midst of institutional collapse. Russian accounts emphasize his personal modesty and sense of responsibility for "the fate of military intelligence"

in those years, and his colleagues later praised him for steering the service through a period of budgetary starvation and political uncertainty without allowing it to fragment or be absorbed by other agencies.

On the “fiasco” side, the GRU under Ladygin was criticized - sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly - for its performance in the first Chechen war (1994–1996).

Russian journalists and some military commentators argued that the General Staff and its intelligence organs had badly underestimated Chechen resistance, misread the political environment, and failed to provide accurate assessments of the likely course of the conflict.

While the FSK/FSB bore much of the blame for domestic intelligence failures, the GRU was part of the broader military establishment that went into Chechnya with unrealistic expectations and poor preparation.

In that sense, Ladygin’s tenure is associated with one of post-Soviet Russia’s most visible military debacles, even if the responsibility was diffuse and shared.

Western commentary in the 1990s tended to see the GRU as weakened and inward-looking during Ladygin’s years, focused more on survival and arms control than on bold foreign operations. There were no spectacular, publicly exposed GRU covert actions in that period comparable to later episodes in Georgia, Ukraine, or Western Europe.

Instead, the service appears to have concentrated on traditional military-strategic collection: monitoring NATO, tracking regional conflicts in the Balkans and the Caucasus, and providing assessments of U.S. and allied capabilities. If there were operational “triumphs,” they were quiet ones - successful penetrations, technical collection, and analytic work that never reached the public domain.

In Russian military-intelligence circles, Ladygin’s legacy is often framed in terms of continuity and professionalism rather than drama. After his dismissal in 1997 and retirement from active service, Ladygin remained involved in strategic analysis, wrote books on national security and U.S. military doctrine, and served on advisory boards.

Ladygin’s post-retirement profile reinforces the image of a doctrinal, analytic officer rather than a swashbuckling operator.

The question of whether GRU operations under Ladygin represented a substantive departure from Soviet-era procedures and methods is, in the end, more about context than about tradecraft.

Structurally and doctrinally, the GRU he led was the same institution that had existed under the Soviet General Staff: same headquarters, same organizational culture, same

emphasis on military-strategic intelligence, technical collection, and support to operational planning. The officers were largely the same people, trained in the same schools, using the same methods.

What changed was the strategic environment.

The GRU had to operate with fewer resources, under a politically weaker state, in a world where Russia was no longer a superpower but still had to monitor NATO, regional conflicts, and arms control regimes. Ladygin's own career - rooted in Soviet technical and treaty work - meant that he adapted the GRU to that environment by integrating it more deeply into arms control and strategic analysis, rather than by reinventing its operational methods.

So the answer is that under Ladygin the GRU did not undergo a radical methodological transformation. Its operations remained grounded in Soviet-era procedures: military-strategic collection, technical intelligence, support to planning, and global monitoring of adversary capabilities. The departures were in scale, ambition, and political framing, not in the underlying tradecraft.

Ladygin's tenure is best understood as a period of managed continuity under severe external constraints, with modest institutional achievements and one major national-level military fiasco – Chechnya - shadowing his record.

Valentin Korabelnikov (1997–2009)

Valentin Vladimirovich Korabelnikov's long tenure as head of the Russian GRU from 1997 to 2009 is one of those careers where biography and institution almost perfectly mirror each other. He was born on 4 January 1946 in the small city of Rasskazovo in Tambov Oblast, deep inside the ethnic Russian heartland. Russian biographical sources are explicit on this point: he is Russian by origin, raised in a provincial milieu that fed countless officers into the Soviet armed forces.

In 1964 Korabelnikov finished secondary school with a silver medal, the classic marker of a bright, disciplined student in the Soviet system, and was drafted into the army the following year. From there his path followed the canonical ladder of Soviet military education. He entered the Minsk Higher Engineering Anti-Aircraft Missile School of Air Defense, graduating in 1969 as an air-defense engineer officer, then went on to the Frunze Military Academy, which he completed in 1974, and finally to the General Staff Academy, from which he graduated with a gold medal in 1988.

By the time the USSR collapsed, Korabelnikov had passed through every major rung of the Soviet officer-education hierarchy, and his ethnic, social, and institutional background placed him squarely in the core of the Russian military elite.

Korabelnikov's early career was split between air-defense command and intelligence. After Minsk, he served in the Far Eastern air-defense army, holding posts as a battery deputy commander, staff officer, and later an officer in the army's reconnaissance section. The move into reconnaissance was the pivot that brought him into the orbit of the GRU.

After Frunze, Korabelnikov served in Germany as an officer attached to the Soviet military mission to the French forces, then in the Belorussian Military District. In 1980 he was sent to Afghanistan, where he served in the 797th reconnaissance center in Kabul, rising from assistant to section chief to section chief itself. That Afghan tour - two years in a brutal, clandestine war - cemented his reputation as a field intelligence officer rather than a purely staff theoretician.

On Korabelnikov's return he entered the central apparatus of the GRU, and by the late 1980s, he had completed the General Staff Academy and was moving into senior positions. In the early 1990s he headed a directorate in the GRU and then became deputy chief.

During the first Chechen war Korabelnikov operated under a pseudonym in the theater, leading an operational group and, according to Russian press accounts, being seriously wounded in an ambush. By the time Boris Yeltsin appointed him chief of the GRU in May 1997, he had behind him more than two decades of continuous service in military intelligence, combat experience in Afghanistan and Chechnya, and the full set of Soviet and Russian elite military credentials.

The highlights and low lights of his tenure as GRU chief are best seen through the conflicts and crises in which the service was visibly engaged.

One of the most frequently cited "successes" associated with Korabelnikov is the operation that killed Chechen president Dzhokhar Dudayev in April 1996. Russian sources, including biographical sketches and interviews, credit him with responsibility for the intelligence operation that located Dudayev by tracking his satellite-phone communications, enabling a precision missile strike on his position.

Whether Korabelnikov personally designed the operation or oversaw it as part of a broader GRU effort, it became emblematic of the service's ability to fuse signals intelligence, battlefield reconnaissance, and long-range strike in a modern counterinsurgency environment.

In Chechnya more broadly, Korabelnikov was not a distant bureaucrat; he spent time alongside spetsnaz brigades, involved himself personally in operational work, and, as noted, was wounded. That hands-on style earned him respect inside the service and contributed to his being awarded the title Hero of the Russian Federation in 1999.

Another visible episode in which Korabelnikov's role was publicly acknowledged was the Kosovo crisis.

In July 1999, President Yeltsin issued an official commendation to Korabelnikov for his "significant contribution to the settlement of the Kosovo conflict." He was part of the Russian delegation led by Yevgeny Primakov that met Slobodan Milošević during the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, and Russian reporting suggests that GRU assessments and contacts played a role in Moscow's mediation efforts.

The famous dash of Russian paratroopers to Pristina airport in June 1999, which surprised NATO and briefly created a tense standoff, is often discussed in Western journalism as an example of Russian military-intelligence initiative. While the operational planning involved multiple organs, it unfolded under Korabelnikov's watch and reflected the GRU's enduring capacity for rapid, covert deployment and political signaling.

Korabelnikov's tenure also encompassed the second Chechen war and the Russo-Georgian war of 2008.

In the second Chechen campaign, the Russian military was far better prepared than in 1994, and GRU reconnaissance and spetsnaz operations were integral to the more systematic, if still brutal, approach.

Western and Russian analysts alike note that by the early 2000s the GRU had adapted its methods to urban and mountain warfare, integrating human intelligence, signals interception, and special-forces raids in a way that contrasted sharply with the chaotic first campaign.

In Georgia in 2008, GRU units were involved in battlefield reconnaissance, deep-penetration operations, and support to South Ossetian and Abkhaz forces. The war was short and, from Moscow's perspective, successful. While the General Staff as a whole was criticized for certain tactical and logistical shortcomings, the GRU's role was generally seen as effective in providing targeting and situational awareness.

The low lights are more diffuse and tied to structural issues rather than a single spectacular fiasco.

Throughout the late 1990s and 2000s, Western reporting and some Russian commentary described the GRU as an institution under pressure: budget cuts, competition with the FSB, and the erosion of Soviet-era overseas infrastructure all constrained its reach.

There were intelligence failures and blind spots - misreading aspects of NATO policy, underestimating certain regional dynamics - but these were shared across the Russian security establishment.

The most visible crisis of Korabelnikov's later years was not an operational scandal but a political clash.

By 2008–2009, Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov was pushing sweeping military reforms that threatened the GRU's status, structure, and autonomy. Russian media reported that Korabelnikov had tendered his resignation in protest earlier in 2009, disagreeing with the reforms.

In April that year President Dmitry Medvedev signed the decree dismissing Korabelnikov and appointing Alexander Shlyakhturov in his place.

Western outlets like the BBC framed the dismissal as part of a broader restructuring of Russian military intelligence, hinting at institutional resistance to reform and internal tensions between the GRU and the civilian leadership.

I suspect far worse.

I suspect Putin became paranoid after installing his puppet, Dmitri Medvedev, as President.

Putin's Puppet

> The "Medvedev gambit" was one of the most audacious constitutional maneuvers in modern Russian political history, and at the time - 2008 to 2012 - it produced a wave of speculation, anxiety, and outright confusion in both Russian and international media.
>
> It was not simply a matter of Vladimir Putin stepping aside and Dmitry Medvedev stepping in. It was a moment when the Russian presidency became, for the first time, a *legal office divorced from real power*, and when the Russian constitution was bent—though not formally broken—to preserve the continuity of Putin's rule.
>
> The stunt was elegant, cynical, and destabilizing all at once, and its implications were felt most sharply inside the armed organs of the state, including the GRU.

When Putin announced he would not run for a third consecutive term in 2008, Russian journalists immediately began speculating that this was not a real transfer of power but a tactical retreat. The constitution barred him from a third consecutive term, but it did not bar him from becoming prime minister.

For us here in the West, imagine Donald Trump, barred from running for a third term as President, stepped aside, only to be appointed by President Elect J.D. Vance as Secretary of State. The maneuver would be, technically, legal, but unprecedented. A constitutional crisis would ensue as all sides debated whether term limits prohibited a term limited former President from holding any office in the line of direct succession.

A constitutional crisis should ensue, so ambiguous is the law.

In Russia, the same ambiguity existed, and Putin chose to exploit it to retain power. In Russia, the law also did not bar Putin from returning to the presidency later. Russian law merely prohibited a third, consecutive term.

The "castling move," as Russian commentators called it - *rokirovka*, the chess term for switching king and rook - was widely interpreted as a way for Putin to remain the de facto ruler while avoiding a constitutional crisis. Medvedev, a loyal technocrat with no independent political base, was seen as the perfect placeholder.

Western press echoed the same analysis: Medvedev would be president in name, Putin in fact.

The constitutional crisis at the heart of the gambit was subtle but real. The Russian constitution vests enormous power in the presidency: control over the armed forces, the security services, foreign policy, and the appointment of ministers.

By placing Medvedev in the presidency while retaining real authority as prime minister, Putin created a situation in which the *formal* head of state was not the *actual* head of state.

This inversion produced a dual-power structure that was not anticipated by the constitution and that left the military and intelligence services unsure whom they should obey. The presidency had become a legal shell; the prime ministership had become the true center of power.

Russian legal scholars at the time debated whether this violated the spirit of the constitution, even if it did not violate its letter.

Russian press speculation during 2008–2009 reflected this uncertainty. Some argued that Putin was testing Medvedev's loyalty. Others suggested that Putin wanted to temporarily soften Russia's international image by placing a more liberal figure in the presidency. Still others believed Putin was using Medvedev to carry out unpopular reforms - especially military reforms - so that Putin could return later without having personally antagonized the armed forces.

I make the following observation: Putin was savvy enough to accomplish all these things in one fell swoop.

International media added their own theories: that Putin feared the emergence of rival power centers, that he wanted to weaken the General Staff, that he was preparing for a long-term restructuring of Russia's coercive institutions.

Inside the military, the ambiguity was destabilizing.

The GRU, in particular, was caught in the crossfire. Valentin Korabelnikov had commanded the GRU for twelve years and was accustomed to dealing with strong presidents - Yeltsin and Putin - who were clearly the ultimate authority. But in 2008–2009, the chain of command was blurred. Medvedev was president, but Putin was the real ruler.

Serdyukov, the defense minister, answered to Putin.

The GRU did not know whether resisting Serdyukov's reforms meant defying Medvedev or defying Putin. Korabelnikov misread the moment. He believed Medvedev would be cautious, deferential to the military, and unwilling to dismantle the GRU's special-operations arm. He assumed Putin would not weaken the GRU while formally out of the presidency. He assumed the General Staff could negotiate or slow-roll reforms.

All of those assumptions were wrong. The reforms came fast - within months of Medvedev's inauguration.

Spetsnaz brigades were disbanded or transferred. The GRU lost more than half its special-operations forces. Training pipelines were dismantled. The service's autonomy was reduced.

Korabelnikov resisted, submitted his resignation, and was dismissed. In retrospect, and in strictly military terms, Korabelnikov was correct and the force reductions were wrong because, major powers who seek force reductions actually rely more on special operations forces to project power and secure their interests. If anything, you cut regular army units and bolster special operations forces.

No, Medvedev was not implementing force reductions as a liberal reformer. Putin was pulling teeth from behind the curtain.

Though the Russian Federation had abandoned socialism as Russia's raison d'être, the Paradox of the Proletariat resonated in Putin's psyche. It appears to have resonated in too many Russian psyches.

Putin knew his side stepping of the constitution would draw the ire of millions, and Chekists may exploit the same legal ambiguities as an excuse to stage a coup. But Chekists always need teeth to bite. Putin decided to remove all the teeth Mother Russia could spare.

Russian press at the time described Korabelnikov's dismissal as a "signal to the generals" and a "victory for the reformers." Western outlets framed it as evidence that Medvedev was asserting authority, though most analysts quietly noted that the real author of the reforms was Putin.

The constitutional crisis was not a dramatic confrontation but a structural distortion: the presidency had become a façade, and the prime ministership had become the locus of real power.

Putin's stunt had not yet "sunk in. The GRU was operating on old assumptions about presidential authority, and it paid the price. The reforms were not Medvedev's initiative; they were Putin's. The GRU's leadership understood this only after the axe had fallen.

Medvedev was simply the constitutional executor. The GRU learned the hard way that, in the tandem era, the presidency was a legal office, not a power center, and that the real decisions were still being made by the man who had built the modern Russian security state: Vladimir Putin.

The story of Dmitry Medvedev's dismissal of Valentin Korabelnikov in April 2009 is really the story of a collision between an old-style Soviet military-intelligence ethos and a new wave of political and bureaucratic reform that wanted to break the power of that world.

On paper, the Kremlin's announcement was bland: Medvedev signed a decree "releasing" General Korabelnikov from his post as chief of the GRU and from military service, and appointing his deputy, Alexander Shlyakhturov, in his place.

No official reason was given. But Russian and Western reporting, and the way the dismissal was read inside Moscow, make it clear that this was not a routine retirement. It was a political act aimed at removing a man who had become a symbol of resistance

to the transformation of the armed forces and of the GRU's refusal to accept a diminishing role.

By late 2008, Korabelnikov had been in the job for twelve years. He was a four-star general, a Hero of the Russian Federation, and one of the last remaining figures whose career ran straight from late-Soviet military intelligence through Afghanistan and Chechnya into the post-Soviet conflicts of the 1990s and 2000s.

Russian media such as Kommersant reported that he had submitted his resignation in protest as early as November 2008, together with other generals opposed to Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov's reform program. Those reforms aimed to shrink the officer corps, cut hundreds of thousands of posts, and restructure the army away from a mobilization-based Soviet model toward smaller, more professional units.

For the GRU, the proposals were even more threatening: disbanding several spetsnaz brigades, redistributing some GRU structures to the SVR, and downgrading the service's status within the General Staff. In that context, Korabelnikov's resignation was not just a personal gesture; it was a political signal that the head of military intelligence considered the reforms a danger to Russia's security.

In this interpretations, Korabelnikov was falling on his sword in protest over dangerous force reductions. That, however, would have been very un-soviet-like.

Russian Federation sources and commentary framed his dismissal explicitly in that light. The Kremlin itself stayed neutral, but Russian journalists and politicians did not. Viktor Ilyukhin, a Communist deputy and former deputy head of the Duma's national security committee, called the dismissal "a blow at our Russian forces and the security of our nation," describing Korabelnikov as "a born intelligence chief" and one of the best experts on the state of Russia's army.

That ringing endorsement came from precisely the wrong place, the Chekist wing of Russian politics.

Western outlets like the BBC and Al Jazeera picked up the same theme: analysts said he was one of the main opponents of the planned reforms, and that his removal was a message to the generals that dissent would not be tolerated.

A U.S. embassy cable from Moscow added another layer, quoting Russian experts who described Korabelnikov as a "Soviet-style general" whose GRU remained fixated on NATO and had performed poorly in the August 2008 war with Georgia, failing to provide adequate intelligence on Georgian air defenses and other real, immediate threats. In that reading, his dismissal was not only about institutional resistance but also about perceived professional failure in a recent conflict.

The clash, then, had two intertwined dimensions.

On one side was Korabelnikov's GRU: large, global, with a massive network of agents abroad, controlling its own spetsnaz brigades, and steeped in a worldview that saw NATO as the primary adversary. On the other side were Medvedev and Serdyukov, backed by Putin, pushing a reform agenda that wanted a leaner army, a rebalanced intelligence community, and a reduction in the autonomous power of the General Staff and its organs.

Korabelnikov's refusal to accept the disbanding of GRU brigades and the redistribution of functions was a direct challenge to that agenda. His reported resignation in protest, and the reluctance of his deputies to take his place, underscored how deep the resistance ran inside the service.

When Medvedev finally signed the decree in April 2009, it was widely read as a victory for the reformers, and a warning to other senior officers: oppose the reforms and you will be swept aside. In one stroke of the pen, Medvedev reduced Russia's special operations community by 57%.

This is where Shlyakhturov enters the story, and why his tenure cannot be dismissed as a mere stopgap.

Alexander Shlyakhturov (2009-2011)

Shlyakhturov was Korabelnikov's first deputy, a career intelligence officer, but he was seen - by Russian media and Western observers alike - as a more compliant figure, less likely to challenge the Defense Ministry. Under Shlyakhturov, the reforms that Korabelnikov had resisted began to bite.

Spetsnaz brigades under GRU control were disbanded or transferred; the service's command over certain special-operations units was diluted; some analytical and technical functions were shifted toward the FSB and SVR; and the GRU's institutional weight inside the General Staff was reduced.

Officers were cut, structures were merged or eliminated, and the service's overseas footprint was trimmed. From the outside, it looked like "pulling teeth": the slow, painful extraction of pieces of an organ that had long prided itself on being the most autonomous and hard-edged part of the Russian intelligence system.

The question I raise - whether political leaders began to view the GRU as a potential threat, even a coup risk - is regrettably not a question open sources can address directly, but it is a reasonable line of analysis.

The GRU is unique among Russian intelligence agencies: it is embedded in the armed forces, commands its own armed units, and has a culture that is more military than bureaucratic.

In the 1990s and 2000s, it remained the last major Soviet-style intelligence organ not subordinated to the FSB's domestic empire or the SVR's civilian foreign-intelligence framework. For a leadership that was increasingly focused on centralizing control, preventing independent power centers, and ensuring that no armed institution could act without Kremlin oversight, the GRU's autonomy was a structural risk.

There is no hard evidence that Medvedev or Putin feared a literal GRU-led coup. But the pattern of reforms suggests a desire to make such a scenario structurally impossible. By cutting brigades, redistributing functions, and downgrading the service's status, the political leadership reduced the GRU's ability to act as an independent armed intelligence organ.

At the same time, they strengthened the FSB, which is more tightly bound to the presidential administration and, as a security service, has no independent combat formations of the same scale. In that sense, the reforms under Shlyakhturov can be read as part of a broader project of "coup-proofing" the state.

Korabelnikov's dismissal was the first sign that Putin was future proofing his next administration. Putin, using Medvedev as a proxy, fragmented potential centers of armed power, ensured that no single military-intelligence service could operate beyond his political control, and reshaped the balance between the General Staff and the civilian leadership.

What is striking, looking back, is that the GRU did not disappear. Previous Russian leaders had all used scorched earth tactics, but not Putin.

Despite the teeth-pulling, enough of the service survived that Igor Sergun, appointed in 2011, could rebuild it into the aggressive, outward-facing covert-action organ that later operated in Crimea, Donbas, Syria, and across Europe.

That survival owes something to Shlyakhturov's administrative navigation of the reforms, but it also underscores the limits of the political leadership's willingness to weaken military intelligence. Putin wanted a GRU that was smaller, less autonomous, and more tightly controlled - not one that was neutered.

The clash with Korabelnikov, and the reforms that followed, were about forcing the GRU to accept that new reality.

Western analysts still wonder if Putin succeeded. Ominously, so does Putin.

Igor Sergun (2011–2016)

Igor Dmitrievich Sergun's tenure as head of the GRU from late 2011 until his sudden death in January 2016 marks the moment when Russian military intelligence re-emerged from the Serdyukov reform trauma as an aggressive, outward-facing covert-action service.

To see what changed under him, you have to start with who he was, because his biography is almost a distilled version of the late-Soviet and post-Soviet officer trajectory that produced the modern GRU.

Sergun was born on 28 March 1957 in Podolsk, a working-class satellite city south of Moscow, in the Russian heartland. His family background, as far as open sources reveal, was ordinary Russian; there is no indication of minority origins or exotic lineage.

Sergun went through the classic Soviet military education pipeline: first the Moscow Suvorov Military School, then the Moscow Higher Military Command School, followed by the Military Academy of the Soviet Army and, later, the General Staff Academy of the Russian Federation.

Sergun entered active service in 1973 and moved into military intelligence in 1984. From that point on, his career was entirely inside the GRU. He served in various positions in the Main Intelligence Directorate, learned multiple foreign languages, and in 1998, as a colonel, was posted as Russian military attaché in Tirana, Albania - an assignment that placed him in a small but strategically sensitive Balkan capital at a time of regional instability.

By the late 2000s Sergun had risen through the central apparatus, completed the General Staff Academy, and was part of the senior GRU leadership.

On 26 December 2011, after the turbulent Shlyakhturov period, Sergun was appointed Director of the GRU (by then officially renamed the Main Directorate of the General Staff) and simultaneously Deputy Chief of the General Staff. He was promoted to lieutenant general in 2012 and to colonel general in February 2015.

If Putin's intent in the earlier reforms of the GRU was compartmentalization, he was reversing it all by investing so much prerogative in one man.

Sergun's appointment came at a moment when the GRU had been badly weakened: spetsnaz brigades disbanded or transferred, training pipelines disrupted, status downgraded, and functions stripped away. Russian military journalists and Western analysts alike described the service in 2010–2011 as "castrated" and "bled." Sergun's task was not simply to run the GRU; it was to rebuild it.

The highlights of Sergun's tenure are inseparable from the major Russian operations of the period: Crimea, Donbas, and Syria.

Under Sergun, the GRU became the spearhead of Russia's hybrid warfare doctrine. In Crimea in early 2014, GRU officers and spetsnaz units played a central role in the seizure of key infrastructure, the neutralization of Ukrainian command structures, and the orchestration of the "little green men" phenomenon—unmarked soldiers who were, in reality, Russian special forces and naval infantry operating under GRU coordination.

Western reporting and EU/U.S. sanctions documents explicitly linked Sergun to the annexation, and in March and May 2014 Sergun was placed on U.S. and EU sanctions lists as a person responsible for GRU activity in Ukraine.

In Donbas, the GRU under Sergun moved beyond classic military-strategic intelligence into direct covert action: organizing, advising, and sometimes commanding separatist formations; providing weapons, training, and command-and-control; and integrating local militias into a broader Russian operational design.

Western investigative journalism and Ukrainian intelligence reporting repeatedly identified GRU officers and units as key actors in the conflict.

The downing of MH17 in July 2014, while carried out by a separatist crew using a Russian Buk system, became one of the low lights of this period: it exposed the lethal consequences of Russia's covert support and triggered intense international scrutiny of GRU involvement in eastern Ukraine.

Sergun himself was not publicly named in connection with MH17, but the broader GRU role in Donbas was one of the reasons he remained under sanctions.

In Syria, beginning in late 2015, the GRU again played a central role. As Russia deployed air and special forces to support the Assad regime, GRU officers were involved in reconnaissance, targeting, liaison with Syrian and Iranian units, and the coordination of Russian special-operations missions.

Sergun was part of the Russian delegation that met King Abdullah II of Jordan in November 2015, a visible sign of his role in the diplomatic-military interface around the Syrian intervention. Russian press and Western analysis both noted that under Sergun the GRU had become a global expeditionary intelligence service, operating simultaneously in Ukraine, Syria, and other theaters.

The low lights of Sergun's tenure are tied less to battlefield failure than to exposure and blowback. The very aggressiveness of GRU operations under Sergun led to unprecedented public visibility.

Western governments named and sanctioned GRU officers; investigative outlets traced unit numbers and individual identities; cyber operations attributed to GRU units began to surface; and the service's covert footprint in Europe became a subject of open discussion.

While many of the most notorious European operations (such as the attempted coup in Montenegro and the Salisbury poisoning) occurred after Sergun's death, the institutional trajectory that produced them was set under his leadership: the rebuilding of spetsnaz, the restoration of GRU operational autonomy, and the embrace of risk-tolerant covert action as a tool of state policy.

Sergun's own death in January 2016 added a final layer of mystery.

The Russian Ministry of Defense announced that he had "died unexpectedly" on 3 January 2016, without specifying the cause. Stratfor, the private intelligence firm, citing its own sources, claimed he had died in Lebanon on a secret mission; Lebanese media later echoed that narrative, suggesting he had been killed in a complex operation involving multiple Middle Eastern intelligence services.

None of these accounts has been conclusively verified, but the very existence of such speculation reflects the perception, in both Russian and international circles, that Sergun was deeply involved in sensitive operations beyond Ukraine and Syria.

Assessing whether GRU operations under Sergun represented a substantive departure from Soviet-era procedures and methods requires a careful distinction between structure and application.

Structurally, the GRU he led was still recognizably the same institution: the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff, staffed by officers trained in Soviet and Russian academies, organized around military-strategic intelligence, signals collection, and special-operations forces.

Sergun himself was a product of that tradition: Suvorov school, command school, military academies, long service in the GRU, foreign attaché posting, and ascent through the central apparatus. The tradecraft - reconnaissance, agent handling, signals interception, deep operations - remained grounded in Soviet practice.

What changed under Sergun was the *mission profile* and the *risk appetite*. The GRU moved from being primarily a strategic collection and support organ to being a central instrument of Russian hybrid warfare and covert action.

In other words, Russian Intelligence fell back into its old, Chekist ways.

In Crimea and Donbas, it did not merely observe; it shaped events, organized proxies, and conducted deniable operations on foreign soil. In Syria, it integrated intelligence and special operations in an expeditionary campaign far from Russia's borders.

Under Sergun the service embraced a more aggressive, kinetic, and politically instrumental role than it had typically played in the late Soviet period, when covert action abroad was more often the domain of the KGB's First Chief Directorate.

If anyone doubted if Putin's nationalist tendencies had taken a back seat to the reformer, Sergun puts those doubts to rest. Putin is an extremely talented Chekist.

Igor Kostyukov (2018-present)

Igor Olegovich Kostyukov's tenure as head of the Russian GRU/GU from late 2018 to the present is the phase in which Russian military intelligence has tried to operate as a fully modern hybrid-warfare organ—combining traditional military-strategic collection and special operations with cyber campaigns, foreign influence operations, and direct involvement in a large-scale interstate war.

To see what that has meant in practice, you have to start with his biography, because he is both typical of the Soviet/Russian officer pipeline and unusual in one crucial respect: he is the first naval officer ever to lead the GRU.

Kostyukov was born on 21 February 1961 in Amur Oblast, in the Russian Far East, a region that has long supplied officers to the Soviet and Russian armed forces. Open Russian sources are sparse on his family background, which is standard for senior intelligence personnel, but everything that is known points to an ordinary ethnic Russian origin rather than any minority or exotic lineage.

Kostyukov received a naval education, graduating from a higher naval school and then from the Military Diplomatic Academy of the Soviet Armed Forces, the institution that trained officers for intelligence, attaché work, and strategic analysis. After the academy he entered the Main Intelligence Directorate—the GRU—and spent most of his career there.

In 2004 Kostyukov served as military attaché at the Russian embassy in Athens, a classic GRU cover posting that combined diplomatic duties with intelligence work. By the 2010s he had risen to become first deputy head of the GRU, with the rank of vice admiral, and was deeply involved in the Russian military operation in Syria. In 2017, by a closed presidential decree, he was awarded the title Hero of the Russian Federation for courage and heroism in the Syrian campaign.

When Igor Korobov, his predecessor as GRU chief, fell ill and then died in November 2018, Kostyukov became acting director and, in December 2018, was formally appointed director of the Main Directorate of the General Staff and deputy chief of the General Staff.

In 2019 Kostyukov was promoted to admiral. That appointment made him the first naval officer to lead the GRU, a symbol of the service's increasingly joint, expeditionary character.

Under Kostyukov, the GRU's operational portfolio has been dominated by three broad arenas: the continuation of the Syrian intervention, the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict into full-scale war, and a sustained campaign of cyber and covert operations against Western states.

In Syria, Kostyukov inherited and continued the work that had earned him his Hero of Russia title: overseeing intelligence support to Russian air and special-operations forces, coordinating with Syrian and Iranian partners, and integrating reconnaissance, targeting, and liaison in a complex multi-actor battlefield.

Russian reporting has noted that he was responsible for security during Vladimir Putin's visit to Syria in January 2020, a visible sign of his role in the theater. From Moscow's perspective, the Syrian operation has been a strategic success: the Assad regime survived, Russia secured bases at Tartus and Khmeimim, and the GRU gained deep operational experience in expeditionary warfare.

The more consequential - and more controversial - part of his tenure has been the GRU's role in Ukraine. The service was already heavily involved in Crimea and Donbas under Igor Sergun and Igor Korobov; under Kostyukov, that involvement expanded into intelligence support for the full-scale invasion launched in February 2022.

Western and Ukrainian sources have described GRU units as responsible for reconnaissance, targeting, sabotage, and support to Russian and proxy forces across the theater. At the same time, many analysts, including Russian military commentators writing cautiously, have argued that the Russian intelligence community, including the GRU, badly misread Ukraine's political cohesion, military capacity, and Western resolve.

The failure of the initial Russian thrust toward Kyiv, the inability to decapitate the Ukrainian leadership, and the underestimation of Ukrainian resistance have been widely interpreted as intelligence failures. While the FSB's Fifth Service, responsible for political intelligence on Ukraine, has borne much of the blame in Russian insider accounts, the GRU's strategic assessments and battlefield intelligence are part of the same picture.

In that sense, the 2022 invasion contains both “triumphs” and “fiascos” for Kostyukov’s GRU: operational successes in specific campaigns, such as the seizure of territory in the south and east, and strategic miscalculations that left Russia in a prolonged, costly war.

Parallel to these kinetic operations, the GRU under Kostyukov has been at the center of a global confrontation in cyberspace and covert action.

Western governments have sanctioned him personally and designated the GRU as responsible for a series of cyber operations and interference campaigns. Units such as GTsSS (often identified as Unit 74455) have been linked in Western indictments and reports to attacks on critical infrastructure, election interference, and destructive malware campaigns.

The U.S. and EU had already sanctioned GRU officers for the 2016 U.S. election interference and the NotPetya attack; under Kostyukov, the pattern has continued, with the GRU treated in Western discourse as one of the main instruments of Russian cyber and information warfare.

At the same time, covert action units such as the now-notorious Unit 29155, associated with assassinations and sabotage in Europe, have remained active. Some of their most publicized operations - such as the Salisbury poisoning in 2018 and the attempted coup in Montenegro in 2016 - occurred before Kostyukov formally took over, but the institutional continuity is clear: he inherited a GRU that had already embraced high-risk covert action abroad and has not reversed that course.

The low lights of his tenure, from a Western perspective, are precisely these exposed operations and the resulting sanctions, indictments, and reputational damage. The GRU has gone from being a largely invisible military-intelligence organ to being a household acronym in Western media, associated with hacks, poisonings, and covert operations.

Kostyukov himself has been sanctioned multiple times by the U.S., EU, and other states.

In March 2022, Ukrainian politician Arsen Avakov claimed that Kostyukov and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu had suffered a sudden illness, and Russian and international media noted that he had disappeared from public view along with other senior siloviki, prompting speculation about internal tensions and health issues.

More recently, in 2026, Kostyukov has reappeared as a visible figure, leading the Russian delegation in Abu Dhabi for peace negotiations with Ukraine and meeting Ukrainian officials Rustem Umerov and Kyrylo Budanov.

That diplomatic role underscores the dual nature of his position: he is both an intelligence chief and a political actor in Russia's war and peace calculations.

Assessing whether GRU operations under Kostyukov represent a substantive departure from Soviet-era procedures and methods requires, again, a distinction between the underlying tradecraft and the way it is being used.

Structurally, the GRU he leads is still the Main Directorate of the General Staff, staffed by officers trained in Soviet and Russian academies, organized around military-strategic intelligence, signals collection, and special-operations forces. Kostyukov himself is a product of that system: naval school, Military Diplomatic Academy, long service in the GRU, foreign attaché work, ascent through the central apparatus. The core methods—reconnaissance, agent handling, signals interception, deep operations—remain grounded in Soviet practice.

What has changed under Kostyukov is the degree to which those methods are integrated into a comprehensive hybrid-warfare strategy and extended into new domains. The GRU now routinely combines traditional military intelligence with cyber operations, information campaigns, and covert action in ways that were rare or more compartmentalized in the Soviet period.

The GRU today operates not only as a collector and battlefield supporter but as a direct instrument of state policy in cyberspace and political warfare. The service's risk appetite remains high: it conducts operations that it knows will be exposed and sanctioned, accepting reputational and legal costs as part of the strategic calculus.

After studying Russian Intelligence all my life, I predict Putin already anticipates the need to sacrifice the agency to provide his administration with absolution. Putin's plans in this regard have just been long delayed by failures in achieving his war objectives.

In Ukraine, the GRU has supported a large-scale conventional war, something the Soviet GRU did in Afghanistan but on a different scale and in a different political context. In Syria and other theaters, it has acted as an expeditionary intelligence organ, coordinating with non-state actors and foreign militaries in complex coalitions.

In that sense, Kostyukov's GRU is both contiguous to its Soviet antecedent and an evolution beyond. In short, Putin's GRU today is more dangerous than any previous generation. It preserves the Soviet military-intelligence ethos - hierarchical, secretive, technically competent - but applies it in a world where cyber operations, global media, and legal sanctions are part of the battlefield.

The result is a Hybrid Agency built specifically for Hybrid warfare.

The institution is still recognizably Soviet in its culture and methods, but its raison d'être has shifted: from supporting a superpower's global military posture to sustaining a revisionist state's confrontation with the West across multiple domains, from Donbas trenches to server farms and diplomatic back rooms in Abu Dhabi.

Prognosis Russia

When all is said and done, when asked to draw a conclusion after a lifetime of analysis, I am at a loss. I know, experts who refuse to draw conclusions are rarely regarded as experts, but I'd rather be honest with you.

It doesn't look good.

At the time of this writing Vladimir Putin appears content with squandering over a million Russian lives, and that doesn't include the combat casualties suffered by Ukraine. At the risk of sounding repetitive, I believe all of these men will agree it would have been better if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball. But that doesn't advise us, either on where we are or where we are all going.
Allow me to start with where we are. The world's leaders are confronted with a harsh reality: Russia contorted the natural course of human history in the 20th century, simply because they believed they had evolved into a superior species of hominin. And though Russia appears to have abandoned "species" as a criterion justifying their crimes, they are demonstratively as racists as they have ever been.

The Chekists of the Soviet era have yielded to the Siloviki of the Putin era. Both weer Shadow Governments, but Putin's, free of fatal flaw of socialism, no longer devours itself in cycles of ideological purges.

For this reason, Silovikistan is emerging as a greater threat to international security than the Soviet Union ever represented. No nation ever fully embraced Soviet socialism, and those who attempted a variant thereof were similarly afflicted by the Paradox of the Proletariat.

But with the adoption of "Kapitalism", and the abandonment of ideological constraints, sufficient economic incentives, the Silovikistan model of power monopolization is practically achievable for those who embrace "Kapitalism".

The danger to the west is found in the sycophantic devotion Western elites show for commercial enterprise. Kapitalism, as realized by the Siloviki, is a wolf in Golden

Gooses clothing. Siloviki Kapitalism bears no resemblance to the Well-Regulated Markets we know and love in the west.

Siloviki Kapitalism is unrestricted economic warfare. This shadow government I call Silovikistan, is the enemy of world peace, and the perpetrator of most crimes against humanity in the 21st Century, and that century has only begun.

But crimes against humanity no longer shock, much less motivate western leaders. As Stalin predicted, crimes against humanity resolve to statistical noise. Instead of charting the same failed course with Russia Intelligence, I believe it is best to take them at their word, and prepare for the worst. That they promise.

In my closing argument, I call Dmitri Medvedev to the witness stand.

Dmitry Medvedev

Dmitry Anatolyevich Medvedev was born on 14 September 1965 in Leningrad, then the second-largest city of the Soviet Union and today known as Saint Petersburg. His family background is notable because it differed significantly from that of many figures who later came to dominate Russian political life. Medvedev did not emerge from the military, intelligence, or Communist Party elite. Instead, he was a product of the Soviet professional intelligentsia, the educated technical and academic class that occupied a respected but not privileged position within Soviet society.

In other words, Dmitry Medvedev does not qualify as one of the Siloviki, insofar as the Siloviki recognize each other; as professionals of the Russian Armed Forces or Russian Intelligence Community.

Medvedev's father, Anatoly Afanasyevich Medvedev, was an engineer and university professor who taught at the Leningrad Technological Institute. His career was rooted in science, technology, and higher education. His mother, Yulia Veniaminovna Medvedeva, worked as an educator and had a background in philology and language studies. Together, they represented a social stratum that valued education, discipline, professional accomplishment, and advancement through merit rather than through Party patronage.

As a child, Medvedev grew up in a relatively typical Soviet urban environment. By all available accounts he was academically successful and displayed the traits that would characterize his later public image: caution, diligence, and intellectual ability. His

upbringing did not place him near the centers of political power, nor did it expose him to the military-security culture that shaped many future members of the Russian elite.

After completing secondary school, Medvedev entered Leningrad State University, one of the Soviet Union's most prestigious institutions. There he studied law, graduating in 1987. He remained at the university for postgraduate studies and subsequently taught law.

Before politics claimed him, Medvedev ‘s professional identity was that of a legal scholar and lecturer. This distinction is important because Medvedev's formative years were spent in legal academia rather than in the armed forces, intelligence services, or Party bureaucracy. Medvedev's route to power was civilian. His career path was law, academia, administration, and eventually politics.

In every measure, Dmitry Medvedev appeared a new coin in the post-Soviet realm. Russia diplomats presented Medvedev as the first ray of light in a re-born Russia. The western press lapped that piddle up like kittens and, for a few years there, even I became hopeful Russia had turned a corner.

Affix this image and that hope in your imagination. I will be returning to this moment shortly.

Medvedev's political career began during the tumultuous final years of the Soviet Union and the early post-Soviet period. The crucial figure in this stage of his life was Anatoly Sobchak, a law professor, reform advocate, and later mayor of Saint Petersburg. Sobchak assembled a team of young lawyers and administrators to help manage the city's transition during the collapse of Soviet authority. Medvedev joined this circle and performed legal and advisory functions.

It was within Sobchak's administration that Medvedev first became associated with Vladimir Putin. Although Putin and Medvedev came from very different backgrounds and generations of experience, both worked within Sobchak's political orbit. When Sobchak's team dispersed and Putin's rise in Moscow accelerated during the late 1990s, Medvedev became one of the trusted civilian specialists who followed.

Medvedev’s advancement thereafter was remarkably steady. Unlike many ambitious politicians, Medvedev was not known for cultivating a public constituency or building an independent political machine. Instead, he developed a reputation for loyalty, administrative competence, and reliability. Those qualities brought him increasing responsibilities inside the presidential administration.

In other words, there is nothing whatsoever in Medvedev’s career trajectory which suggests he is building his own network. One immediately understands why men, like

Sobchak and Putin, valued Medvedev. Medvedev was a competent and loyal, a man who could not stray out of his assigned lane without getting run over.

Medvedev was riding coattails and had no option to deviate from that role.

Gazprom

During the early Putin years, Medvedev served in senior administrative posts and eventually became chairman of Gazprom, Russia's largest natural-gas company and one of the most strategically important enterprises in the country. That position is critically important for the Siloviki, who both profited from and ran Gazprom from the shadows.

Throughout much of the post-Soviet period, senior Russian government officials have been required to file declarations concerning income, property, and certain financial interests. Ministers, governors, members of parliament, judges, and senior executive branch officials have all been subject, at various times, to disclosure requirements. If such an official directly owned shares of Gazprom in his own name, those shares would generally fall within the scope of the reporting regime.

That fact, however, should not be mistaken for transparency.

The problem is that Russian public transparency has become substantially more restricted over time. Particularly after the expansion of Western sanctions and the deterioration of relations with the West, the Russian government reduced public access to various categories of personal financial information. The official justification was national security and protection of sanctioned individuals.

For our purposes, the Siloviki are covering their tracks. Why? Because much of Putin’s expansionist ambitions are directly tied to securing larger energy reserves for Gazprom. A closer look at hydrocarbon futures reveals the Siloviki’s regional imperatives.

Hydrocarbon Futures

The hydrocarbon picture of the region is often misunderstood because people focus on who owns pipelines rather than who controls reserves. Gazprom's reach does not automatically translate into ownership of oil and gas resources outside the Russian Federation. In fact, many of the most significant hydrocarbon resources in the post-

Soviet space lie within independent states whose governments, national companies, and foreign partners control their development.

Ukraine's Role

Ukraine possesses substantially larger hydrocarbon resources than is commonly appreciated, although much of its potential remains underdeveloped. Historically, Ukraine was a significant natural gas producer during the Soviet period, particularly in the Dnieper-Donets Basin in the east.

This is the region Putin is presently attempting to annex as part of Russia.

Ukraine's conventional gas reserves remain important, but the real interest emerged in the 2010s when geological surveys pointed to potentially substantial shale gas resources in eastern and western Ukraine. Even more significant are the offshore fields in the Black Sea and around Crimea.

Prior to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Ukraine was actively exploring offshore gas development and many analysts believed domestic production could increase dramatically over time. Russian control of Crimea would transfer de facto control of offshore resources and infrastructure to Russia.

Ignore what the Siloviki tell us about Russia's deep, cultural interests in Crimea. Putin's invasion was always about seizing these energy reserves.

While estimates vary widely, Ukraine likely possesses enough gas resources to become substantially more energy independent than it was during the Soviet and early post-Soviet eras. This makes Ukrainian natural gas reserves a double-edged sword for the Kremlin, for not only would Ukraine be a supply competitor to Gazprom, developing natural gas reserves in Ukraine would also end Ukrainian imports of Russian natural gas.

At a time when the Siloviki had saturated Russia's domestic markets, they could ill afford to lose market export customers. But, relative to Ukraine, Russia would also be losing a lever of existential control over Ukraine.

Ukrainian oil resources exist as well, though Ukraine is primarily a natural gas story rather than an oil-export power. The existence of proven petroleum reserves would enable Ukraine's petrochemical industry to operate independent of Russia's.

Once again, Ukrainian energy development threatened to deprive the Siloviki of another lever of control over Ukraine.

Georgian Role

Georgia is not a major hydrocarbon producer in its own right, but it occupies a position of extraordinary strategic significance. Modest oil and gas deposits exist within Georgian territory, yet they are not large enough to transform Georgia into a major energy state. The country's importance derives instead from geography.

Georgia sits between the Caspian Basin and European markets and hosts some of the most important export corridors in Eurasia. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the South Caucasus natural gas pipeline both cross Georgian territory. As a result, Georgia functions less as an energy producer and more as an energy transit state.

Control over Georgian territory affects whether Caspian hydrocarbons reach the Mediterranean and Europe without traversing Russian territory. For this reason, Georgia's significance in energy politics greatly exceeds the size of its own reserves.

Armenia’s Role

The broader Transcaucasus region, particularly when Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are considered together, contains resources that are heavily concentrated in Azerbaijan. Although Azerbaijan’s relationship with Russia has been troubled, more recently it has appeared to stabilize, though appearances, especially when it comes to Russia, are always deceiving.

Russia’s disproportionate interests in territorial disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan is more than just suspect. Russia’s choice to side with Armenia in its often armed dispute with Azerbaijan is a preface to a kill. Of that, I am certain.

Russia’s motive lies in Azerbaijan’s Caspian coast, and claim to offshore energy reserves. I remain convinced Türkiye’s commitment to Azerbaijan’s independence is the only reason the Siloviki have not acted already.

Armenia possesses few significant hydrocarbon deposits and remains an energy importer. Azerbaijan, by contrast, is one of the world's historic petroleum-producing regions. The Absheron Peninsula around Baku was already a major oil-producing area in the nineteenth century and remains central to the country's economy.

Offshore development in the Caspian Sea dramatically expanded Azerbaijan's role after the fall of the Soviet Union. Major fields such as Azeri-Chirag-Gunashli and Shah Deniz contain very substantial oil and natural gas reserves. The Shah Deniz gas field in particular transformed Azerbaijan into a major gas exporter and a key supplier for projects intended to reduce European dependence on Russian energy.

In practical terms, when most analysts discuss Transcaucasian hydrocarbon wealth, they are largely discussing Azerbaijani resources and the infrastructure that carries them westward.

The Caspian's Role

The Caspian Sea itself contains the largest concentration of hydrocarbon resources in the region outside Russia proper. The basin is shared among Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Iran, and its reserves have been compared by some analysts to parts of the Persian Gulf, though typically on a smaller scale.

Kazakhstan's offshore and near-shore fields, especially Kashagan, rank among the most significant oil discoveries of the modern era. Turkmenistan possesses enormous natural gas reserves, including the giant Galkynysh field, which is among the largest gas deposits on Earth. Azerbaijan's offshore oil and gas fields represent another major component of Caspian wealth.

Collectively, the Caspian Basin contains tens of billions of barrels of recoverable oil and vast quantities of natural gas. The geopolitical importance of the Caspian stems from the fact that these resources can potentially supply Europe, Turkey, South Asia, and East Asia.

All of these countries are presently highly dependent on Gazprom energy and petroleum byproducts. Russia, therefore, views limits on these suppliers as a secondary, strategic objective, but a primary strategic objective would be the control of these suppliers.

Relative to the Caspian's reserves, Russia's interests are dynamic. Transportation routes, primarily gas pipelines through the Transcaucasus region, contribute to Russia's revenues where they are controlled by Russia, but can detract where they are not. Revenue is a derivative of supply and demand, so Gazprom's quarterly revenues are more about transport than reserves.

Because both Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are former members of the Soviet Union, and current members of the Commonwealth of Independent States led by Russia, the Siloviki are confident these nations will align with Russia on most issues when it comes to development and transport of hydrocarbon reserves.

In other words, in industrial and diplomatic matters common to all Caspian nations, Russia expects the CIS nations to remain in solidarity on matters of common interest.

In the area of transport, however, the Siloviki may operate to effect transport in contradiction of their stated position within the CIS. Market share is, after all, market share.

There are multiple ways for Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to export hydrocarbons, and that fact sits at the heart of much of post-Soviet geopolitics.

For most of the 1990s, Russia enjoyed a very strong position because the pipeline infrastructure inherited from the Soviet Union was already in place and largely ran north through Russian territory. As a result, both Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan depended heavily on Russian transit routes to get oil and gas to international markets. Moscow did not own the reserves, but it possessed tremendous leverage because it controlled many of the pathways by which those reserves reached customers.

Over time, however, both countries began seeking alternatives.

Kazakhstan still exports substantial volumes of oil through the Caspian Pipeline Consortium system to the Russian Black Sea port of Novorossiysk, so Russia remains a major transit route for Kazakh oil.

At the same time, Kazakhstan has developed export routes toward China and has also shipped oil across the Caspian Sea by tanker to Azerbaijan, where it can enter pipelines running through Georgia and Turkey. Kazakhstan therefore remains connected to Russian infrastructure, but it is no longer wholly dependent upon it.

I predict, the more energy Kazakhstan transport around Russia, the more the kremlin will become alarmed by Azerbaijan's "mistreatment" of Armenians. Ethnic conflict has ever and always been the cloak behind which Russian Intelligence hides its true intent.

Now consider Turkmenistan.

Turkmenistan has moved even further away from Russian transit dependence. During the Soviet and immediate post-Soviet periods, Russia was the primary export route for Turkmen natural gas. Today, however, China's pipeline network has become the principal outlet for Turkmen gas exports. Massive pipelines run eastward through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan into China. As a result, China's role in Turkmen energy exports now exceeds Russia's in practical importance.

So, as you can see, the Siloviki must apprehend the erosion of Russian interests in both directions. In both directions, alternative routes and developable reserves predict the involvement of western and Chinese development, at least on the interface. The Siloviki are not fools. They know, once China become integrated with the energy infrastructure of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, China's influence in a strategically critical region will grow exponentially, at the same time that the Kremlin's diminishes.

Putin may employ a brave face when addressing these developments in the world press. Indeed, Putin has predictably "welcomed" developments he can no longer openly oppose. As Russia's role diminishes in a strategic sector, Kazakhstan's role

compounds in importance. Kazakhstan, not Russia, is now the transportation corridor for hydrocarbon sales to China.

Influence over Kazakhstan's transport infrastructure is critically important to the Siloviki relative to their Asian markets. This represents an Achilles Heel. The Siloviki cannot afford to alienate Kazakhstan by openly interfering with, or even coercing Kazakhstan's energy trade, for that would only induce a regional coalition in opposition composed of Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and China.

That eventuality is the Kremlin's nightmare, for any open dispute threatening to impede China's access to energy will be addressed at the highest levels of diplomacy. One does not intimate a threat to China's existential interests without incurring a cost. I suspect China is presently positioning itself as potential mediator in "Soviet Asia" should other formerly "autonomous regions" seek independence.

The Siloviki are certain to understand how precarious their position in the east can become.

The Russo-Sino Corridor

Russia's strength in its relationship with China is found in the two major hydrocarbon corridors it maintains directly with China. These are one-way flows.

Russia currently maintains **two major direct hydrocarbon corridors with China**, one for crude oil and one for natural gas. Both are strategically important because they allow Russia to sell energy to China without relying on maritime routes or transit states.

The ESPO Pipeline

The most important oil connection is the Eastern Siberia–Pacific Ocean (ESPO) pipeline system. Built in stages beginning in the 2000s, the pipeline carries crude oil from fields in eastern Siberia toward Russia's Pacific coast. A major spur branches south from Skovorodino directly into China. This connection runs into Daqing, one of China's major refining centers.

The ESPO system has become one of China's largest sources of imported Russian crude, and after the Western sanctions imposed following the invasion of Ukraine, its importance increased substantially. The oil transported through ESPO originates primarily in eastern Siberian fields rather than the older West Siberian production regions.

The Power of Siberia Pipeline

For natural gas, the centerpiece is the Power of Siberia pipeline. This project links gas fields in eastern Siberia, especially the Chayandinskoye and Kovykta fields, directly to northeastern China. Deliveries began in December 2019 and have increased steadily.

The pipeline was the culmination of decades of negotiations between Gazprom and China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC).

The Power of Siberia pipeline represents the first major direct pipeline connection carrying Russian natural gas into China. Unlike the older Soviet-era infrastructure, which was oriented toward Europe, Power of Siberia was specifically designed around the Chinese market.

Russia and China have also spent years discussing a second major gas route commonly known as **Power of Siberia 2**. This proposed pipeline would be very different from the existing line. Instead of drawing gas from eastern Siberian fields developed specifically for China, it would connect western Siberian gas reserves, the same reserves that historically supplied Europe, to the Chinese market through Mongolia.

This pipeline, though, is merely proposed. Mongolia will want to think more than just twice about giving both China and Russia an excuse to interfere with Mongolian affairs.

The project has been under discussion for years, but negotiations over pricing, capacity, and commercial terms have repeatedly slowed progress. As of the time reflected in public reporting through the mid-2020s, it remained a major strategic objective for Moscow, particularly as European demand for Russian pipeline gas declined.

But Moscow's interest may not be exclusively directed by declines in European markets. The Siloviki apprehend independence movements in eastern Siberia gaining traction. A precipitous loss of control in the Kremlin, perhaps during a coup to unseat Putin, should alarm defense analysts in the west. Under such a scenario, a number of "formerly autonomous regions" of Siberia could take the leap toward independence.

China will already correctly anticipate the West to advocate for newly independent, Siberian nations, and will realize they can ride that impetus to secure China's role in Siberia. China will be certain to intervene militarily if only because the West cannot. The United States will not risk a nuclear confrontation with a Russian state in crisis, but China can, and likely will pitch its intervention as a "Peace Keeping" mission.

Any independence movement which involves Krasnoyarsk Krai will become an international crisis to all superpowers, and every nation bordering Russia in Asia. That, conspicuously, includes Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Mongolia, three actors who will have only China to rely on if the regime in the Kremlin collapses.

My point at this point in our conversation is not that we should have well thought out contingency plans for that eventuality, but that every nation effected under this scenario must too have contingency plans. As we saw in the Russian Revolution of

1917, and every change of the guard in Russia since, Russia's center does not faint when it collapses, it goes into seizures.

China could, without opposition internationally, interject a "token force" into the newly declared Siberian states and, thereby, serve as human shields to prevent a nuclear strike by the Siloviki. Trust me, with a 30 million male surplus in their population, Beijing will not think twice about risking "ceremonial" detachments to stand in solidarity with their new neighbors in their hour of crisis.

China's intervention will be wrapped thickly in "Good Will" toward all parties involved, including Beijing "Friends in Moscow", but they are not likely to ever leave again. The longer the crisis goes on, the more support the newly formed nations of Siberia will require, and Beijing will gladly stage a Great Leap Forward to build a Belt and Road in Siberian.

Under the implosion scenario, Russia will likely emerge with the Urals Mountains as its eastern border. The determinant will be Krasnoyarsk Krai. Krasnoyarsk Krai is the home of Russia's remaining ICBM silos and command headquarters. Russia will loath giving that base up, but in the scenario where Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are encouraged by Beijing to act as regional mediators with their northern, Siberian neighbors, the initiative of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan will fill the power vacuum.

We likely would witness a Kremlin so convinced the CIS is finished the siloviki will opt to withdraw all Russian nuclear weapons west of the Urals.

The breakup of the Soviet Union provides the immediate precedent, and Ukraine's surrender if its nuclear weapons will provide Moscow hope. What Siberian regions lack that Ukraine does not is both critical mass of population and critical mass of industry. No one Siberian region could oppose Moscow militarily, but the logistics of asserting an offensive military presence across Siberia is also a Russian vulnerability.

The sheer scope of the geography means even the Russian army would struggle to secure all of Siberia for long, or at all.

If the moment arrives where independence factions in Siberia believe they could prevail, they will if Beijing interjects itself into the scenario. Any threat to Russia's nuclear arsenal will provide them an existential excuse, and they would only have to send "ceremonial" units to begin with.

Whoever assumes control in Moscow after Putin is deposed will agree Russia must control all nuclear weapons. Moscow will never initiated a nuclear strike against either China, the United States or a European Country even under this scenario, but what Russian's strategic command will make of developments is a wild card.

If sufficient nationalist attitudes prevail within the command-and-control structures of Russia's missile forces, those commanders could interpret the evolving scenario as the "existential threat" justifying a launch.

Everyone anticipating an independence movement in Siberia as a blessing has not thought the scenario through thoroughly. The uncontrolled collapse of the Russian state is the only dooms-day scenario I can envision in the 21st century. That possibility needs to be taken seriously.

So critical are Russian strategic interests in Siberia that they reduce energy development and transport corridors to tactical interests. These energy transport corridors are not about energy exclusively. So many existential interests intersect, there, in Siberia, the emerging web cannot be ignored.

We, in the West, naively expect any international conflict involving major military engagements or nuclear weapons would necessarily involve the United States and Europe. But there, I Siberia, is the most immediate and compelling scenario. Any crisis in Moscow threatens global instability across these specific borders.

Once correctly understood, we realize precisely why the Siloviki in Moscow are as paranoid as they are today. The siloviki don't entertain these matters as points of discussion once in a blue moon. Socio-industrial development in former Soviet Asia is a daily, growing concern for the Kremlin.

Both to the east and to the west, Moscow is witnessing the development of existing rivals, emerging rivals and future enemies. Nothing whatsoever appears to offer Russia any opportunity to grow its hydrocarbon economy east of the Urals.

To the west, and only to the west, a glimmer of hope existed, and that was in Ukraine. Both Belorussia and Ukraine are acknowledged by all as "brethren" nations, really just regional neighbors for most of the last five centuries, and military intervention there did not risk impacting Russian export markets.

Ukraine was a fatted lamb in the expanding eyes of the Siloviki.

Trans-Caspian pipelines

For decades, policymakers in Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Europe, Turkey, and the United States have discussed a major Trans-Caspian natural gas pipeline running directly across the floor of the Caspian Sea from Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan. The strategic significance of such a pipeline is obvious. It would allow Turkmen gas to flow westward into the South Caucasus pipeline network and onward to European markets without crossing either Russian or Iranian territory.

The project has been proposed repeatedly but has never been constructed. Various obstacles have impeded it, including disputes over the legal status of the Caspian Sea, environmental objections, financing concerns, commercial uncertainties, and opposition from both Russia and Iran.

For many years, Moscow strongly preferred that Turkmen gas continue moving through routes Russia could influence rather than an independent east-west corridor. There is **not currently a major gas pipeline running directly across the Caspian Sea from Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan**. There are, however, multiple export routes that allow Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to avoid complete dependence on Russia.

Kazakhstan uses a mixture of Russian routes, Caspian tanker shipment, and Chinese connections. Turkmenistan has increasingly oriented itself toward China rather than Russia.

The larger strategic struggle since 1991 has been over exactly this issue: whether Caspian energy reaches market through Russian-controlled corridors, Chinese-controlled corridors, or independent corridors running through Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey.

If one looks at Russian behavior in the Caucasus, in Georgia, and in relations with Azerbaijan, Russia has consistently asserted itself beyond any apparent vital interest, in an ethnic conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. While dressed as a dove, Russia has only served to perpetuate a conflict which has, until now, only served to stop development of the Trans-Caspian pipeline.

If developed as envisioned, Türkiye would emerge as the regional arbiter and guarantor of this regional infrastructure. Against this prospect both Russia and Iran are aligned, but so is China. Beijing will be less able to influence pricing, and potentially availability of products from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, where these two suppliers have a third, independent option for delivery to world markets.

Hydrocarbon Conclusions

Viewed together, the most consequential pattern is that the largest undeveloped or recently developed hydrocarbon potential is concentrated not in Ukraine's offshore gas prospects and, far more significantly, in the Caspian Basin itself.

There is, therefore, only one direction the Siloviki could expand without risking a war which could be opposed: West. Putin correctly understood Europe and the United States would not intervene militarily in former Warsaw pact countries, and so the Siloviki looked west to expand their riches.

Putin's Gazprom

During Putin's years in power, Gazprom became one of the principal instruments through which the Russian state exercised both domestic and international influence. Gazprom thereby became the font from which the Siloviki drew their personal wealth.

The Russian state has long been Gazprom's dominant shareholder, and the individuals placed in senior management and board positions have repeatedly come from Putin's political networks. Trusted associates, former officials from Saint Petersburg, presidential administration figures, and individuals closely aligned with the Kremlin have occupied many of the company's most important positions.

From this perspective, Gazprom functions less as an independent commercial enterprise than as a strategic arm of the Russian state. And because the Russian state has been fully conflated with the financial interests of eh Siloviki, there is no separation, not even in any degree, between the existential interests of the state and the existential interests of the Siloviki.

The Siloviki are the state. The state is the Siloviki.

And the Siloviki wanted a manager whose loyalty, measured in Blat, was beyond doubt. That man was Dmitryi Medvedev.

Gazprom decisions regarding pipelines, exports, investment priorities, and leadership appointments have frequently aligned with broader Russian geopolitical objectives. That relationship is observable and well documented. Under Medvedev, they were perfectly aligned.

That may not be saying much. Gazprom is the goose that lays Russia's only egg.

Medvedev's position placed him at the intersection of politics, state management, and economic power. It also elevated him from a relatively obscure administrator to a national political figure.

But Putin's clock was ticking. The Russian constitution prohibited him from serving a third, consecutive term as president. The Siloviki needed a trustworthy manager to fill the presidency for them.

In 2005, Medvedev was appointed First Deputy Prime Minister, a position widely interpreted as preparation for higher office. Medvedev was increasingly presented as a modernizer, a reform-minded technocrat in the state-controlled press. When Putin reached the constitutional limit on consecutive presidential terms in 2008, Medvedev emerged as his chosen successor, and was elected President of the Russian Federation.

Surprise, surprise.

Up to that point, Medvedev's life presents a striking contrast with many of the men who have dominated Russian state security institutions. He was not a soldier, not a spy, and not a product of the coercive services. He was a lawyer, academic, administrator, and corporate manager who rose through networks of trust and patronage rather than through military or intelligence credentials.

That background is precisely what makes his later political evolution such a compelling subject for investigation. The man who entered the Kremlin in 2008 was widely perceived, both in Russia and internationally, as a legalist, a technocrat, and a cautious advocate of modernization.

Whether that perception reflected reality, and how it compares to the Dmitry Medvedev of today, is one of the central questions we need to answer.

I have already drawn my conclusion. Dmitryi Medvedev is playing “Mini Me” to Putin’s “Doctor Evil”.

It is really that simple. Convincing you of that required this lengthy trip down Gazprom lane.

Just as Gazprom remained under Putin’s control while Medvedev was at the helm, so to did Russia remain Putin’s while Medvedev was in the Presidency.

No analyst in the West would today dispute that conclusion. What baffles me is why few today challenge Medvedev’s recent nuclear threats.

Medvedev is not, cannot be speaking “out of school”, as a private Russian citizen.

If he is, he speaks nothing like the “moderate” he was cultured to be, but a radical hawk of the Siloviki.

All who decry this as a sudden transformation are fools. There has been no transformation. Dmitryi Medvedev has been a radical hawk of the Siloviki all along. The “moderate” façade presented tot eh West was the act.

But Medvedev the hawk remains completely compliant with his Siloviki benefactors. Because Medvedev’s compliance has historically been so consistent, western defense analysts must regard the statements and attitudes of Dmitryi Medvedev as directly representative of, not just derivatives of Putin’s.

Crimea 2014

For our purposes, it is useful to treat the annexation of Crimea as a discrete operation, even though it emerged from longer historical tensions between Russia and Ukraine. Forgive my obvious truncation of Crimean history. It is sufficient to say Crimea has always been the jewel in Russia's crown, from the earliest days of the Tsar, even back to the Sarmatian and Scythian ages.

Nobody has ever argued against location, location, location. In Russia's case, everyone has always argued over this location.

The events of February and March 2014 unfolded with remarkable speed and displayed a striking combination of political warfare, covert military action, information operations, legal maneuvering, and psychological pressure. Unlike traditional invasions, the annexation was designed to achieve strategic objectives while delaying international recognition that a military operation was underway.

The immediate context was the collapse of the government of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych in February 2014. After months of demonstrations in Kyiv known as the Euromaidan movement, escalating political violence culminated in Yanukovych abandoning the capital and later fleeing Ukraine.

In Kyiv, the Russian nationalists weer turned out and Ukraine's independence movement assumed the leadership role. Predictably, Putin characterized these events as an unconstitutional coup, while Ukraine and most Western governments regarded them as a revolutionary transfer of power resulting from Yanukovych's loss of political legitimacy.

Whatever interpretation one adopts, the sudden power vacuum in Kyiv created an opportunity for the Kremlin. Western analysts will want to pay close attention, for this s precisely how Siberian independence will unfold when it does, just in reverse.

Crimea occupied a unique position within Ukraine. The peninsula possessed an ethnic Russian majority, hosted Russia's Black Sea Fleet under long-standing treaty arrangements, and had been part of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic until its transfer to the Ukrainian SSR in 1954.

The Russian Federation had therefore maintained extensive military infrastructure, intelligence assets, political relationships, and logistical networks in Crimea long before 2014.

The operation began almost immediately after Yanukovych's departure.

In late February 2014, armed personnel in modern military uniforms began appearing at strategic locations throughout Crimea. These forces seized airports, government buildings, communications facilities, transportation hubs, and military infrastructure.

Most strikingly, they wore no insignia. Their uniforms carried no unit designations, national flags, or identifying markings. Russia initially denied these troops were Russian military personnel.

They quickly became known internationally as the "little green men."

Subsequent statements by Vladimir Putin and abundant documentary evidence established that these forces were in fact Russian servicemen, including special operations personnel and other elite units. The absence of insignia served an important strategic purpose. It created ambiguity during the critical early days of the operation, slowing international response and complicating Ukraine's ability to characterize events as a foreign invasion.

Military force alone, however, was not the central feature of the operation.

The annexation succeeded because military action was integrated into a broader political strategy.

Crimean governmental institutions were rapidly brought under effective Russian control. Armed personnel occupied the Crimean parliament building. Local legislators, convened under conditions difficult to describe as fully independent, installed a new regional leadership favorable to Moscow. The new administration quickly announced plans for a referendum concerning Crimea's political future.

At the same time, Ukrainian military units throughout Crimea found themselves isolated.

Rather than launching large-scale assaults, Russian forces generally surrounded Ukrainian bases, blocked access routes, disrupted communications, and encouraged defections. This approach minimized bloodshed while steadily eroding Kyiv's ability to exercise authority on the peninsula. Many Ukrainian units received confusing instructions from a government already struggling to establish control over the country after Yanukovych's departure.

Information operations played a critical role.

Russian media presented events in Crimea as a defensive action undertaken to protect Russian-speaking populations from alleged threats posed by Ukrainian nationalists. In short history was repeating. Putin was goosestepping into Crimea while brazenly accusing the new Ukrainian government of being “fascists”.

Television broadcasts emphasized instability in Kyiv and frequently characterized the post-Yanukovych government as illegitimate. This narrative was directed not only at Russian audiences but also at Crimean residents and Russian-speaking communities elsewhere in Ukraine.

The referendum itself occurred on 16 March 2014.

The ballot offered options that favored separation from Ukraine, while maintaining the pre-crisis constitutional status quo was not provided in the form many observers expected or understood.

Official results, like results in all Russian elections, reported overwhelming support for joining Russia. Russia immediately recognized the outcome. On 18 March 2014, Putin signed documents formally incorporating Crimea into the Russian Federation.

From Moscow's perspective, the process represented an exercise in self-determination by the population of Crimea. The Siloviki expected the world to accept their annexation of Crimea as a fait accompli.

From Kyiv's perspective, and from the perspective of most Western governments, the referendum occurred under military occupation and therefore lacked legal validity. This legal dispute remains unresolved.

The overwhelming majority of United Nations member states continue to recognize Crimea as part of Ukraine. Still, Russia considers Crimea an integral part of the Russian Federation and has invested heavily in military, economic, and infrastructure integration since 2014.

From a strategic perspective, the annexation demonstrated several principles that would later receive widespread attention from military and intelligence analysts.

First, Russia showed that territorial objectives could be achieved through a blend of covert military action, information operations, political pressure, intelligence activity, and legal maneuvering rather than through a conventional armored invasion.

Of course, the primary condition making this all possible was the window of opportunity opened when the central government in Kyiv collapsed. The historical precedence and “little green men” model was asserted as legitimate by Russia, a precedent they will now have no defense against if it is repeated by China in Siberia.

Second, the Kremlin exploited speed and uncertainty. By the time foreign governments had reached internal consensus about what was happening, most critical objectives had already been accomplished.

Third, the operation revealed the extent to which modern conflict could blur the distinction between war and peace. There was no formal declaration of war. There was no dramatic amphibious assault. Yet control of territory shifted from one sovereign state to another within a matter of weeks.

All Putin required was an aspirant faction in Crimea and distraction in Kyiv. Once again, the scenario now forms a template against which Beijing's ambitions and Moscow's fears will henceforth be measured.

For Russian leadership, Crimea appears to have been regarded as a strategic and historical exception. If Crimea's absorption was the product of cost-benefit analysis, the only benefit can be found in the hydrocarbon reserves the Siloviki aspired to claim.

For much of the West, the annexation represented the first forcible alteration of internationally recognized European borders by a major power since the end of the Second World War.

It just wasn't worth opposing by military force.

After Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the United States, the European Union, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan, and several other countries, imposed sanctions on Russia.

To be precise, the sanctions were imposed because Russia seized and subsequently annexed territory internationally recognized as part of Ukraine. Most governments regarded the annexation as a violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and international law, and sanctions were the principal response.

The first sanctions appeared almost immediately after Russian forces took control of key facilities in Crimea and after the March 2014 referendum. Initially, the measures targeted specific individuals and entities. Travel restrictions and asset freezes were imposed on Russian officials, Crimean leaders, and business figures associated with the operation.

As the crisis deepened and fighting expanded in eastern Ukraine, sanctions broadened to include entire sectors of the Russian economy. The most significant sanctions targeted major Russian banks, defense firms, and energy companies.

Gazprom Sanctioned

Gazprom was one of the principal targets of Western sanctions after Crimea's annexation in 2014, although the sanctions were more nuanced than many people assume.

One of the more interesting findings is that Western governments generally avoided imposing the most extreme measures directly on Gazprom in 2014. The reason was practical. Europe still depended heavily on Russian natural gas supplies, and many European governments were reluctant to disrupt gas deliveries on which their economies depended.

Instead, the sanctions focused on restricting Gazprom's access to Western capital and technology. Gazprom and several of its subsidiaries faced limitations on borrowing in Western financial markets. Certain energy technologies, especially those related to deep-water, Arctic, and unconventional resource development, became more difficult or impossible to obtain from American and European suppliers. The goal was not to stop current gas exports but to impair Russia's future energy development capabilities.

The distinction matters.

The West was trying to impose long-term costs on the Russian state without triggering an immediate energy crisis inside Europe.

This was a mistake. I remain convinced, had drastic sanctions been applied immediately, the later invasion of Ukraine would have been averted.

As we discussed earlier, because the Russian state remained Gazprom's controlling shareholder, sanctions aimed at Gazprom were simultaneously sanctions aimed at a critical instrument of Russian state power. Western policymakers generally viewed Gazprom not merely as a commercial company but as part of the Kremlin's strategic architecture.

Beyond these specific sanctions, Russian access to Western financing was also restricted. Certain exports of advanced energy technology were prohibited. Defense cooperation was curtailed. A number of Russian individuals believed to be close to the Kremlin had foreign assets frozen and were barred from entering sanctioning countries.

In other words, Western governments were applying modest pressure to bring Putin’s Kremlin to heel. These half-measures only reinforced the viewpoint among the Siloviki that the West would talk the talk but not walk the walk.

The Siloviki began immediate plans to invade Ukraine.

The annexation of Crimea in March 2014 did not immediately lead to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine eight years later. Instead, the period between those events was marked by a prolonged and increasingly unstable confrontation in which Russia, Ukraine, and the West all adapted to a new strategic reality.

What emerged was neither peace nor open war, but a hybrid condition that gradually eroded the assumptions that had governed European security since the end of the Cold War.

In the immediate aftermath of Crimea, Russia found itself in possession of territory it regarded as historically and strategically indispensable, but it had also triggered the most serious rupture in relations with the West since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The United States, the European Union, and several allied governments, imposed sanctions, although the initial measures were relatively limited.

The Siloviki read that as a yellow light.

Russia was excluded from the G8, financial restrictions were imposed on selected individuals and entities, and Western leaders signaled that the annexation would not be recognized as legitimate. Despite these penalties, the Kremlin quickly concluded that the costs were manageable. Crimea remained firmly under Russian control, and no foreign government appeared willing to reverse the annexation by force.

At the same time, events in eastern Ukraine began to develop into a separate conflict.

Armed separatist movements emerged in parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, collectively known as the Donbas. Although the precise relationship between these movements and the Russian state was often obscured by denials, conflicting statements, and layers of intermediaries, the conflict rapidly evolved beyond a purely local uprising.

Russian volunteers, intelligence assets, military advisers, and eventually regular military personnel became involved to varying degrees. Ukraine responded by launching what it termed an "Anti-Terrorist Operation" to restore control over the affected territories.

The resulting conflict produced a pattern that would define the next eight years. Neither side was strong enough to impose a decisive military solution, yet neither side was willing to accept the other's political objectives.

As a consequence, the war settled into an uneasy stalemate characterized by artillery exchanges, sniping, sabotage operations, trench systems, and periodic offensives. Thousands died, but the conflict largely disappeared from Western headlines except during moments of sudden escalation.

The press in the West was confused by its own press cycle, which organized news events into discrete chapters, and Western leaders largely reflected press bifurcations. Putin's "little green men" had extended their campaign beyond Crimea's borders and Western politicians only addressed the fighting when questioned in the press, and only to the extent that the conflict made it into western headlines.

For all intents and purposes, Western diplomacy degraded to a "current events" segment of an elementary school's "Show & Tell" day. Opposition from the west was less than rhetorical, so the Siloviki interpreted that as less than yellow light.

But the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 in July 2014 dramatically reminded the world that the Donbas conflict was not a localized dispute with contained consequences.

The destruction of the civilian airliner killed 298 people and intensified international scrutiny of Russian involvement in eastern Ukraine. The event hardened attitudes throughout Europe and contributed to a broader sanctions regime aimed at Russian financial institutions, energy firms, and defense industries.

At least the west reacted. The Siloviki realized they were operating under a definite yellow light after MH17 was shot down. Afterwards, western diplomacy repeatedly sought to stabilize the situation. The Minsk agreements of 2014 and 2015 established frameworks for ceasefires, political negotiations, and eventual conflict resolution.

Yet the agreements contained deep ambiguities regarding sequencing and implementation. Russia, Ukraine, and the separatist authorities often disagreed about what had been promised, what conditions had to be met first, and who was responsible for violations. The agreements succeeded in reducing the intensity of fighting at times, but they never resolved the fundamental dispute.

The Siloviki went to work on the Russian psyche full time. The event was portrayed domestically as the correction of a historical injustice and a demonstration that Russia had returned as a major power willing to defend its interests. The phrase "Crimea is ours" became both a political slogan and a symbol of national resurgence.

Within Russia, the annexation of Crimea initially produced a surge in public support for Vladimir Putin. This atmosphere strengthened nationalist currents inside Russian politics and reduced the influence of those advocating accommodation with the West.

Following Crimea, the Siloviki were ascendant.

Meanwhile, Ukraine underwent profound changes of its own. The shock of 2014 accelerated the formation of a distinct Ukrainian national identity that was increasingly oriented toward Europe rather than Moscow. The Ukrainian armed forces, which had been poorly prepared for the crisis in Crimea and the early stages of the Donbas war, began a long process of modernization.

Training, doctrine, logistics, and leadership all improved substantially with Western assistance. By the early 2020s, Ukraine's military was a far more capable institution than it had been in 2014. This military cooperation, though, did not escape Siloviki notice. This was “NATO” creeping in beneath the door.

The economic relationship between Russia and Europe began to change.

Although Europe continued to purchase large quantities of Russian natural gas and oil, concerns about dependence grew steadily. Energy became increasingly entangled with security policy. Pipeline routes, liquefied natural gas imports, renewable-energy investments, and diversification initiatives all reflected an emerging recognition that geopolitical risk could no longer be separated from energy policy.

The Siloviki tolerated these concerns, and did all they could to assuage European fears of Russia cutting Europe off from energy.

The years after 2014 also witnessed a broader deterioration in relations between Russia and the Western alliance. Disputes over election interference, cyber operations, espionage cases, information warfare, and the poisoning of individuals linked to Russian security services deepened mutual distrust.

Each side increasingly viewed the other through a security lens. Russia saw NATO enlargement and Western support for Ukraine as strategic encirclement. NATO members increasingly viewed Russia as a revisionist power willing to alter borders by force.

By the end of the decade, the conflict in Ukraine had become embedded within a much larger confrontation over the future security architecture of Europe. The issue was no longer simply Crimea. It involved competing visions of sovereignty, spheres of influence, military alliances, and the post-Cold War order itself.

The election of Volodymyr Zelenskyy in 2019 briefly created hopes that fresh negotiations might succeed where previous efforts had failed. Zelenskyy entered office promising to pursue peace while preserving Ukrainian sovereignty. Some prisoner exchanges occurred, and diplomatic contacts resumed. Yet the underlying disagreements remained unresolved.

Russia continued to insist on political arrangements that Kyiv regarded as incompatible with national sovereignty. Ukraine remained committed to policies that Moscow increasingly viewed as unacceptable.

There was never any possibility Moscow would negotiate a settlement on Crimea or the Donbas, for the entire conflict was designed to provide Putin the causus belli required to seize all of Ukraine.

In the eyes of the Siloviki, Ukraine belonged to Mother Russia and they were determined to have it.

Military Exercises

During 2021, the situation entered a new phase. Russia began concentrating large military forces near Ukraine's borders. What initially appeared to some observers as coercive diplomacy gradually expanded into a military buildup of unprecedented scale.

Moscow issued security demands concerning NATO, Ukraine, and the broader European order. Western governments warned of possible invasion. Diplomatic negotiations intensified, but mutual confidence had deteriorated so severely that compromise became increasingly elusive.

The Siloviki were not negotiating. The Siloviki were buying time. As long as they were negotiating with Chamberlain, the Siloviki would continue to come to the peace table. The terms Russia offered were tantamount to negation of Ukreaine as an independent state.

Te Siloviki wanted their Kulaks back. That was clear from the outset, but we must allow Western leaders the same interval to prepare their response to what was clearly becoming inevitable: an invasion of Ukraine.

By early 2022, the long interlude that began with Crimea was ending. The hybrid conflict of the Donbas years had failed to produce a political settlement. Sanctions had failed to compel fundamental Russian concessions.

Diplomatic agreements remained unimplemented. Russia believed that time was not working in its favor as Ukraine's military strength and Western ties increased. Ukraine believed that surrendering sovereignty would merely invite further pressure.

The result was the destruction of the unstable equilibrium that had existed since 2014.

In the weeks before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Washington found itself in the difficult position of trying to deter a war while simultaneously warning the world that a war appeared increasingly likely.

Russian forces had been concentrating along Ukraine's borders for months. Satellite imagery showed large formations moving into assembly areas. U.S. intelligence agencies were publicly releasing assessments that Russia appeared to be preparing for a major military operation. European leaders were pursuing diplomacy, but there was growing concern that negotiations had little chance of reversing the military buildup.

Against this backdrop, President Joe Biden held a press conference on 19 January 2022. The central question facing reporters was straightforward: what would the United States do if Russia invaded Ukraine?

Until that moment, the administration's public message had emphasized unity among NATO allies and severe economic consequences for Moscow. The White House wanted to project certainty. The problem emerged when Biden attempted to distinguish between different levels of Russian military action.

During the press conference, Biden said "It's one thing if it's a minor incursion and then we end up having to fight about what to do and not do, etc."

In Moscow, the Siloviki watched Biden’s remarks in television and smiled. The hard, blinking yellow light turned green.

President Joe Biden's January 2022 "minor incursion" remark invited comparison to an earlier episode in American diplomatic history involving Dean Acheson.

In January 1950, Acheson, then Secretary of State, delivered a speech describing America's defensive perimeter in the Pacific. Notably, he discussed a line running through Japan, Okinawa, and the Philippines without explicitly including South Korea.

After North Korea invaded the South six months later, many observed that the omission signaled U.S. ambiguity on the Korean Peninsula, just as Joe Biden had just signaled on Ukraine.

President Biden was an imbecile who was neither talking softly or carrying a big stick. In fact, his comment confirmed the United States had no position, not even in the contingency of invasion, and would evaluate the matter after the fact.

That single phrase, "minor incursion," immediately dominated headlines around the world. The Siloviki rejoiced. Ukraine, they became convinced, would be theirs in a matter of days.

But Biden didn't stop after his gaffe, so we're correct to question if it was, after all, a gaffe. Biden continued by discussing disagreements that could emerge among NATO allies regarding the scale of sanctions and responses depending on the type of Russian action taken.

Biden's remarks are today regarded as ill-advised, open speculation by a man entering senility. Biden's staff were reluctant to rein him in, and could not correct his mistakes.

Biden's broader point appears to have been that a limited operation, covert activity, cyberattack, or smaller cross-border action might generate debate among allies about the appropriate response, whereas a full-scale invasion would trigger a far more unified and severe reaction.

But that distinction was not how the comment was received.

The President was openly stating that the United States would consider what to do after the fact. Compounding that grievous error was the fact the President of the United States was openly sewing doubt about NATO unity on Russia's imminent threat.

Biden simply brushed off the defining question of the 21st Century as a campaign hypothetical. A Mis Universe contestant would have done a better job of it, in my humble opinion.

Most observers interpreted the statement to mean that the United States might tolerate a small Russian military operation. Ukrainian officials were particularly alarmed because, from Kyiv's perspective, any violation of Ukrainian sovereignty was an invasion, regardless of scale.

The notion that there might be a threshold below which Russia would face a weaker response was viewed as dangerous messaging at a moment when deterrence depended upon clarity.

The Siloviki regarded these remarks as an invitation.

The reaction was immediate. Critics in the United States, Europe, and Ukraine argued that the remark introduced uncertainty precisely when the administration needed to communicate resolve. Reporters pressed the White House for clarification. Ukrainian leaders privately and publicly expressed concern that the statement could be interpreted by Moscow as ambiguity or hesitation.

The White House tried to contain the fallout. Within hours, administration officials emphasized that any movement of Russian military forces across Ukraine's border would be regarded as a renewed invasion and would result in a severe coordinated response.

Biden himself later sought to clarify his remarks, stating that he had been referring to possible non-military actions, cyber operations, or other forms of Russian aggression and not to the acceptance of territorial seizures.

These attempts are widely regarded as ex post facto cosmetic surgery. A “minor incursion” cannot be mistaken for anything other than a physical crossing of the border.

On 24 February 2022, Russia did not conduct a "minor incursion."

Not at all.

2022 Russian Invasion

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched the largest military invasion in Europe since the Second World War. The events of the previous eight years were no longer background conditions. They became the immediate prehistory of a much larger war.

I won’t even bother with re-telling the tale. At the time of this writing, I assume we have all witnessed enough of this nightmare to agree, it would have been better for all involved if Anastasia had just attended her debutante ball.

But take personal inventory before we proceed. Recall, if your stomach can handle it, every horrifying news report over the last five years.

It is about to get lot worse, if Dmitryi Medvedev is to be believed.

Because Ukraine light infantry has single handedly destroyed the Soviet conventional arsenal piece meal, the Siloviki are nowhere near their original goal. Compounding matters, as long as Ukraine is capable of opposing the Russian army, Crimea will remain under constant attack from Ukrainian drones and missiles, drowning the Siloviki ledger on this action in red ink.

Between you and I, the Siloviki deserve precisely that: Red Ink.

And that red ink is an existential threat to the Siloviki. Into the moment the Siloviki has directed their trusted mouthpiece: Dmitryi Medvedev, the moderate cum Harbinger of Doom.

The Nuclear Option

Medvedev, despite being regarded as a liberal reformer in post-Soviet Russia, recently dropped the mask and confirmed what I suspected all along. Medvedev, like most FSB operatives, wear a mask.

In 2026 Medvedev openly called for Russia to use nuclear weapons t assure a Russian victory in Ukraine and, in the most dangerous allusion, to attack NATO member countries.

Medvedev's nuclear rhetoric in 2026 marks a sharp break from the traditional caution that once governed Soviet and even early-Putin nuclear signaling. What stands out is not only the extremity of his language but the settings in which he chose to deliver it: formal interviews with major Russian newspapers, televised conversations amplified by state-aligned media, and public forums designed to reach both domestic and international audiences.

This is not a case where a drunk Medvedev colored outside of the lines during an interview. The man went on a press tour in which he delivered a psychotic diatribe against the West.

In each case, Medvedev spoke with a level of explicitness that no Soviet leader ever approached, presenting nuclear use not as a remote contingency but as a realistic and even imminent option if Russia's political demands are not met.

The most consequential of these appearances was his long interview with *Vedomosti* in September 2026. Here Medvedev abandoned the usual euphemisms of Russian nuclear doctrine and spoke in stark, literal terms. He insisted that Russia's nuclear policy "can hardly be described as a mere hint," and then went further, declaring that Russia's military capabilities would allow it to strike Kyiv and NATO facilities, "leaving not one stone left standing."

Medvedev framed such strikes not as hypothetical abstractions but as operational possibilities, grounded in doctrine and ultimately subject to the president's decision. The interview's tone was apocalyptic: Medvedev warned that such an escalation would represent "a point of absolute no return for the entire planet," and he described the world as being "mere seconds on the Doomsday Clock." In this setting - a major national newspaper - he was not improvising for television; he was articulating what he claimed to be Russia's strategic reality.

In the same interview, Medvedev tied nuclear use directly to Russia's political objectives in Ukraine. He argued that the war must end "on Russia's terms," otherwise it could reignite and escalate into a global conflict. This formulation was significant because it implied that nuclear use might be justified not only by existential threats to Russia's sovereignty, but by political outcomes Moscow finds unacceptable.

Tethering the use of nuclear weapons to political imperatives is altogether a departure from nuclear arms control norms. But Medvedev didn't stop there.

Medvedev also framed Russia's identity in existential terms, calling it a country that is "either great or nothing," a phrase that fused national pride with nuclear brinkmanship and suggested that restraint would be a form of humiliation. Medvedev's rhetoric reveals the growing, existential crisis compelling the Siloviki to war: no growth is not an option, and Russia has nowhere to grow if not to its east.

Earlier in 2026, Medvedev delivered a related set of remarks in a state-aligned media conversation that circulated widely on Russian television and pro-government channels. In this forum, he argued that nuclear weapons would be used "if the fate of the country were at stake," and he dismissed Western interpretations of Russian doctrine as misunderstandings.

The former President of Russia insisted that Russia acts "strictly in line with its nuclear doctrine," and that there is no need for debate about thresholds because the doctrine already defines them.

Medvedev was reading from a script and, this setting, a controlled media environment designed to reinforce Kremlin messaging, allowed Medvedev to present nuclear use as a sober, doctrinal matter rather than a rhetorical flourish.

In other words, Medvedev meant business.

Across these appearances, the context is crucial. Medvedev is no longer a central policymaker; he is a sidelined figure whose formal role as deputy chairman of the Security Council carries little real authority. Medvedev's nuclear threats therefore serve a dual purpose. Domestically, they allow him to maintain relevance by becoming the regime's most aggressive public voice, a sanctioned hawk who says what others prefer not to say directly.

The only possible "other" in the current scenario is Putin.

Internationally, Medvedev's statements function as psychological pressure, reinforcing the idea that Russia's leadership - broadly defined - views nuclear escalation as a realistic tool in its confrontation with NATO.

The result is a pattern of nuclear signaling that is both more explicit and more personalized than anything seen in Soviet practice.

Medvedev's remarks were not buried in diplomatic communiqués or collective leadership statements; they were delivered in high-visibility forums, with language designed to shock, intimidate, and remind the world that Russia's nuclear arsenal is not merely symbolic.

In clear terms, Medvedev used these platforms to argue that nuclear weapons are central to Russia's survival, that their use is doctrinally justified under a wide range of conditions, and that the world is closer to nuclear catastrophe than Western leaders admit.

Medvedev's words were not slips or improvisations - they were deliberate, repeated, and framed as authoritative interpretations of Russian policy. Medvedev's recent nuclear threats on Russian state television are best understood as part performance, part doctrine, and part symptom of Russia's deepening confrontation with NATO.

What Medvedev's remarks cannot be mistaken for is unilateral deviance from Putin's direction. Medvedev made comments Putin believed necessary, though could not deliver himself.

In other words, Vladimir Putin, and by extension, the Siloviki of Russia are openly threatening a nuclear exchange to secure their stated objectives in Ukraine.

I pray we now all agree that it would have been better for all involved if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball. In case we are not, allow me to contrast this new policy in Silovikistan from that of its predecessor, the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union never issued nuclear threats as overt, explicit, and personalized as Dmitry Medvedev's recent remarks. Nothing in the historical record matches the combination of directness, frequency, and rhetorical abandon that Medvedev now displays on Russian state television.

Soviet nuclear signaling was often sharp, sometimes menacing, but it was always embedded in formal diplomatic language, collective leadership statements, or doctrinal formulations. It was never the kind of personalized, improvisational nuclear brinkmanship Medvedev engages in today.

To see the contrast clearly, it helps to recall how the USSR handled nuclear threats.

Soviet leaders certainly used nuclear coercion, especially during crises such as Berlin (1958–1961), Cuba (1962), and the tense NATO–Warsaw Pact standoffs of the late Cold War. Khrushchev famously warned the West that the USSR would "bury" capitalism, and he used nuclear posturing aggressively during the Berlin crisis.

But even Khrushchev's most dramatic statements were framed as geopolitical warnings, not explicit promises to launch nuclear strikes under specific political conditions. They were bluster, wrapped in ideology, not operational threats.

Medvedev's threats were direct and operational. To what degree they are also operative remains to be seen. I pray we never learn, but prudence compels us to try and ascertain where Putin's head is at.

In Putin's Silovikistan, past is clearly no longer prologue.

That is a shame. We all recall the worst moment in Soviet-U.S. relations.

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, Soviet communications were intense and confrontational, but they remained within diplomatic channels. The USSR never publicly threatened to use nuclear weapons unless the United States met certain political demands. The danger was implicit in deployments and military readiness, not in televised declarations that Moscow might nuke specific cities or NATO facilities.

Brezhnev, Andropov, Chernenko, and Gorbachev all maintained a strict taboo against explicit nuclear threats.

Even at moments of severe tension - such as NATO's Able Archer 1983 exercise, which Moscow misinterpreted as possible cover for a first strike - the Soviet Union did not respond with public nuclear ultimatums. Instead, it relied on intelligence channels, military alerts, and diplomatic protests. The Soviet political culture treated nuclear weapons as instruments of deterrence, not rhetorical tools for domestic propaganda or personal political positioning.

This is where Medvedev's behavior diverges sharply.

Medvedev's recent statements - warning of nuclear strikes on Kyiv, threatening NATO states directly, and describing nuclear war as a realistic outcome if Russia's political objectives are not met - are qualitatively different from Soviet-era practice. They are explicit, personalized, and delivered in mass-media formats designed for maximum public impact.

Medvdev's venom was not couched in diplomatic language or collective leadership statements. They are not tied to formal crisis diplomacy. They are not even framed as reluctant last-resort measures. They are threats made for television, social media, and domestic political consumption.

The sources describing Medvedev's nuclear rhetoric emphasize this shift.

In one interview, Medvedev insisted that Russia's nuclear doctrine is "reality, not rhetoric," and that nuclear weapons "can be used in certain cases," presenting this as a corrective to Western interpretations of Russian policy. Analysts note that Russian officials - including Medvedev - have repeatedly issued extreme nuclear warnings since the start of the war in Ukraine, often invoking "nuclear apocalypse" scenarios to intimidate NATO states supporting Kyiv.

In other cases, Medvedev has accused NATO members of planning nuclear transfers and threatened "symmetrical" nuclear responses, part of a broader pattern of Russian nuclear saber-rattling designed to manipulate Western decision-making.

Nothing in Soviet history resembles this pattern. The USSR used nuclear weapons as a strategic deterrent, and occasionally as a diplomatic lever, but it did not normalize nuclear threats as routine political messaging. It did not allow individual leaders to freelance nuclear warnings on television. It did not treat nuclear brinkmanship as a tool of domestic political relevance for sidelined elites.

In short, Medvedev's nuclear threats are not a continuation of Soviet practice - they are a dangerous departure from it.

Medvedev's comments reflect the political culture of Putin's Russia, where nuclear intimidation has become a normalized instrument of state communication, and where figures like Medvedev use extreme rhetoric to maintain relevance in a system that has otherwise pushed them to the margins.

In a widely covered appearance with state media in early 2026, Medvedev declared that Russia "may not exist without its nuclear weapons," arguing that the country's very survival depends on its strategic arsenal in the face of Western pressure. He framed nuclear arms as the decisive factor preventing NATO from attacking Russia directly, explicitly linking past Western statements about avoiding "World War III" to fear of Russian nuclear retaliation.

This was not a technical discussion of deterrence; it was a political message to both domestic and foreign audiences: Russia is weak in many conventional domains, but nuclear weapons compensate for that weakness and must be treated as a justifiable option in lieu of conventional force.

If this fear is compelling the Russia's rattle nuclear sabers, it is understandable. Ukraine's light infantry just dismantled the entire Soviet conventional arsenal in less than five years of defensive combat. The scale of incompetence in Russia's conventional army is breathe taking by all standards.

The Siloviki, the thieves who thought they'd steam roll Ukraine and be staging victory parades on the streets of Kiev inside of a week, is being destroyed wholesale by a defensive force with a fraction of the capacity of NATO forces.

Amplifying the obvious lessons of combat in Ukraine is the impunity with which the United States Airforce, United States Navy and Israel Defense Forces destroyed Iran's national defense networks. Mind you, the best that Iran had in terms of missiles and radars were the best Russia could sell them, and all that Soviet era hardware roved impotent against what the West fielded.

In other words, the combined experience of both Ukraine and Iran has opened Russia's eyes. Prior to the invasion of Ukraine Russia saw itself as an undisputed military power. There is today nobody in Russia, not from Vladimir Putin down to the lowest ranking private who harbors any illusions about Russian strength.

The Russian Armed Forces are little more than en empty vodka bottle. What makes Russia dangerous in the moment is that they know this as fact. Results trump rhetoric every day of the week. Russia's reputation as a global power has vanished overnight.

I pray humiliation is the only factor motivating Putin to compel Medvedev along these dangerous lines. The West cannot take the chance that Putin is not bluffing. Has Putin conflated his own survival with Russia's National Security Interests? If he has not, have the Siloviki?

I need more data.

Here is some to consider:

By mid-2026, Medvedev's rhetoric had sharpened further. In an interview timed to the State Duma campaign, Medvedev warned that the war against Ukraine must end "on Russia's terms," otherwise it could reignite and escalate into a global conflict. He explicitly raised the possibility of nuclear strikes on Kyiv and on NATO facilities, insisting that such use would be permissible under Russia's nuclear doctrine, but that the final decision rests with the president.

Not true as we shall see, but Medvedev's stretching of internal, nuclear force protocols is nothing short of provocative. Perhaps internal provocation of dialogue is what Putin is truly after.

When Medvedev described Russia as a country that is "either great or nothing," he was proposing, if Russia cannot impose its will, it must be prepared to threaten up to, and including, the limits of the system. That framing turns nuclear weapons from a last-resort deterrent into a badge of status and leverage.

In this vein of interpretation, Putin feels constrained by existing, internal protocols on the use of nuclear force, protocols which preclude Wester experts from perceiving a credible threat.

Perhaps Putin merely wants a credible threat. I advise we all recall what they say about the Cookie Monster: Give the Cookie Monster a cookie, and the next thing he'll want is a glass of milk.

Returning the mouth of Sauron, Medvedev escalated his threats by focusing on hypothetical NATO nuclear assistance to Ukraine. He warned that if NATO members transfer nuclear weapons or technology to Kyiv, Russia would respond with tactical

nuclear strikes not only against Ukrainian targets but also against the supplying nations.

That sounds fair enough, until you realize false flag operations are standard tactics for Putin. Anyone who believes Putin would not detonate a tactical nuke on Russian territory, then blame Ukraine, is dangerously naïve. From that simple gambit, Putin would merely accuse the West in supplying Kyiv with the warhead or the know-how.

It is more likely Putin would detonate a dirty bomb on territory he could spare for a couple hundred years, then accuse Ukraine of using material from Chernobyl for the bomb. If Putin did nothing further, he'd emerge form that scenario with causus belli toward the west, and authorization to counterstrike Kiyv.

I am not saying this is a scenario that will play out. I am saying this is a scenario Putin is clearly gaming.

Medvedev went on to characterize such a transfers of knowledge or technology as a "direct" nuclear escalation and reserved for Russia "any means at its disposal," explicitly including non-strategic nuclear use. This is classic escalation rhetoric: he takes a speculative scenario - Western nuclear sharing with Ukraine - and uses it to justify pre-emptive nuclear threats against NATO states themselves.

But the key phrase is "non-strategic nuclear use". Medvedev, and therefore Putin, are contemplating the use of tactical nuclear weapons. The aforementioned false flag attack on Russia would secure authorization to use a tactical nuclear weapon on Kyiv.

Of this I am certain. I just don't believe we are witnessing communications which are at the threat stage. I believe Medvedev is engaging in a "shaping operation". Putin, knowing he cannot achieve his goals for the Siloviki by conventional means, knows his only path to victory is a tactical strike, a decapitation strike on Kyiv. Putin is seeking to shape Western expectations, make the risk calculus for he West that much more difficult to accept, while shaping the opinion of the domestic Siloviki about Russia's own, internal nuclear use protocol.

Internal Protocols

The authority to use nuclear weapons in both the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation has always been concentrated at the apex of the state, but the internal mechanics of that authority - who prepares the order, who transmits it, and who physically controls the launch codes - have differed in important ways across eras.

In the Soviet period, nuclear command and control rested formally with the General Secretary and the Politburo, but the operational system was built around the General Staff. The Soviet Chain of Command system was designed for launch-on-warning, meaning that the military could execute a nuclear strike within minutes of detecting what it believed to be an incoming attack.

According to analyses of Soviet command systems, the General Staff possessed direct access to the unlock and launch authorization codes and could initiate a missile attack "with or without the permission of political authorities," a reflection of how deeply embedded the military was in the nuclear chain of command.

The Soviet system allowed two methods of launch: the General Staff could transmit codes directly to missile crews, or it could remotely launch land-based strategic missiles from central command facilities. This arrangement meant that while political leaders were theoretically supreme, the military had substantial autonomous capability in practice.

It also means that a rogue General Staff could initiate a nuclear strike to instigate a final show down the West. This scenario was an overwhelming concern as the Soviet Union was winding down.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia retained much of the same architecture but formalized presidential authority more explicitly. Under the Russian Constitution, the president is the commander-in-chief, and current military doctrine specifies that "the decision to use nuclear weapons shall be taken by the President of the Russian Federation."

The authorization for nuclear use is jointly prepared by three officials: the president, the minister of defense, and the chief of the General Staff. This triad reflects a balance between political authority and military expertise.

The launch order itself is transmitted through the Cheget nuclear briefcase system, which entered service in 1985 and remains central to Russia's nuclear command

structure. However, the Cheget is not sufficient on its own to launch nuclear forces; it is a communication and authentication device, not a firing mechanism.
The General Staff holds the actual launch codes and sends the “direct command” to the units that execute the strike. Historically, the process required multiple codes from different leaders, integrated by the General Staff, adding layers of authentication.

The Russian system therefore places formal decision authority with the president, but operational control remains heavily dependent on the General Staff. The military retains the ability to transmit launch orders through dedicated systems such as Signal for the Strategic Rocket Forces and KSBU for air and sea forces.

This dual structure - political authorization combined with military execution - creates both redundancy and potential ambiguity. The 1995 Norwegian rocket incident, in which a scientific launch triggered Russia’s early-warning system and activated President Yeltsin’s nuclear briefcase, illustrates how sensitive and brittle the system can be when early-warning data is misinterpreted.

As for tactical nuclear weapons, Russia does not publicly distinguish their command authority from that of strategic weapons. The same doctrine applies: only the president can authorize nuclear use. But because tactical nuclear weapons are deployed with frontline units and have shorter delivery timelines, the practical role of the General Staff and theater commanders becomes more significant.

The doctrinal language leaves room for rapid escalation if commanders perceive a threat to state survival, though the formal requirement for presidential authorization remains.

In sum, the Soviet Union maintained a system in which political leaders were nominally supreme but the General Staff possessed substantial autonomous capability. Modern Russia has codified presidential authority more clearly, but the military still holds the operational keys: the codes, the communication systems, and the mechanisms that physically execute a launch.

The president decides, the triad authenticates, and the General Staff fires.

In all, the Russia safeguards are a bit more robust than the Soviet safeguards, at least on the launch of strategic strike weapons like missiles, but actual safeguards on tactical nuclear weapons, on artillery delivered low-yield nukes is dangerously lacking.

If we are facing a scenario where Putin wants tactical nukes to be an option he may order, they will never be weapons he can launch by remote. Initiating a launch of ICBMs remotely is already hardwired into the system. But there is no world in which an artillery piece can be fired via remote, not within acceptable risks. Put another way, sure, you could have artillery crews standing by, 24-7, with a 5-kiloton projectile in the breach, ready to fire, but do you really want an artillery crew standing by, 24-7, with a 5-kiloton projectile in the breach, ready to fire?

Not if his name were Prigozhin.

Broken Arrow Protocols must exist within Russia's current system, as much as they existed in the Soviet System. Those protocols will have to have existed at all levels within the command chain. No responsible state actor could tolerate the possibility of an artillery man going rogue any more than they could tolerate the Dear Leader going rogue.

The use of nuclear weapons is not a decision Putin can take unilaterally. Especially not a first-strike use of nuclear weapons.

Broken Arrows

Broken-arrow protocols are the internal procedures a nuclear-armed state uses to prevent an accident, loss, unauthorized arming, or unintended detonation of a nuclear weapon. The term itself is American, but the underlying logic applies universally: every nuclear weapons state must maintain layered safeguards that activate when something goes wrong.

Although the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation do not publicly use the term "broken arrow," both have long maintained their own equivalents — systems designed to prevent accidental launch, accidental detonation, accidental loss, or accidental escalation inside the nuclear command-and-control structure.

Because both the Soviet Union and the modern Russian Federation classify strategic and tactical weapons similarly, they are both subject to the same, strict protocol.

To understand what these protocols look like inside Soviet and Russian command-and-control, it helps to begin with the basic architecture. In both systems, nuclear weapons are controlled through a hierarchy of political authorization and military execution. The Soviet Union built its command-and-control around

launch-on-warning, meaning the General Staff could obtain nuclear release authority within minutes of detecting an incoming strike.

According to analyses of Soviet and Russian command systems, the General Staff possessed direct access to unlock and launch authorization codes and could initiate a missile attack with or without political approval if the system interpreted incoming data as a genuine nuclear attack.
This architecture made broken-arrow safeguards essential: the system had to prevent false alarms, misinterpretations, or technical malfunctions from triggering an irreversible sequence. It also had to have enough people in the decision making loop to guard against a rogue on the General Staff.

In practice, Soviet broken-arrow protocols were embedded in multiple layers.

> First, early-warning operators were trained to distinguish between peaceful rocket launches and military missiles, though the system was imperfect. The 1995 Norwegian sounding-rocket incident demonstrated how fragile the safeguards could be: a scientific rocket triggered President Yeltsin's nuclear briefcase and briefly convinced Russian operators that a U.S. submarine-launched missile was inbound.
>
> The fact that the system did not escalate further reflects the existence of internal checks — verification loops, cross-station confirmation requirements, and human review — all designed to prevent a false alarm from becoming a nuclear launch.
>
> Second, Soviet and Russian systems rely on physical separation between warheads, delivery systems, and arming mechanisms. Even when a weapon is loaded onto an aircraft or missile, the fissile core or arming components may be separated until the final stages of deployment.
>
> This is a classic broken-arrow safeguard: it prevents accidental detonation if an aircraft crashes, a missile malfunctions, or a weapon is jettisoned. The U.S. example of the 1950 B-36 incident — in which a Mark IV bomb was dropped and destroyed without its plutonium core — illustrates the logic behind such protocols. Although this was an American case, the Soviet Union adopted similar separation practices to prevent accidental nuclear yield.

Third, both Soviet and Russian systems incorporate procedural locks: multiple authorization codes, redundant authentication channels, and the requirement that political and military authorities jointly validate a launch order.

In Russia today, the president, the minister of defense, and the chief of the General Staff jointly prepare the authorization, while the General Staff holds the actual launch codes and transmits the direct command. Broken-arrow protocols here take the form of fail-safe mechanisms: if any part of the triad cannot authenticate the order, the launch sequence halts.

If communication systems fail, the system defaults to non-launch. If early-warning data is inconsistent, operators must escalate verification rather than escalate to launch.

Finally, broken-arrow protocols appear in the physical launch systems themselves. Russian strategic missiles can be launched remotely from command centers, bypassing missile crews, but only if the General Staff transmits the correct codes through secure channels.

This remote-launch capability requires extremely strict safeguards: authentication layers, code-verification loops, and hardware interlocks that prevent accidental activation. Tactical nuclear weapons, which are deployed closer to front-line units, rely more heavily on procedural controls — strict storage rules, separation of warheads from delivery systems, and centralized authorization requirements — to prevent battlefield accidents or unauthorized use.

In essence, broken-arrow protocols in the Soviet and Russian systems are not a single checklist but a philosophy embedded throughout Chain of Command: prevent accidental escalation, prevent accidental detonation, prevent accidental loss, and prevent accidental launch. They operate at every level — early-warning verification, code authentication, physical separation of components, and human review — because the consequences of failure are existential.

The 1995 false alarm shows how close the system can come to catastrophe, but also how these safeguards can hold under pressure. The Soviet Union built them into a launch-on-warning architecture; Russia inherited them and adapted them to a more centralized presidential system.

Putin’s current problem is that tactical nuclear warheads, typically dropped as bombs or fire as artillery shells, fall under the same broken-arrow protocols as strategic

nuclear weapons. Medvedev's dangerous, public dialogue could plausibly be a shaping operation, one intended to shape internal opinions within the Siloviki.

Tasking Medvedev to address these issues in public, in the press, is Putin telling the Siloviki "Get in line".

If Putin were able to downgrade tactical nuclear weapons within the Russian Federation, both first use and broken arrow protocols would presumably be relaxed. Perhaps not. Maybe we are witnessing the birth of a cleaner, safer Russia. If so, there is then no explaining Medvedev's comments.

No, we are not witnessing a cleaner, safer Russia. We are witnessing the Siloviki attempting to arm itself with tactical nuclear weapons and the authority to use them. Medvedev's press campaign is designed both to shape western and Russian opinion, to condition all party's to the inevitable use of a tactical nuclear weapon in the foreseeable future.

If I am correct, what Putin is attempting is the re-classification of tactical nuclear weapons to remove them from the control of Russia's Strategic Nuclear Forces or, RVSN.

The GUMO

Russia's Strategic Nuclear Forces are built around the **Strategic Rocket Forces (RVSN)**, the branch responsible for land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles. In the Soviet Union, the RVSN was created in 1959 and immediately elevated to a status equal to the Ground Forces, Air Forces, and Navy.

But in practice it was *more* than equal: it was the most prestigious, best-funded, and most politically protected branch of the entire military. Its officers were selected through a highly competitive process, its facilities were isolated from the rest of the armed forces, and its command structure reported directly to the General Staff with minimal interference from other services.

This privileged position survived the collapse of the USSR. In the Russian Federation, the RVSN remains a separate service branch with its own commander-in-chief, its own training academies, and its own internal security organs. It is not subordinate to the Ground Forces or Aerospace Forces; it is a peer only to the General Staff itself.

The RVSN missile regiments operate in closed cities, its personnel undergo intense political vetting, and its command posts are hardened, redundant, and deeply integrated into Russia's nuclear command-and-control architecture. In other words, the RVSN is insulated from the malignancy which has come to be known as the Siloviki. At least its operational staff are. The RVSN veteran community have likely been co-opted by the Siloviki, though they bring nothing to the table.

Within the military hierarchy, the RVSN sits directly beneath the General Staff and above all other branches in terms of strategic importance. The General Staff controls the launch codes, the communication systems, and the remote-launch capability for strategic missiles, but the RVSN controls the physical missiles, the silos, the mobile launchers, and the crews.

This creates a dual structure: political authorization flows downward from the president through the minister of defense and the chief of the General Staff, while operational execution flows upward from the RVSN's missile regiments through their command posts to the General Staff. The two chains meet only when a launch order is authenticated.

This presents Putin, indeed, everyone in the Siloviki with a challenge. How does one co-opt or compromise such an insular institution? Not easily. Not easily at all.

The RVSN is not merely elite; it is *politically insulated*. Its officers do not rotate through other branches. Its command culture is rigid, doctrinal, and deeply conservative. Its loyalty is to the state, not to individual commanders. And its procedures are designed to prevent improvisation, freelancing, or unauthorized action.

This is why Putin relies on the RVSN as the backbone of Russia's nuclear deterrent: it is predictable, disciplined, and structurally incapable of rogue behavior. Except Putin himself has rogue tendencies, a fantasy about a decapitation strike on Kyiv.

The privileged status of the RVSN also explains why Putin cannot simply "circumvent" the nuclear authorization triad. The RVSN's launch systems are hardwired into the General Staff's authentication architecture. No president — not even Putin — can bypass the requirement for the General Staff to transmit the final launch command.

The Cheget nuclear briefcase does not fire missiles; it only communicates authorization. The General Staff holds the actual firing codes, and the RVSN holds the missiles. The system is designed so that no single actor can initiate a launch alone.

Tactical nukes are not controlled by the RVSN. They are stored, maintained, and deployed by other branches — primarily the Aerospace Forces, the Navy, and certain specialized units of the Ground Forces.
Russia's safeguards over tactical nuclear weapons are deliberately opaque, but enough is known — from doctrine, historical practice, and credible analysis — to sketch the real structure. The key point is that **tactical nuclear weapons are not "free-floating" battlefield assets**.

Tactical weapons remain embedded in the same presidential-authorization system that governs strategic weapons, but with different physical, organizational, and procedural safeguards. These differences matter because they create both flexibility and danger.

The Russian Federation inherited the Soviet model: tactical nuclear weapons are stored under centralized, highly secure custody, controlled by the 12th Main Directorate of the Ministry of Defense (12th GUMO). This directorate is responsible for the storage, transport, maintenance, and physical security of all nuclear warheads - strategic and tactical alike.

No frontline commander, no theater commander, and no service branch (Ground Forces, Aerospace Forces, Navy) has independent access to nuclear warheads. They cannot "take them out of storage" on their own. The warheads are kept in specialized bunkers, guarded by dedicated nuclear-security troops, and moved only under strict orders.

This is the first safeguard: physical separation. Tactical nuclear warheads are stored separately from their delivery systems — aircraft, Iskander launchers, naval platforms — until a political decision is made. This prevents accidental use, battlefield improvisation, or rogue action. Even in wartime, the warheads would be transported from 12th GUMO sites to operational units only after a presidential order.

The second safeguard is procedural separation. Russia's nuclear doctrine states that only the President of the Russian Federation can authorize nuclear use. This applies equally to strategic and tactical weapons. The authorization is prepared jointly by the president, the minister of defense, and the chief of the General Staff.

Tactical nuclear use is not delegated to theater commanders. There is no evidence of pre-delegation authority - the practice in some Cold War NATO plans - that would allow local commanders to use nuclear weapons if communications fail. Russia's system is centralized, reflecting both Soviet tradition and Putin's personal need for control.

The third safeguard is command-and-control authentication. Even tactical nuclear use requires the same authentication chain as strategic use: codes must be transmitted through secure channels, verified by multiple nodes, and matched with physical arming procedures. Tactical delivery systems — such as Iskander-M missiles or dual-capable aircraft — cannot launch nuclear payloads without receiving the correct arming codes. These codes are held by the General Staff, not by the units themselves. This prevents unauthorized launch even if warheads were somehow delivered to a unit.

The fourth safeguard is organizational culture. Tactical nuclear weapons are handled by specialized personnel trained in nuclear security protocols. These individuals are not ordinary soldiers; they are part of a closed, vetted community within the 12th GUMO and associated units. Their careers depend on strict adherence to procedure. This culture acts as an informal safeguard: nuclear weapons are not treated as battlefield tools but as strategic assets requiring ritualized handling.

The fifth safeguard is doctrinal ambiguity. Russia's nuclear doctrine deliberately blurs the line between strategic and tactical use, but it does not relax safeguards. The doctrine allows nuclear use in response to threats to state survival, large-scale conventional aggression, or attacks on critical infrastructure. But Russian doctrine does not specify different authorization pathways for tactical weapons. This ambiguity is political, not procedural.

Ambiguity allows Russia to threaten nuclear escalation without changing the underlying command-and-control structure.

The sixth safeguard is political control. Putin's system is hyper-centralized. The president, the minister of defense, and the chief of the General Staff form a tight triad. All three are politically beholden to Putin. None has independent authority. This political reality reinforces the procedural safeguards: nuclear use is not only technically controlled but politically constrained by loyalty networks.

Nuclear Conclusions

With all features and facets of Russia's Nuclear Forces considered, it is not likely Putin is attempting to restructure internal nuclear protocols using Medvedev's speeches as a proxy. It is certain he is using Medvedev's speeches as a shaping operation, with the objective of preparing western leaders to anticipate, and thereby accept Russia's use of a tactical nuclear weapon as justifiable retaliation in kind.

All which remained is for Putin to fabricate a pretext for the use of a tactical nuclear weapon. I offer the obvious candidate is a False Flag Operation wherein the Siloviki detonate a dirty bomb somewhere on Russian territory, then blame it on Ukraine.

The False Flag

A scenario whereby an actor in the region constructs a dirty bomb cannot be far from the Kremlin's mind, for though Ukraine surrendered its nuclear weapons to Russia years ago, Ukraine operates a number of nuclear power stations. Obtaining controlled nuclear material could not be accomplished without circumventing IAEA oversight of these facilities.

That is not likely to occur. But Chernobyl remains highly radioactive, as we learned during the opening hours of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In fact, it is known that Russian units made a bee-line for Chernobyl, built a number of defensive fortifications there, the abandoned the site when Russian forces were withdrawn from the Kyiv salient.

Russia had the means, the motive and the opportunity to secure radioactive material while on site. If Russian armed forces did secure radioactive material from the Chernobyl site, it's only plausible use would be for use in constructing a dirty bomb.

Isotopic Fingerprints

Science can absolutely identify whether radioactive material came from the Chernobyl site. In fact, this is one of the reasons a "dirty-bomb false flag" using Chernobyl material would be extremely risky for Russia: the forensic signature of Chernobyl is so distinctive that Western labs could identify it quickly and with high confidence.

Here is the core idea in clear prose.

Radioactive material carries a kind of "fingerprint." Every reactor, every accident site, every waste repository produces a unique isotopic pattern based on its fuel composition, burn-up history, neutron flux, cooling time, and chemical environment. Chernobyl's isotopic fingerprint is unusually recognizable because the 1986 meltdown released a chaotic mixture of radionuclides into the environment. The ratios of cesium-137 to cesium-134, the presence of certain isotopes of strontium, the distribution of transuranics like plutonium-239 and americium-241, and even the chemical form of the particles are characteristic of the Chernobyl disaster.

If a dirty bomb were detonated using material taken from the Red Forest or from contaminated soil or samples removed during Russia's occupation of the site, forensic teams could analyze the debris and identify its origin. They would look at isotope ratios, decay chains, particle morphology, and trace contaminants. These signatures would be compared to known Chernobyl profiles, which have been extensively studied for decades.

The match would be unmistakable. The match would be undeniable. And the match would implicate either Russia or Ukraine.

The material would create doubt, enough doubt for Putin to risk use of a tactical nuclear weapon on Kyiv without fear of NATO or US retaliation, not until after an investigation, which Russia will call for and, the investigation would confirm the radioactive material came from Chernobyl.

That means Russia could not be implicated "beyond a reasonable doubt", the western standard of justice. Putin, if gambles, will gamble the west will not instigate a nuclear exchange without proof amounting to less than reasonable doubt. Catastrophic sanctions, yes. A nuclear exchange? Never.

Dirty Bomb Itself

A dirty bomb is not a nuclear weapon; it's a conventional explosive wrapped in radioactive material. Its destructive power comes mostly from the blast, with the radiation adding contamination, panic, and long-term health risk rather than immediate mass casualties.

From a purely material standpoint, Russia absolutely has access to the ingredients. But so does Ukraine.

During the early phase of the war, Russian forces occupied Chernobyl, drove armored vehicles through the Red Forest, dug trenches in contaminated soil, and looters raided a radiation monitoring lab that contained "dangerous materials such as the powerful radioactive isotopes used to calibrate instruments—as well as intensely radioactive samples from the infamous Chernobyl reactor meltdown in 1986." That episode alone shows that radioactive sources suitable for a dirty bomb exist in the theater and have already been disturbed.

So, could the Kremlin fabricate a dirty-bomb incident on Russian territory and blame Ukraine? Technically, yes: it would be relatively easy for Russian security services to

assemble a device using sealed sources or contaminated material, detonate it in a controlled way, and then present it as evidence of Ukrainian “terrorism.”
The hard part is not the bomb; it’s the story. In 2022, when Shoigu phoned Western defense ministers claiming Ukraine was preparing a dirty bomb, NATO officials dismissed the allegation as “absurd” and warned Russia not to use it as a pretext for escalation.

Ukraine responded by inviting IAEA inspectors to the sites Russia named, and the inspections found no undeclared nuclear activities or materials. That episode showed how quickly a dirty-bomb narrative can be challenged by international verification. But that response was delivered because he Kyiv regime survived the gambit. Putin did not strike.

But Shoigu’s accusation reveals the prospect of a dirty bomb attack is operative in the thinking and planning of Russia’s most senior commanders.

In a false-flag scenario, Russia would face the same problem, only worse. A dirty bomb leaves forensic traces: isotopic signatures, evidence of where the material came from, patterns of contamination that can be analyzed by the IAEA and national labs. If the material matched known Russian sources or Chernobyl samples that had been under Russian control, Western intelligence would see through the story quickly.

The Kremlin could still sell the narrative domestically—Russian TV can frame almost anything—but internationally it would be met with deep skepticism, especially given Russia’s prior accusations and the established pattern of disinformation around nuclear issues.

Now, how dangerous would such a self-inflicted attack be?

Physically, a dirty bomb using Chernobyl-type material would contaminate a local area, potentially force evacuations, and create long-term health risks for those exposed. It would not destroy a city or a military formation. The main danger would be psychological and political: panic among civilians, pressure on authorities to respond, and a pretext for escalation.

If Russia detonated such a device on its own territory, it would be poisoning its own land and people to create a casus belli. That’s not impossible—states have done brutal things to their own populations—but it would be a high-risk move, because the contamination and fear would not be easily contained.

But how concerned are Russian military leaders when they ordered Russian regiments to seize and hold he Chernobyl site during their initial invasion? I say Putin would gladly sacrifice a few square miles of Russia to obtain all of Ukraine.

The real risk comes in the next step.

The Retaliatory Strike

Putin using this fabricated attack as justification for a tactical nuclear strike on Kyiv is the actual objective.

Here, the physics and the politics diverge sharply.

A tactical nuclear weapon on a major city is not a dirty bomb; it is a true nuclear detonation, with immediate mass casualties, massive infrastructure destruction, and long-term fallout. It would cross a threshold that has held since 1945. Most serious analyses of nuclear risk in the Ukraine war treat actual nuclear use as a low-probability, high-impact event precisely because it would trigger a qualitatively different Western response.

If Russia did this - if it nuked Kyiv and claimed it was “retaliation” for a Ukrainian dirty bomb - Western governments would not accept the pretext. They would treat it as what it is: a first use of nuclear weapons in war since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, by a state that had already been issuing nuclear threats. The likely responses would cluster in three areas.

First, political and economic isolation would go to an extreme. Whatever remains of Russia’s integration into global finance, trade, and diplomacy would be severed. Sanctions would be expanded to a level approaching comprehensive embargo. Russia would become a pariah state in a way even Iran and North Korea have not experienced.

Second, a military response would almost certainly move beyond what we’ve seen so far. NATO has been careful to avoid direct war with Russia, but a nuclear strike on Kyiv would force a reassessment of that restraint.

The most plausible path is a massive conventional response: destruction of Russian forces in Ukraine, strikes on Russian military assets involved in the nuclear operation, and possibly the establishment of a no-fly or missile-exclusion zone over parts of Ukraine enforced by NATO air and naval power.

Western leaders have repeatedly signaled that Russia "must not use [dirty bomb allegations] as a pretext for escalation," and that actual nuclear use would fundamentally change the nature of the conflict. They would be under enormous domestic and alliance pressure to act.

Third, nuclear posture in the West would shift. NATO would likely raise the alert level of its own nuclear forces, reposition assets, and reinforce deterrence messages. But it is important to say plainly: a Russian tactical nuclear strike on Kyiv would not automatically trigger a Western nuclear strike on Russia. Nor could it. And Putin knows this to be the case.

The logic of deterrence with the West will still apply, but every former Warsaw Pact state would realize they do not exist anywhere near NATO's nuclear umbrella.

I the aftermath of suck a strike, western planners would look for ways to punish and contain Russia, without escalating to full nuclear war. The response would be devastating for Russia in conventional and political terms, but calibrated to avoid mutual annihilation. But if sanctions are today on the brink of ruining Russia, and they have accepted that fate, what more could "total isolation" do?

I believe Putin will play the victim card with BRICs allies, and find supplies the west could not sanction. The Russian people will suffer immeasurably, but then again, the Russian people always have suffered immeasurably.

The leadership of Silovikistan will not suffer.

End Game Scenario

So, if all wisdom holds as it does, what is the end game scenario from Putin's vantage point? With one detonation of a tactical nuclear weapon over Kyiv, Russia will deprive its enemy of its largest, and capital city. Russia may even eliminate a significant core of Ukraine's leadership. I just don't believe Ukraine is that stupid.

Ukraine has been operating under the assumption a tactical strike on Kyiv could take the gem of Ukraine out in an instant. It is impossible that Ukraine's government is concentrated in Kyiv. It is also impossible that Ukraine military command and control is concentrated in Kyiv.

The diversification and distribution of Ukraine's command and control personnel are the greatest deterrent against such a strike, for destroying a city while leaving the enemy intact serves no tactical or strategic purpose. Unless we are facing "Crazy Ivan".
There are immediate precedents for irrational, self-defeating behavior by dictators in the past. Hitler's behavior in the losing days of World War 2 comes to mind. And let's also agree, I just documented over one hundred years of uninterrupted psychosis exhibited by Russia's Intelligence apparatus.

In the end, following such an attack, the worst Russia could expect would be Russia returned to the isolation at the height of the Cold War.

That, my friends, is the "good old days" Vladimir Putin is trying to restore anyway.

I am convinced we are confronting "Crazy Ivan".

If only to preserve their place in power, I am convinced Russian Intelligence will resort to extremes we only regard as insane here in the west. I believe the time has come to end Russian Intelligence once and for all.

Regime change in Moscow is the only way to free the Russian people from the stranglehold of the Siloviki. Regime change in Moscow is the only way to set the world back on its natural course.

Anastasia's may have been deprived of the life she should have led, but so have we all. I pray my readers all now realize that is fact, not interpretation. It truly would have been better for the world if Anastasia had attended her debutante ball.

And because Russian Intelligence will clearly never end their ways, it is time for the world's freedom loving nations to end Russian Intelligence. Regime change can only be accomplished though total isolation of the Russian Federation and the empowerment of Ukraine to win their fight for freedom.

As my concluding chapter, I offer a reasonable, attainable plan to empower Ukraine to drive Russian forces from its territory.

A Simple Plan

Ukraine struggles to defend itself against Russia's invasion because it has such a vast territory to defend. The solution is to implement a NATO Defense Zone east of the Dnieper River.

Once NATO forces deploy to defend Ukrainian territory east of the Dnieper River, Ukrainian Forces could concentrate all their might east of the Dnieper River. NATO forces would be separated from the line of contact by hundreds of kilometers, except along the south coast, and there rules of engagement would preclude NATO combat actions against Russian forces.

NATO should impose a No-Fly-Zone and engage any threat entering Ukrainian airspace from behind the NATO zone of deployment.

Russia could not plausibly contest NATO involvement as an "invasion", and a minimal NATO force in all major cities would the serve as a trip wire against a tactical nuclear strike.

Free to deploy the full weight of it's armed forces against invading Russian forces east of the Dnieper River, the sudden increase in operational tempo could be the straw that breaks the Siloviki back.

The only thing NATO lacks at this time is the courage.

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A Last Word

Ultimately, what we all witnessed occur in the 20th century was Marx imagine an enemy, then become him. Whether we are talking about Anarchists, International Socialists or National Socialists, we are confronting a pseudoscientific, paranoid and – often times - schizophrenic movement which imagined a fire, then set the world ablaze so they would not be the ones who burned.

Am I justified in such incendiary rhetoric?

I'll allow you to be the judge. The socialist movement named it's banner news publication "The Spark" with specific, revolutionary purpose.

A time has come to extinguish that spark.

But how? How does one extinguish a movement whose core is an idea, and whose means of propagation are threats and lies? Socialism should be the very definition of clinical insanity.

We, in the West, correctly abhor anything resembling censorship. Lies we must endure. Lies can be negated by the truth, and most effectively when experience is the teacher.

But threats?

No, free society should not be required to tolerate threats, especially where they are as explicit as those proscribed in Marx's vile theories on human evolution.

I propose, and pray all freedom loving nations enact, laws which criminalize any theology, philosophy or scientific hypothesis which proscribes violence against anyone, for any reason.

If death is not the enemy of free speech, nothing is.

Marxism, and all of its subvariants, are predicated on the violent overthrow of the existing order of all societies, the liquidation – e.g. extermination – of the dominant classes therein, and the forced re-education of all who survive the nightmare of revolution.

I pray the Righteous leaders in the world enact laws specific to this purpose.

If socialist proscriptions for violence cannot be criminalized and prosecuted, the family of Mankind will suffer in the 21st century greater perils and more widescale slaughter than we have in the 20th century.

Do not claim you were not warned.