



HOOVER ARCHIVES:  
**Dark Memories**

*A brief history of Soviet torturers and assassins, some of whom had second thoughts.*

By *Katya Drozdova*

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Having the . . . means to suppress human will and not using them during interrogation, on the “home front,” is much too humane. In the twentieth century, such humanism would be incredible.

—NKVD captain, cited in Varlam Shalamov’s *Kolyma Tales*

The Soviet Union was notorious for using terror against its own people and external foes in an effort to achieve security. Its pervasive security apparatus—designed to protect the Communist Party elite—was driven by an ideology of war against the capitalist U.S. system; it wielded formidable resources to gather intelligence and crush dissent domestically and abroad, relying on vast networks of informers as well as clandestine agents trained in sabotage, conspiracy, insurgency, and terrorism. Many challenges that free nations face today—confronting terrorists and adversary states whose strategies still echo Soviet playbooks—bring lessons learned from the struggle against the USSR into clearer focus.

Unique historical accounts assembled by Russian historian Boris I. Nicolaevsky and safeguarded in the Hoover Institution Archives’ Nicolaevsky Collection paint a picture of a security apparatus that despite its power and ruthlessness, ultimately failed to preserve the communist state. Much is known about this system from its victims. But the Nicolaevsky Collection offers rare insights into how this security apparatus worked and where it failed from the viewpoints of its perpetrators—including personal accounts of their work by military and foreign intelligence and counterintelligence agents as well as domestic security agents. One implication of the Soviet example is that state terror, no matter how systematically and brutally practiced, is ultimately self-defeating—both for the perpetrators, who fell victim to their own system, and for the nation as a whole. However, lacking outside pressure—such as U.S. policies implemented by President Reagan—even deteriorating systems may survive for decades, oppressing their citizens and threatening free nations.



*Boris I. Nicolaevsky (1887–1966) was a Russian archivist and journalist who amassed a vast trove of material about Russian revolutionary movements and figures. He was deported from the USSR in 1922. The bulk of the Nicolaevsky documents—more than 800 boxes—were acquired by the Hoover Institution in 1963.*



*Soviet agent Nikolai Khokhlov, right, headed a team that was sent to assassinate émigré George Okolovich, left. Instead, he decided to defect. "I was thoroughly disillusioned by the tyranny of my own country," Khokhlov later wrote. He settled in Southern California, where he taught college courses in psychology.*

Current events, including some of the techniques of Islamist terrorist networks, evoke many of the Soviet methods. An Al-Qaeda operational manual discovered in Britain in the wake of the September 11 attacks coaches its agents on torture methods as well as on what to do if captured, such as enacting planned security arrangements and claiming abuse by their captors. The Nicolaevsky Collection details similar and more advanced diversion tactics taught to Soviet agents as well as interrogation techniques. The publicized confessions of British sailors captured by Iran this year remind one of the Soviet show trials in which Joseph Stalin used his prisoners' rehearsed confessions as "weapons of political warfare" to discredit his opponents. The radiation poisoning in London last year of a KGB (and its successor, the FSB) defector, Alexander Litvinenko—who had asserted FSB use of terrorist methods in *Blowing Up Russia*—is yet another page taken directly out of a Soviet security apparatus playbook, which once dispatched "mobile groups" to liquidate political opponents.

### PHYSICISTS AND CHEMISTS

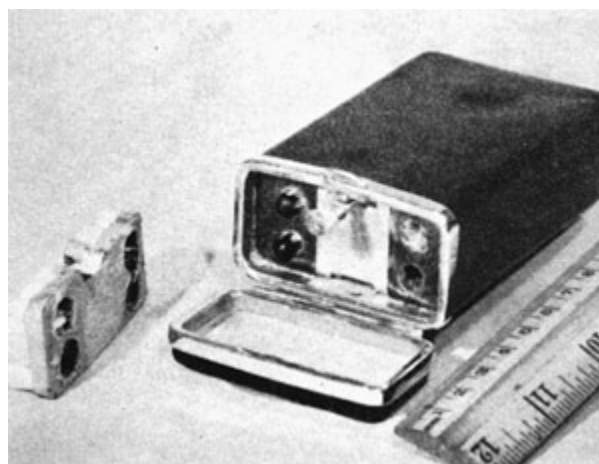
It is possible to quell the human will by injections, with pure pharmacology and chemistry, without any "physics" such as breaking suspects' ribs. . . . The physicists and the chemists—these were two schools of interrogation.

—NKVD "chemist," in *Kolyma Tales*

Today, even democratic nations debate the potential value of high-pressure interrogations, possibly leading to outright torture, when their security is at stake. One warning from the Soviet experience is that extreme abuse, although likely to produce confessions, is also likely to produce false confessions. What rate of false confessions would a nation deem acceptable—considering that information gained may lead to groundless convictions, executions, or enforcement operations against innocent people? The Nicolaevsky Collection depicts a Soviet solution, drawn from an insider's account of the earliest Soviet security organization, known as the Cheka, which helped establish a terrorist state: "Better that nine innocent persons suffer than one guilty escapes retribution."

*The Soviet example suggests that state terror, no matter how systematic and brutal, is ultimately self-defeating—both for the perpetrators, consumed by their own system, and the nation as a whole.*

“In the Soviet Union, there hasn’t been a political court proceeding where the accused did not confess his guilt,” A. Repin, a Ministry for State Security (MGB) major, wrote about his work. Most proceedings were indeed political, designed to pre-empt or punish dissent, unauthorized contact with foreigners, and attempts to escape the USSR, among other such crimes proscribed by Soviet law as counterrevolutionary, anticommunist, or treasonable. Two types of expert interrogators arose to extract confessions: Those dubbed “physicists” broke bones, while others known as “chemists” broke one’s will using psychology and drugs (as one such chemist tells Varlam Shalamov in one of his *Kolyma Tales*). Most interrogators simply threatened and beat their detainees. Electric shocks, crude physical tortures, and mock executions were also used. A chosen method for high-value detainees was a so-called conveyer belt in which multiple interrogators replaced one another while continuously questioning the prisoner for days without rest. Those who withstood faced advanced treatments, especially for public trials where signs of torture would be counterproductive.



*Among Soviet agent Khokhlov’s weapons was this cigarette case, modified into a tiny gun that could silently fire poisoned bullets. Khokhlov nearly fell victim himself to Soviet secret weapons. In 1957, he survived a bout of radiation sickness, a foreshadowing of the fatal radiation poisoning of KGB defector Alexander Litvinenko in London last year.*

Thus, in the 1930s Moscow Trials, Stalin sought not only to eliminate but also to publicly discredit his opponents—the old-guard Bolsheviks who helped install the very system that destroyed them. The seemingly “apathetic and will-less” defendants voluntarily confessed to terrible crimes in open court proceedings. Observers might have inferred their repentance, but keen participants immediately recognized the “familiar ‘work’ style of MGB. . . . Different people have different thresholds, but all break down at the MGB,” as Repin wrote.

***An early Soviet guideline helped establish a terrorist state: “Better that nine innocent persons suffer than one guilty escapes retribution.”***

Documents describe how the Moscow Institute for Forensic-Experimental Medicine facilitated such effects. Veiled behind an official mission of evaluating suspects’ mental competency to stand trial, the institute conducted experiments on prisoners focused primarily on crushing human will through chemical and hypnotic methods, as well as psycho-treatments involving dramatic manipulation of room temperature, color, light, sound, food, and sleep. Some interrogators were capable of eliciting desired information through logic, study, conversation, and other such nonviolent techniques, writes a Soviet military intelligence officer, V. A. Denisov, about his experience. Yet their skills, knowledge, and witness to the terror made them a liability to the regime, and so those nonviolent interrogators were replaced by loyal brutes.

Thus the Soviet system continued for decades, with internal purges targeting dissent and foreign infiltration. At the same time, other kinds of persuasion proved more effective than abuse at collecting actionable intelligence; these could guide free nations fighting their enemies today.

### AN INVITATION TO DEFECT

There was one flaw in General Sudoplatov's [a Soviet spymaster's] plan. When he sent me westward on my first journey, I was a young, patriotic and thoroughly indoctrinated agent of the Soviet state. When I returned . . . I was thoroughly disillusioned by the tyranny of my own country.

—Nikolai Khokhlov, Soviet agent

Nikolai Khokhlov knocked on a door in Frankfurt in 1953 and told the man who answered, George Okolovich, the head of an anti-Soviet Russian émigré organization: "I am a captain in the MGB. . . . I have been sent to organize your assassination." He then surrendered to U.S. authorities, volunteered valuable counterintelligence information, and turned over useful technology including his assassination weapon—a cigarette case that silently fired poisoned bullets. (Khokhlov was to be treated for radioactive thallium poisoning in 1957, in a foreshadowing of the Litvinenko case; unlike Litvinenko, Khokhlov survived.)

*"To show Stalin that I meant business, I wrote down an account of his crimes and attached it to my letter. I warned him also that if I were murdered by his henchmen, the record of his crimes would be published by my lawyer at once."*

How should nations respond if a knowledgeable adversary were to switch sides, and are there ways to invite such defections? Consider another example from the Nicolaevsky Collection, involving the Soviet-supported communist organization Tudeh in Iran, which used terrorist methods to oppose the reign of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, a U.S. ally. Outlawed in 1949 after an assassination attempt on the shah, Tudeh continued to pose a security threat. Tehran had a stroke of luck in 1954 when a Tudeh assassin refused to carry out his mission and instead surrendered to his target, Tehran's military governor, Brigadier General Timur Bakhtiar. Asked why he had surrendered and confessed to his mission, the would-be assassin told Bakhtiar, according to an account in *Life* magazine: "My conscience bothered me about taking the life of a patriot like yourself. . . . Besides, I am tired of a life of treason." Skeptical of the explanation, Bakhtiar easily could have ordered the suspect tortured, but he opted instead to talk with him. This elicited timely and accurate intelligence that led to the exposure of a vast Tudeh fifth column in the Iranian military—complete with high-command involvement, Soviet embassy links, communications ciphers, and an underground Marxist propaganda press.



*Iranian Brigadier General Timur Bakhtiar, left, collected valuable data from a would-be assassin who decided not to carry out his mission. The assassin, right, identified in news reports as Jafari, handed over information about the activities of the Soviet-supported group Tudeh. On the table is the revolver Jafari had intended to use.*

Although rare—given the size of the Soviet subversive networks—such pre-emptive defections could prove very valuable. The defectors sought political asylum and counted on better treatment by the U.S. or allied authorities than by their own employers, who often would retaliate against those they considered traitors. In more recent years, other U.S. adversaries appear to be considering similar deals; there are reports, for example, that a high-ranking defense official and member of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard defected to the West in early 2007. Risks in welcoming defectors, however, involve accepting double agents, as well as triggering retaliation.

### THE MOBILE GROUPS STRIKE BACK

Our law is simple: cost of entry—one ruble; exit—two. That is, to join our organization is difficult enough, but to leave it is even harder.

—Soviet military intelligence recruiter, quoted in V. Suvorov, *Aquarium*

One way the Soviet Union disciplined its renegade agents, while also undermining the nations that welcomed them, was through the use of Mobile Groups for Special Tasks. This mechanism was created in 1936 by Nikolai Yezhov, head of the NKVD (successor to the Cheka and predecessor to the MGB and the KGB), to conduct delicate security assignments abroad.

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In one case, Soviet agent Ignace Reiss broke with Stalin during the purges and refused to return to the USSR. In an intercepted letter, he wrote that his motivation was “returning to freedom.” His bullet-ridden body was found in 1937 in Switzerland, where he and his family had fled. Reiss's friend and superior, Walter Krivitsky (who was Soviet intelligence chief for Western Europe at the time), also defected to pre-empt his own purge; he cooperated with American authorities and wrote about the planning of Reiss's murder. Krivitsky was found dead in 1941 in a Washington, D.C., hotel. The FBI, which investigated the death, maintained that nothing proved his death was other than a suicide. Yet the Nicolaevsky and Honeyman collections in the Hoover Archives—as well as *The Secret History of Stalin's Crimes*, a book by former Soviet espionage official Alexander Orlov—maintain that Krivitsky was liquidated by one of the mobile groups.

Secretive persecutions sometimes backfired, as related by Orlov. NKVD Foreign Department chief Abram Slutsky (who had earlier helped prepare the Moscow show trials) was lured back into the USSR and served poisoned tea and cookies by a colleague. To minimize alerts among the security services, the Soviet government declared Slutsky's death to have been caused by a heart attack and buried him as a hero with state honors. However, experienced agents who passed by his open casket during funeral ceremonies recognized the discoloration on his face—the subtle evidence that he had been poisoned.

Orlov survived his own defection. He turned the tables on Stalin—a technique free nations might consider when bargaining with unaccountable foes. As Orlov wrote in *The Secret History*: “This I could do not by beseeching [Stalin] or appealing to his sense of humanity. I did it in another way which I knew he would understand and I warned him with all the determination at my command that if he dared to revenge himself . . . I would publish everything that was known to me about him. To show Stalin that I meant business, I wrote down an account of his crimes and attached it to my letter [sent to Stalin and Yezhov]. I warned him also that if I were murdered by his henchmen, the record of his crimes would be published by my lawyer at once. I knew Stalin well and I was sure that he would heed my warning.” Undertaken from a point of strength, Orlov's bargain held, but security came at the price of a life of fear.

Special to the *Hoover Digest*.

Available from the Hoover Press is *Stalin's Loyal Executioner: People's Commissar Nikolai Ezhov, 1895–1940*, by Marc Jansen and Nikita Petrov. To order, call 800.935.2882 or visit [www.hooverpress.org](http://www.hooverpress.org).

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