

Postage due:
A new perspective on state security/intelligence research

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ABSTRACT

What can we learn when we mix three ingredients rarely found in the same bowl—intelligence history, business concepts, and postage stamps? What can we learn about the mindset of an intelligence organization which offers the world, and itself, an outsized portion of falsehood? What price does an organization pay when it cannot separate its own facts from fiction?

The paper takes an unusual approach to explore Soviet/Russian state security. Perspectives from business research about strategic management and decision-making processes are applied to the complex world of postage stamps. The approach can be used beyond this specific setting—stamps are sources of information, and they provide an effective anchor for research.

Material from Russian archives and other sources shows that an astonishing number of post-Soviet postage stamps—about two hundred—have direct or indirect links to state security and intelligence. This paper discusses a subset—three sets of Russian stamps which commemorate seventeen people in counterintelligence and military intelligence: a 2002 set of Cheka/OGPU/NKVD agents, a 2018 set of SMERSH agents, and a 2022 set of former KGB counterintelligence chiefs.

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Truth seldom is pleasant.
Alexander Solzhenitsyn [1]

INTRODUCTION

Two hundred is the number to remember.

More than three dozen for heroes of intelligence and counterintelligence. More than a dozen for agencies and units related to state security. More than three dozen for construction and infrastructure projects managed by the security apparatus. More than a hundred for individuals and groups who are victims of state security, or are closely connected to specific victims.

In the thirty years since the Soviet Union voted itself out of existence in December 1991, Russia has issued roughly two hundred postage stamps with links to state security. This appears to be unique in world history—the voluminous publication of such stamps, the persistent celebration of intelligence agencies and individuals, the insistent commemoration of a defunct nation, the relentless obfuscation of a cruel and bloody history, and the continued elevation of an intelligence/counterintelligence apparatus which dominated its previous host government and survived to dominate the government of a new nation.

This present paper comes from a portion of my recent book, *Putin's Boys: The Stamp Men*. Before we begin, however, this year's major event in Russian history—the invasion of Ukraine—begs a particular question: What do Vladimir Putin and the employees of Russia's intelligence services believe about their past and present, and why? The answer, in part, is that the Soviet Union long celebrated its intelligence and counterintelligence activities, occasionally in stamps, frequently in stories about individuals and events. Those stories, mythologized in articles, books and movies, dictated a distorted view of history. Of course, we need stories in societies, even if as we grow up we learn they are not entirely true. In the United States, children learn that a youthful George

Washington said “I cannot tell a lie”, and confessed that he cut down a cherry tree. As adults, we know the story isn’t true, but it is a useful children’s tale to encourage honesty.

Although Post-Soviet Russia has issued in total about two hundred stamps that have connections, direct or indirect, to state security, this paper will focus on one part of this story: people commemorated on three stamp sheets issued in 2002, 2018, and 2022—the stamp men.

The stamp men are in the distant past. They come from specific periods—1918 to 1938, World War II, and the Cold War—yet illuminate a century which leads inexorably into our present. By suggesting that modern Russia should celebrate these stamp men, history is being deliberately and profoundly distorted by the government of Vladimir Putin. Nor is it only postage stamps. Seventy-five years of Soviet news, literature, school, art, music, movies, monuments, names of buildings, streets, and cities, and postage stamps—all controlled by a centralized state—embedded beliefs deep into society’s memory. Many have survived the Soviet Union, and others are being revived.

Less than two years after former KGB officer Vladimir Putin’s first election as president, the Russian post office issued in 2002 a sheet of stamps to commemorate Soviet-era counterintelligence agents on the 80th anniversary of the 1922 creation of a new internal unit in the secret police to house long-running efforts against “the subversive activities of foreign intelligence services, foreign émigré centers, smuggling, illegal border crossing and political banditry”. [2]

The stamp sheet does not name the agents’ employer. There is no need. Any present-day Russian, or any person from any part of the former Soviet Union, is a person whose very existence has been shaped by these men. Their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents were intimately acquainted with such men, whether as onlookers, victims, or participants—or in all three roles. The stamp men’s employer is the same as Vladimir Putin’s long-time employer—the state security apparatus now known as the FSB and foreign intelligence SVR, previously known in Soviet times by an ever-changing series of acronyms: KGB, MVD, MGB, NKGB, NKVD, OGPU, GPU and, before that, the VCheka or Cheka, (the All-Russia Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage), founded in 1917 during the Russian Revolution and Civil War, to help Lenin gain control of the country by using unrestrained violence. Employees were Chekists, their emblem an unsheathed sword and shield.

For decades, the Cheka and its successors enforced government policies through fear and violence in almost every aspect of national and personal life—agriculture, industry, science, art, literature, foreign relations, national defense, community, family, love. By dislocating and killing farmers, they expanded famines. By imprisoning and killing teachers and scientists, managers and engineers, poets and musicians, they lobotomized a nation’s culture, science, and economy. By killing their own agents, army officers and soldiers before, during, and after World War II, they weakened the country, increased suffering, and made a mess of international relations. By pitting neighbor against neighbor, they destroyed human ties and the basic fabric of society.

And, by suppressing dissent, Chekists made the Soviet Union so inflexible and unresponsive that it could not resolve a host of profoundly obvious problems—social, political, bureaucratic, military, technological, economic, environmental. The Soviet government collapsed largely because it could not adequately acknowledge and address problems.

Official structures and names changed over time, but the sword-and-shield emblem and the nickname survive in modern Russia. State security is intuitively understood as the Cheka, and people working in state security are still Chekists. Dzerzhinsky was a Chekist. Putin is a Chekist.

Research context

The stamp men’s stories reflect diverse materials. Some are more about relatives and locations, others about official records and acts. This is a study of people from a long-lived apparatus which generally has sought to conceal or destroy factual material.

One term should be noted for its distinct meaning. “Repression” means the punishment of individuals, groups, or entire segments of society for political reasons. It is a consequence of anything, including “ordinary” crime, deemed hostile to the state. If the reader wishes, a quick Internet search for Article 58 of the Soviet criminal code makes clear that anything could be deemed a political crime—family relationships, private thoughts or being unaware of something. In practical terms, repression often meant prison, labor camp, exile, or execution.

The point of the stamp men

Sense of self: At first glance, the stamp men are a nice gesture toward Vladimir Putin to honor the place where the new president built his career—after university, Putin worked for the KGB for sixteen years then, in the late 1990s, briefly ran its successor, the FSB.

Loyal service: On second look, the stamp men show that the Cheka's sword and shield continue to protect Russia after the Soviet Union. Stories of heroic intelligence agents and events create positive images and a focus on national security. After all, any organization seeks pride and purpose in its past. American police look up to role models like the FBI's Eliot Ness, and it is natural that Russian intelligence agencies want to feel proud of their spy-catching predecessors.

Continuity of values: The third examination is the most important. The stamp men built, worked in and finally were destroyed by an agency which served as a control mechanism but was itself difficult to control, in a larger institutional system fueled by suspicion and self-deception. Their stamps represents a profoundly sanitized organizational history. When we belong to an organization, or study one, or have dealings with one, it is useful to grasp the organization's beliefs and desires regarding its history. Highly idealized beliefs and desires which do not align with historical or present facts are a major source of conflict, poor decisions, and adverse results.

Like any organization, Russian intelligence agencies are imbued with purpose and sense of tradition, but the stories they may believe are inaccurate, which makes it difficult for them to make truly wise and informed decisions. And, sensing or knowing darker organizational truths will damage internal trust and honesty, again handicapping the ability to make good decisions.

A note on Trust and Syndicate-2

In the 1920s Soviet foreign counterintelligence work focused on complex disinformation programs—false organizations to entrap known or suspected foreign agents. The best-known one “Trust” is commemorated on the border of the 2002 stamps. Syndicate-2 is almost as famous.

In Trust, British agent Sidney Reilly was lured, kidnapped, and then interrogated in Moscow by at least three of the 2002 agents—counterintelligence chief Artur Artuzov, assistant Vladimir Styrne, and Grigory Syroezhkin. A conveyor belt of rotating interrogators denied him sleep for days on

end, and he was rattled by at least one mock execution. Internal reports suggest he was killed in 1925—a Chekist wounded him with a shot in the back, stamp man Syroezhkin killed him with a shot to the chest, and he was buried in the building’s courtyard.

In Syndicate-2, anti-Bolshevik expatriate Boris Savinkov was lured back to Russia, then dropped out an upper-floor Lubyanka window by stamp men Syroezhkin and Puzitsky, and possibly their boss Felix Dzerzhinsky. A newer explanation, in which the valiant stamp men tried to save Savinkov from self-defenestration, is absurd—the non-voluntary nature of Savinkov’s brief flight was known as early as 1926. *[3]*

One unintended consequence of secretive yet expansive operations like Trust and Syndicate-2 was that Soviet agents abroad unwittingly learned disinformation, then sent it home. Coupled with the centralization, compartmentalization, fear, employee turnover, and administrative disorder which increasingly characterized Soviet bureaucracies throughout the 1930s, the result was an intelligence system and government remarkably ill-equipped to assess the validity of data or to act on it. The proof was in the pudding—in 1941, Soviet agents reported to Moscow that Germany would soon attack. They were disbelieved, and military commanders at the border were afraid to act without authorization, so Germany simply destroyed most of the Soviet air force on the ground and within days captured or killed hundreds of thousands of Soviet soldiers.

2002: 80TH ANNIVERSARY OF COUNTERINTELLIGENCE

Artur Khristianovich Artuzov (1891 - 1937)

Artuzov, a “genius of counterintelligence”, is still celebrated by modern Russia’s SVR, which blandly states that he joined “a commission that established Soviet power in the north of Russia” in 1918, then later managed counterintelligence operations like Trust and Syndicate-2. [4]

In reality, he was recruited by his uncle Mikhail Kedrov, another counterintelligence hero whom we will meet later, to travel far north to seize military supplies stored in Archangel. Before the trip, Kedrov directed his nephew to break into the Swiss embassy and steal a cache of jewelry to help finance Lenin’s war. Other embassies were pilfered, too. [5, 6, 7]

When Artuzov, his uncle, a couple of cousins, and a detachment of soldiers arrived in Archangel, they arrested officials, “eliminated unrest”, and seized warehouses of food, clothing, munitions, steel, and coal. They traveled by ship to the island monastery Solovetsky (Solovki), and soon turned it into a prison camp, along with villages like Pertominsk and Kholmogory (from Finnish Kalmomäki, “corpse hill”). In the early 1920s, the few survivors of the village concentration camps were sent to the islands, into the “Solovki [later *Severnyy*, or Northern] camp of special purpose forced labor”, abbreviated SLON. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, never at a loss for words, called SLON the “Arctic Auschwitz”. [8, 9, 10, 11]

Slon is the Russian word for elephant. When the camp (*lager*) was relabeled a prison (*tyurma*), the nickname changed to STON, the Russian word for groan. Elephant or groan, it makes no real difference, for Solovki was the “mother tumor” (another Solzhenitsyn phrase)—the camps Artuzov and Kedrov had created provided the methods and structure for thousands of camps of labor and death which would swallow millions of people, all coordinated by a new Main Administration of Corrective Labor Camps, *Glavnoe Upravlenie ispravitel’no-trudovykh Lagerei*, better known by its obvious acronym. Artur Artuzov and his uncle Kedrov are, thus, co-founders of the entire Gulag.

After substantial time as the head of counterintelligence, Artuzov was shot in 1937. Various family members were repressed—his teenage son Kamill was removed from the barracks of the dying in a Kolyma camp and revived only because he could play violin. [12, 13, 14, 15, 16]

Nikolai Ivanovich Demidenko (1896 - 1934)

In 1921, the 'Cheka sent Ukrainian-born Nikolai Demidenko to “catch agents and spies” when the Soviets invaded Joseph Stalin’s homeland, the small but newly free country of Georgia. [17]

By 1922 Demidenko was stamp man Artuzov’s assistant. In Operation Syndicate-2, he and stamp man Puzitsky helped lure ex-patriate Boris Savinkov to Russia for interrogation and execution, and he soon received the highest Soviet honor—the Order of the Red Banner. In Paris in 1930, in a ayflight street attack organized by stamp man Puzitsky, he and agents dressed as French policemen kidnapped and killed Russian exile Alexander Kutepov. [18, 19, 20]

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Demidenko was centrally involved in collectivizing agriculture, and we can read some of his lengthy communications with OGPU field offices. They show he was well aware of logistical difficulties, local “excesses”, and social and agricultural problems of collectivization, deportation, and the effort to “eliminate” an entire segment of the peasant population, the so-called “kulak” (fist) class. [21, 22]

By 1934, Demidenko was in Moscow as head of the OGPU’s counterintelligence department; he replaced stamp man Jan Olsky, who had replaced stamp man Artuzov.

Officially, Demidenko died of illness at age 38 in mid-1934. More likely, he was murdered. Several days later, the OGPU was merged into the new NKVD headed by new chief Genrikh Yagoda, Yagoda, an expert in poison, later confessed to killing Menzhinsky several weeks before Demidenko died, and it is quite possible that he killed Demidenko as well as part of his takeover. Demidenko was a department chief in an agency being taken over by a new agency, and belonged to a cadre of long-time senior colleagues who would be killed in the next several years, and died at a suspiciously ideal moment. His fellow 2002 stamp men would be shot, cremated and dumped in the NKVD’s infamous “Common Grave No. 1” in an outlying cemetery, but Demidenko received a normal grave. It seems his wife and daughter survived. [23, 24, 25]

¹ To consider how Georgia feels about its Soviet experience, in the capital Tbilisi the main public square was renamed in the 1930s for secret police chief Lavrenty Beria, then for Lenin when Beria fell out of favor. In today’s independent Georgia, it is Freedom Square, and Lenin’s statue has been replaced with Saint George slaying the dragon—not by coincidence, the nation’s patron saint holds his sword and faces north, toward Russia.

Jan Kalikstovich Olsky (Kulikovsky) (1898 - 1937)

Today, in Belarus, the ministry of state security, which is still named the KGB (!), gives Olsky a rather positive official biography as one of its earliest chiefs.

He volunteered for Soviet intelligence work and in 1919 “liquidated” almost sixty “Polish” spies in a Red Army unit. By mid-1921, at age 22, Olsky was head of the entire Cheka in Belarus, where he destroyed thousands of enemies. In the next thirty years, the Cheka would sweep away hundreds of thousands of Belarusians, some killed, most exiled to remote places. *[26, 27, 28]*

He returned to Moscow and by 1926 he was head of the “Special Department”, the OGPU’s surveillance and enforcement division. One interesting task was to investigate problems in aircraft production. The problems were real enough (quality, quantity, delays) but they were evidence of larger endemic Soviet problems—poor management, design, production, and training; conflicting incentives and disincentives; and rushed industrialization. Emphasizing these problems was not administratively palatable, so Olsky blamed sabotage and willful disobedience as the culprits.

During the first Five-Year-Plan, Olsky and stamp man Puzitsky seized crops for export and enforced the mass exile of hundreds of thousands of peasants, which presented Olsky with unsolvable problems when he became counterintelligence chief. The OGPU was expected to meet (and exceed) arbitrary arrest numbers and follow unusable rules for transport and resettlement. An exhausting stream of problems came to his office (starvation, cannibalism, chaotic transport, no supplies for exiles when they arrived), and a series of useless edicts were issued in response. Peasants starved, bureaucrats fought, and Olsky was demoted to manage Moscow’s cafeterias. After he was shot in 1937, his wife went to the camps and a son into the abyss of state orphanages. *[12, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36]*

Sergei Vasilievich Puzitsky (1895 or 1898 - 1937)

Russia's modern SVR gives Puzitsky a positive biography for working in military tribunals and OGPU counterintelligence. He even received the agency's top prize, a gold-plated gun, inscribed for his "merciless fight against counterrevolution".

In 1928 he and stamp man Syroezhkin went to Yakutia to kill the "White Guard" group and its Japanese masters, and in 1930 he organized Demidenko's kidnapping job in Paris.

When he worked with stamp man Olsky in 1930-31 to deport hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian and North Caucasus farmers, he wrote a study showing the exile operation was a deadly and expensive mess. This assessment probably was unwelcome, since the OGPU was expanding mass exiles, particularly to the North. *[37, 4, 20, 38]*

To grasp these deportations, a typical OGPU status report states that in four winter days in 1930 Arkhangelsk received five trainloads of exiles from southern Russia and Ukraine totaling 8,501 people, ranging from infants to ordinary adults to amputees to people more than ninety years old. More than three thousand were children. Almost three-fourths of the exiles were incapacitated, some completely. About two thousand people who seemed somewhat able-bodied were sent immediately in subfreezing weather to logging and other hard labor. 6,500 exiles unable to work were simply put in storage (with unknown fates): 1,310 in a factory space, another 1,342 in warehouse space at the port, and 3,901 stuffed into an old movie theater and a church. *[39]*

Puzitsky was demoted to deputy chief of one of the labor camps on the Moscow-Volga Canal, where two hundred thousand canal workers used hand tools to dig the 80-mile canal. Tens of thousands died—a few got grave-markers, many were dumped in the canal earthworks. However, as with the recent 75-mile White Sea Canal, it was "heroic work". *[40, 41, 42, 43]*

Puzitsky did not get an opportunity to write a canal version of his 1930 mass exile review. He was arrested in 1937 just weeks before the canal's official opening and confessed to an enormous conspiracy. He was shot, and his wife and mother went to the camps. *[44, 45, 12, 20, 46]*

Vladimir Andreevich Styrne (1897 - 1937)

Styrne was born into a Latvian family and became assistant chief of city census statistics in Moscow. When the revolution came, he joined the Cheka.

In the midst of the post-civil war famine, Styrne's task was to find spies in the 120,000 local workers of the American Relief Administration (ARA), which in 1920-1923 fed up to ten million Soviets a day (several million died anyway). Styrne looked for disloyalty—friendliness with foreigners, talking too freely, expressing admiration, complaining about Bolsheviks. Virtually any interaction or information-gathering about the famine could be anti-Soviet espionage, and the Cheka cemented its incurable suspicion of foreigners, even in the face of obvious efforts to prevent millions of their fellow citizens from starving to death. *[47, 48]*

America stopped sending food when the Cheka refused to stop seizing crops—Soviet ships were exporting grain while the ARA unloaded grain to feed the starving.

Styrne rose through the ranks and transferred several times. In 1930, the Soviet Union's Politburo officially approved, among other things, a list from Styrne's local office to execute 276 kulaks and 66 criminals, and to exile 1293 kulaks and 425 criminals (this one Politburo document approved the execution of about 25,000 people). Between 1935 and 1937, Styrne reported on sabotage and arrests and identified villagers who were morally decayed, drunk, embezzlers, etc.; discussed agricultural failures and the punishment of saboteurs and malingerers, noting that farm workers lacked food; and identified institutional failures and factory-peasant competition for food. *[49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55]*

In 1937, he became a regional chief of counterintelligence based in Kyiv, Ukraine. His math background and census work helped—his field reports show he methodically gathered and analyzed data, and year after year he provided data and factual commentary and carefully avoided opinion and personal judgment. But, he became nervous about going to Moscow for meetings, and advised a colleague to obey orders and keep quiet. After three months in his new job, he was shot (apparently his wife was, too). *[56, 57]*

Grigori Sergeevich Syroezhkin (1900 - 1939)

Syroezhkin's stamp is incorrect—he died not in 1937 but in 1939.

The most traveled and personally brutal of the 2002 stamp men, he is in an odd way also the most tragic one. Born in the famine-prone region of Saratov, he grew up in Tbilisi, Georgia, where his father found a job in the local army garrison, which helped pay for an education as the way to a better life for his son, who did well in school but may have been bullied. He tried to join the army but was sent home for being too young, then studied wrestling and tried to join a circus, but an injury ended that dream. When the Revolution came, the family returned to Russia. Syroezhkin was literate, and apparently a voracious reader, and by age 18 he joined the Cheka, where he stood out as “completely satisfied...physically strong...impressed that the results of his operational work were immediate”. For two decades he was a hands-on repressor of bandits, peasants, spies, refugees, and other enemies, from Leningrad to the Caucasus, as far east as China, Mongolia, and Kolyma, and as far west as Finland, Sweden, Germany, and Spain. A severe alcoholic (even by Chekist standards), he was demoted more than once for drinking. *[4, 58, 59, 60]*

He put a bullet in Sidney Reilly's chest. He killed Russian refugees in China. In Novosibirsk he arrested 300 peasants, and sentenced 73 to death. In Kamen-na-Obi and Chumakovsky, he was involved in torture, summary killings, and the burning of a village. In Leningrad he killed spies and terrorists, and knew how to induce female prisoners to “confess”. In Belarus, he helped jail or kill more than a hundred teachers, scientists, and writers. *[56, 61]*

In Spain, Syroezhkin employed the son of a man whom he had thrown out a window a decade earlier. And, he unfortunately told friends that he believed in the innocence of certain army officers who had been shot. Someone betrayed his confidence, and Syroezhkin was recalled in 1938. Even though all his old counterintelligence friends had already been shot, and various family members were already repressed, he chose to return to Moscow rather than disappear or defect. Of course, he was then shot. *[62, 63, 12, 59, 58, 64, 65, 66]*

2018: 100 YEARS OF MILITARY COUNTERINTELLIGENCE

In 2018, on 19 December (which, believe it or not, is officially “Chekists Day” in Russia), one hundred years to the day after the Cheka created its counterintelligence “Special Department”, Russia used the unrecognized Lugansk People’s Republic proto-state to issue a limited edition stamp sheet commemorating military counterintelligence agencies. *[67]*

The two center characters are Mikhail Kedrov, whom we have already met briefly, and Viktor Abakumov, who ran SMERSH (Smert shpionem—“death to spies”), the World War II counterintelligence agency designed to work at the front, to provide Stalin with a bureaucratic counterweight to Beria’s NKVD, and to ensure Soviet military loyalty to the Kremlin.

The same Kremlin which lobotomized its military in the 1930s by killing tens of thousands of officers. The same Kremlin which soon would aim guns at the backs of its own soldiers to force them forward, refuse to sign the Geneva War Convention, seek no help for Soviet soldiers languishing in German prisoner-of-war camps, and ship tens of thousands of war prisoners (Germans, Poles, Japanese, and even a few Americans) to the Gulag. The same Kremlin which later at the end of the war would use its intelligence agencies to send hundreds of thousands of returning Soviet soldiers to the Gulag. It is unsurprising that the Kremlin decided to spy on its own army.

The four other 2018 stamp men died as counterintelligence security officers in Red Army units during the war: Grigory Kravtsov (age 22), Peter Zhidkov (age 43), Vasily Chebotarev (age 26), and Mikhail Krygin (age 27). Their job was complex—to inspire a fighting spirit, to search for German spies and sympathizers, to work behind enemy lines, and to unmask malcontents. They were thrust into the frontlines of war, and each suffered a terrible death.

Mikhail Sergeevich Kedrov (1878 -1941)

Mikhail Kedrov we have already met as co-founder of the Gulag. His stamp is a fabrication—there was no armored train, although he requested one for Arkhangelsk and was denied. Still, the stamp’s irony is perfect—Kedrov’s mythical train cannon takes aim at Kedrov himself.

Kedrov was a committed revolutionary. In his early twenties he went to prison for sedition and bomb-making, then printed subversive literature, then moved to Switzerland where he gained medical training and met Lenin. As the Revolution unfolded, he was appointed to run investigative commissions in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other cities to root out enemies, seize military supplies, and conscript civilian doctors and nurses for the battlefield.

On his way with his nephew Artuzov to Archangel in 1918, he stopped in the city of Vologda to liquidate the provincial and city governments, steal food and valuables from a nearby convent, and loot city banks. He also addressed a sanitation crisis by ordering Vologda to empty out its cesspools and clean up garbage or suffer fines and punishments. Complying with this medical edict was difficult for residents—the Bolsheviks were stealing or eating all the city’s cart-pulling draft horses, and thousands of soldiers only added to the supply of sewage and garbage. Vologda soon “plunged into the abyss of a communal catastrophe” of typhoid epidemics. [7, 68, 69]

Once in Archangel, Kedrov imposed martial law. To take the enormous cache of ammunition and coal, he “mobilized the entire population” (forced them) to load it onto trains and boats. He also met the murderous Rebekka Maisel Platinina, who joined in his work, then married him.

In 1921, in the midst of national famine, Kedrov went to Azerbaijan and Georgia to reinforce Soviet rule and to requisition (seize) food. There he crossed paths with a young Lavrenty Beria, future chief of state security. Kedrov’s attempt to undermine Beria’s local authority would spell his demise two decades later. Arrested in 1939, Kedrov was put on trial and, in a rare turn of events, seems to have been acquitted. Beria ignored the court, kept Kedrov in prison, and eventually had him shot. [12, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74]

Kedrov’s arrest and execution were part of a criminal case against Beria in 1953, and Khrushchev’s famous 1956 “Secret Speech” used a prison letter from Kedrov to denounce Stalin. The Great Soviet Encyclopedia praises Kedrov but omits Archangel and the facts of his death. [16, 75, 76]

Viktor Semenovich Abakumov (1908 - 1954)

Viktor Abakumov claimed he was born to poor parents and had little school. A 1952 investigation did not support this story—he may have been higher born and better educated than he admitted.

He joined state security in the early 1930s. Coercing sex from prisoners' wives earned him demotion to the Gulag camp division, but soon he moved up to the Secret department, where he built a reputation for rape, torture, and executions. After helping with the Great Purge, he helped eliminate many of the Red Army's senior officers, then built SMERSH for political control of the armed forces as WWII unfolded. At war's end he sent hundreds of thousands of soldiers and former POWs to the Gulag. In 1946 he became Minister of State Security and in his most artful post-war act helped fabricate the "Leningrad Affair", in which more than 2000 residents, who had survived nearly nine hundred days of siege and starvation, were sent off to camps or shot.

He fell from grace during the "Doctors' Plot", a fumbling project to arrest Jews, doctors, and others. Intelligence agencies had unmasked enemies for two decades, and the idea of plots was worn out. Abakumov was tough, though—arrested in 1951, after three years of abuse he still would not confess. He was shot in 1954, several days after his wife and nearly-four-year-old son were released from prison. She lost the Moscow mansion and treasure plundered from Germany, but son Igor built a scientific career doing, of all things, mind-control experiments. Perhaps it worked—in the 1990s, he managed to have his truly terrible father rehabilitated. Twice.

To see Abakumov's memory polished beyond recognition, one can observe the shiny family memorial in Moscow's Rakitki cemetery, installed in 2013 with the support of Vladimir Putin. [88]

Grigory Mikhailovich Kravtsov (1922 - 1945)

Grigory Kravtsov's stamp is a fabrication. He died not as a pilot but in a punishment unit, one of thousands of such units in the most dangerous battlefield positions. He was born in Kazakhstan to a Ukrainian mother who seems to have been part of a mass deportation during the great post-war famine. Starvation would stalk Kazakhstan, too, when crops were seized in the 1920s and in the great Kazakh famine of 1930-1933, which killed one-fourth (a million-plus people) of the republic. By age 11, Kravtsov was already being put to work on a collective farm.

Officially, he entered the war as a (scarce and expensively trained) pilot but was permitted to volunteered as a SMERSH officer in a front-line punishment unit, a job with a life expectancy of several months at best. We don't know if aviation was ever any part of his real story. Aviation fables were a regular part of Soviet propaganda, and the source of his stamp, a Hero of the Soviet Union poster, was itself a fake, with a pilot's cap and goggles melded with a drawing of his face.

We can believe part of his story: he died a terrible winter death in Poland. Records indicate that temperatures at the time approached nearly forty degrees below zero. Penal units like his were expendable and thus had poor equipment, and less of it (clothing, food, weapons) and often were the first units to advance under fire into dangerous territory. Soon after the onset of the Red Army's massive Vistula-Oder offensive, Kravtsov's unit proceeded toward the far side of the frozen Vistula River. A report claims the explosion which blew him to pieces was from a German artillery shell. But, since the Germans along the entire front had limited ammunition and a combined total of several thousand tanks, artillery, and mortars, while the Soviets launched a seemingly endless bombardment of millions of shells from tens of thousands of large-caliber pieces and rocket launchers, it seems possible (even very likely) that young Kravtsov was killed by his own army. He was one of more than fifty thousand Soviet soldiers who died during the offensive.

Soon after what would have been his twenty-third birthday, his mother learned she would never see her son again. A few days later she was made to sit for a newspaper with her other children and her daughter-in-law. No one smiled. [77, 78, 79, 80, 81]

Peter Anfimovich Zhidkov (1904-1943)

Peter Zhidkov was a tank unit counterintelligence officer in his late thirties. From a poor family in Ivanovo, an industrial city northeast of Moscow, at age 15 during the Civil War he found jobs to help feed his seven siblings (their fate is unknown). He had various jobs over the next few years—shoemaker, railway, textile mill. In 1936 he landed a job in the propaganda newspaper office of the large Zhideleva textile mill in his home city. Drafted in 1941, he was sent to Ukraine in 1942 as a counterintelligence officer in engineering and tank units. He died before dawn in Khotov, a village near Kyiv, Ukraine, during the brutal battle of November 1943. His award file for Hero of the Soviet Union was written in the field by hand.

His hometown of Ivanovo has numerous memorials for the many residents who were killed in the war, and Zhidkov has long been a local hero. His name is on almost half a dozen monuments and plaques. The fate of his wife and any children is not clear. *[82, 83, 84]*

Vasily Mikhailovich Chebotarev (1918 -1944)

Vasily Chebotarev was born during the Soviet invasion of Kazakhstan. As a teenager, he worked on a collective farm then in a mine. At twenty, he entered the army, apparently became a very talented and successful sniper, and spent more than a year near Leningrad (including two horrific winters). In an unclear turn, he was re-purposed as a counterintelligence officer in Belarus.

He was a strong young man, and we can believe that he was a brave soldier. At the Bobr River, his unit was ordered to advance into heavily armed German positions. There were tanks, but Chebotarev was part of an infantry group moving on foot toward German guns. This tale is not quite right—as a supposed top sniper, exposing him like this makes little sense.

His official end is equally confusing—he inspired his tank unit, he held a hilltop for a day, he killed many Germans, he captured the turncoat SS Lieutenant Ryaglikov, he tried to save 18-year-old field nurse Maria Inkina. Maybe he did all these things. The official story is that the retreating Nazis paused to defile his corpse with numerous stab wounds and a Soviet star cut into his chest (just like stamp man Krygin, whom we will meet below).

Chebotarev died 2500 kilometers away from home and was buried on a roadside in Belarus. A local museum in Belarus apparently has an extensive exhibit of personal correspondence and other related items, which might shed light on his tale and the fate of his wife and daughter.

The Germans killed more than a million civilians in Belarus. However, before the Germans arrived—and after they retreated—the Soviets destroyed or deported hundreds of thousands more. *[85, 86, 87]*

Mikhail Petrovich Krygin (1918 - 1945)

Krygin was another SMERSH Hero of the Soviet Union from the heartland with a missing father and overlooked family.

Krygin was born into a large and poor peasant family in the midst of the Russian civil war. War was followed by famines, and the Krygins either joined or were forced onto a new collective farm. His father died around 1935. The son attended school, learned to read, and escaped fieldwork for a typesetter's job in local news-sheets. Drafted in 1939, he was sent almost four thousand miles east to Vladivostok, where he began service in an anti-aircraft battery. By 1943, he had entered a 3-month basic training course for SMERSH counterintelligence operatives.

His time in Vladivostok is not documented but he would have seen of the many American Lend-Lease supply ships and the Soviet Gulag fleet which took prisoners to Kolyma camps and brought back the products of their labor.

In August 1945, two days before the war ended, the Soviets declared war on lost-cause Japan and seized the Japanese-occupied Korean port city of Chongjin (Seisin, in Russian). The attack began not with a giant naval ship as suggested by his stamp, but with a reconnaissance group in torpedo boats. Krygin's boat was dashed against a rocky shore. Whether by combat or accident, his detachment was wiped out. The main Soviet force arrived three days later. It seems his unit was sent so the Soviets could claim fighting was underway and thus invade the city after war's end.

His hometown provides a museum display, a recent outdoor monument which replaced an older one, and a school and street in his name, Vladivostok has a memorial plaque and a street in his name, and Russia has given him two stamps. All derive from a dubious story and a doctored photograph from the 1940s. What was once a minor artistic falsehood has become historical "truth". Krygin lived a hard and short life, died three and a half thousand miles from home, and was dumped by his own military in a communal hole in a street. Perhaps he deserves more than glorification with false images. [89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94]

2022: 100 YEARS OF COUNTERINTELLIGENCE

In May 2022, the Russian post issued a third commemorative stamp sheet with new notables—five men who at different times held the job of chief of counterintelligence. They include the KGB boss of Donald Trump’s business partner, an accomplice to mass murder, a cynical orphan, a man involved with bugging the American embassy, and a watchful bureaucrat.

Evgeny Petrovich Pitovranov – counterintelligence chief 1946-1950

Some of Donald Trump’s construction projects (including New York’s Trump Soho condominium hotel and others) received tens if not hundreds of millions of Russian investment dollars from a fund run by Tefvik Arif, the former deputy director of the hotel management department of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, a ministry which was headed for many years by the KGB’s commercial espionage chief, Evgeny Pitovranov (1915-1999).

Pitovranov joined the NKVD in 1938 and at the end of World War II became minister of state security in Uzbekistan, a job which required a particularly ruthless individual—Uzbekistan now housed a good part of relocated Soviet industry, along with labor camps and settlements filled with tens of thousands of unhappy survivors of mass deportations (mostly Crimean Tatars and Chechens). Much of the native population resented war conscription and decades of repression.

Pitovranov soon became head of Soviet counterintelligence. Ethnically Jewish, when arrested in 1951 as part of the “Zionist Plot in the MGB” he appealed for his life to Stalin, whose warped sense of humor liked Pitovranov’s proposal to create a network of fake Zionist organizations which could be used as bait to unmask any real Jewish nationalists.

In the mid-1960s, Pitovranov took charge of the Soviet chamber of commerce and industry, where he created a new intelligence entity “*Firma*” to use foreigners as sources of commercial and political espionage. Methods included building relationships with foreign businessmen, providing them opportunities to make money, and finding ways to blackmail them (e.g., sex or bribes).

As noted above, his subordinate Tefvik Arif later channeled investment money into some of Donald Trump's projects. Pitovranov's son Sergei later obtained a conveniently influential and presumably lucrative job at the World Bank. [95, 96, 97, 98]

Pyotr Vasilievich Fedotov – KGB counterintelligence chief 1954-1956

Future accomplice to mass murder Pyotr Fedotov (1901-1963) was born in St. Petersburg. He left school around age thirteen to fold newspapers at the post office. During the Revolution, and became a “political instructor” in a Red Army disciplinary regiment in the Caucasus—he was an enforcer in a large penal or punishment unit. He supposedly was promoted to censor publications and mail in Chechnya, but in reality he helped destroy thousands of anti-Soviet Chechens.

In and after the 1930s, he focused on NKVD internal security, working in the personnel department and internal investigations. That is, he helped purge his own colleagues in the 1937-1938 Great Terror, going as far as Armenia to get confessions out of arrested NKVD workers.

Fedotov is referenced in the management and cover-up of the NKVD's notorious massacre of more than 20,000 Polish officers in Katyn Forest. Given his earlier work in Chechnya, perhaps we might find evidence in the future of involvement in 1943's Operation Lentil—the population of Chechnya and Ingushetia—over half a million people—was deported in little more than one day.

As head of KGB counterintelligence from 1954 to 1956, Fedotov organized the “false cordon” (fake border) operation which used fake emigres to trick Russians suspected of espionage into talking with fake anti-Soviet agents on the border in China. Torture and deception secured confessions, and the hapless “Japanese spies” were imprisoned or shot.

Fedotov faced no real consequences for his career. In 1959 he was cited for “gross violations of the law during the period of mass repressions” and punished with retirement and a pension. [99]

Oleg Mikhailovich Gribanov – KGB counterintelligence chief 1956-1964

Oleg Gribanov (1915-1992) was one of millions of “*bezprizornye*” (abandoned children)—he left a state orphanage at age ten. After years surviving as a homeless teenage petty criminal, he started working for state security at the beginning of the 1930s before he was seventeen. He was fired and re-hired twice in the first several years—the job offered food, clothing, and housing, important benefits for a street urchin with no discernable skills. In 1938, barely twenty-three, he became a detective/investigator in the Fourth Department (the “Special” or secret department), focused on political intelligence and counterintelligence activities—the NKVD was busy purging the country (and itself) and needed additional hands-on workers to find enemies and extract confessions.

Gribanov navigated the byzantine politics of survival and promotion, and in 1953 found himself on the lucky side when Lavrenty Beria attacked the slow unfolding of several anti-government conspiracies fabricated by state security. Gribanov saved himself by helpfully denouncing his former boss Viktor Abakumov for fabricating a “Zionist plot in the MGB”.

Promoted to head of counterintelligence, Gribanov coordinated Soviet agents during Hungary’s failed rebellion, arranged intensive electronic bugging of foreign embassies in Moscow, and expanded complex counterintelligence games with the Americans. In 1961, he helped with a more domestic task—the execution of an older man and a pair of 22-year-old boys in the “money-changers” case, even though the retroactive verdict was explicitly illegal under Soviet law.

In 1964, an important subordinate defected to the West, and Gribanov was fired from his job for “gross violations of party principles in working with personnel, for serious errors and shortcomings in operational work, [and] a vicious style in leadership”. He spent the next two decades moving through various administrative, jobs which may or may have not maintained his connections with the KGB. He was fired again in 1972 for “gross violation of financial discipline” (this can mean only embezzling money), but the system soon gave him another job. In the 1960s and 1970s, he found time to co-author a number of popular books about spies and detectives under the pseudonym Oleg Shmelyov. He died in 1992, after witnessing the death of the Soviet body which made his childhood so terrible and on which he sustained himself. *[100, 101]*

Grigory Fedorovich Grigorenko – KGB counterintelligence chief 1970-1983

Another future repressor of Hungarian independence, Grigory Fedorovich Grigorenko (1918-2007) was born in Ukraine. A bright young man, he graduated from a teachers' college for physics/mathematics and went to work as a high school teacher before being drafted for World War II, where he worked for the special (NKVD) counterintelligence departments in various military units. He then joined the newly-formed SMERSH, where he worked on radio deceptions to mislead the Germans. Electronic technology and intense surveillance became important tools for much of his career in the following decades as he rooted out spies, double-agents, and leakers of information in the Soviet Union.

In the mid-1950s he was a KGB agent inside Hungary, where his work with future Soviet leader Yuri Andropov helped the USSR to de-stabilize and then invade the independence-minded country. He finished his career as head of counterintelligence for nearly thirteen years.

He was in charge when the Soviets began a massive program to electronically bug the American embassy, and to install hundreds of bugs in the new American embassy under construction.

Ivan Alekseevich Markelov – KGB counterintelligence chief 1983-1989

Ivan Markelov (1917-1990) was from a remote Siberian village. By 1939, he left his mine-worker job to join the NKVD's regional headquarters in Novosibirsk, a fast-growing city with a Gulag-based economy. Barely twenty-two years old, his first tasks related to the theft of state property. We don't know exactly what that was, but the term is often found in the context of people "stealing" (seeking) food, a common event in the famished agricultural region, and in the crowded, underprovisioned city of Novosibirsk. His unspecified job clearly was entry-level—perhaps arrests, interrogations, executions, or guarding prisons or labor convoys.

The NKVD in Novosibirsk had a notorious record during the purges—in 1937, for example, when Moscow demanded that officials find 5,000 people to arrest, the agency arrested 25,000, most of whom were shot. The frenzy of arrests, executions, and camp convoys was followed by an internal blood-letting—it seems Markelov was hired after the internal purges created many job openings.

During World War II, more than half the men drafted from his childhood district of Motyginsky died. Markelov spent the war safely behind the front, then steadily transferred up the ranks of state security. He helped crush Hungary's 1956 rebellion. Later, in the thriving city of Ryazan, he kept a watchful eye on schoolteachers who were considered politically untrustworthy. He also monitored the expulsion of famous dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn from the writers' union.

In the last decade of his life (and the Soviet Union's), he ran a ballooning counterintelligence bureaucracy. Senior intelligence officials had little incentive to limit organizational growth; by 1989, Markelov's counterintelligence division swelled to more than twenty separate departments. *[103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 108]*

CONCLUSION

The postal amnesia of Putin's Boys—the 2002, 2018, and 2022 stamp men—keeps alive the Soviet propensity to euphemize or euthanize history and to minimize or simply erase unhelpful truths, particularly regarding state security organizations, individuals, and events.

Perhaps these stern Chekists are meant to inspire, but their stories betray wishful thinking and ignorance, self-deception and destructive suspicion, and weakness and insecurity. Kedrov and his nephew Artuzov gave birth to the Gulag. Demidenko, Olsky, Puzitsky, and Styne exiled hundreds of thousands of people. Syroezhkin killed people, and Abakumov condemned tens of thousands. Kravtsov, Zhidkov, Chebotarev, and Krygin died in the service of repression, and Pitovranov and the other 2022 counterintelligence chiefs had their own sad secrets.

In 1954-1955, millions of Soviet government files representing three and a half decades of state security activity were destroyed: office files, investigation files, employee files, intelligence files, counterintelligence files, files on citizens, files on foreigners, and on and on. "Cleaning" out the archives became a routine administrative function until the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union. Vladimir Putin himself destroyed KGB files in East Germany.

After the early 1990s when some remaining archives were more accessible, the newly named FSB reasserted dominance over what constitutes truth by restricting archival access, limiting transfers of records to external depositories, and resuming the destruction of evidence. As Petrov (2001)

observed, “concealment of history is the main aspect of national Russian politics...a characteristic feature of a resurgent police state.”

And, now, to continue re-writing and legitimizing the past, Vladimir Putin is destroying one of the remaining mountains of proof of the detailed tragedies of millions of specific prisoners. The archive of the past is not just locked away—it is being obliterated. In 2014 the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs received a classified order to destroy decades of Gulag file cards that documented names, dates, camp transfers, and fates (e.g., death, release, exile). In the city of Magadan, headquarters of the horrific Kolyma camps, the file cards have been destroyed, as they probably have been in many other places by now. *[109, 110, 111]*

A permanent erasure of the past like this is worse than concealment. When scarce information about parents, grandparents, and ancestors is consigned to oblivion, we are left adrift in time, ignorant of our identity, unable to learn why we exist, incapable of comprehending anything about those who came before us, or that they ever walked the earth at all.

An official propensity for lying, for hiding the past, is a disease which damages the very heart of society. Many places—and many people—have hidden pasts. Some pasts are covered with wind-blown sand and the vicissitudes of fading memory and time. Other pasts are concealed by mud and stone, submerged underwater or buried underground, their guideposts corroded, their maps torn and burned. Still, the unseen pasts remain. In time, sands may blow away, waters may recede, and soils may erode to reveal old truths and test our beliefs and courage, but we cannot put our faith in circumstances to uncover the truth—we must make our own efforts, and draw others to the pursuit of truth. This is no idle philosophizing, for if we fail to scrutinize what we are told, fail to share our questions, and fail to denounce what we learn are lies, then we ourselves become complicit in the crimes others have committed.

As Joseph Stalin is said to have remarked, doubtless with utterly self-aware irony: “One must sometimes correct history.”

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