



## KGB

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*Russian in full* **Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti** , *English* **Committee for State Security**

foreign intelligence and domestic security agency of the Soviet Union. During the Soviet era the KGB's responsibilities also included the protection of the country's political leadership, the supervision of border troops, and the general surveillance of the population.

### **Pre-KGB Soviet security services**

Established in 1954, the KGB was the most durable of a series of security agencies starting with the Cheka, which was established in December 1917 in the first days of the Bolshevik government. The Cheka (originally VCHEKA, an acronym derived from the Russian words for All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counterrevolution and Sabotage) was charged with the preliminary investigation of counterrevolution and sabotage, but it quickly assumed responsibility for arresting, imprisoning, and executing "enemies of the state," which included the former nobility, the bourgeoisie, and the clergy. The Cheka played a prominent role in the Russian Civil War (1918-20) and aided in crushing the anti-Soviet Kronshtadt and Antonov rebellions in 1921. When Soviet archives were opened in the 1990s, it was learned that the Cheka, which in 1921 had a staff of more than 250,000, was responsible for the execution of more than 140,000 people. Feliks Dzerzhinsky, the Cheka's chief during the early years of Soviet power, molded the service into an effective, merciless tool of the ruling Communist Party.

In 1922 the Cheka was supplanted by the GPU (State Political Administration) in an effort by the Communist Party to reduce the scale of the Cheka's terror. A year later the GPU was renamed the OGPU (Unified State Political Administration) and given additional duties, including the administration of "corrective" labour camps and the surveillance of the population. As Joseph Stalin consolidated his power and directed the modernization of the Soviet Union, the OGPU implemented the forced collectivization of agriculture and the deportation of the kulaks (wealthy peasants) and staged show trials of "enemies of the people." By the early 1930s the OGPU controlled all Soviet security functions, directing a vast army of informers in factories, government offices, and the Red Army. During this period the OGPU also conducted covert operations on foreign soil to disrupt the activities of the regime's opponents, some of whom it kidnapped and murdered.

In 1934 the OGPU was absorbed into the new NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs), which helped Stalin to consolidate his power by carrying out purges (see purge trials). More than 750,000 people were executed in 1937-38 alone, including tens of thousands of party officials and military and security officers. Among the victims were more than half the members of the ruling Central Committee (the Communist Party's highest organ) as well as the NKVD's first two chiefs, Genrikh Yagoda and Nikolay Yezhov. Yezhov was succeeded as head of the NKVD by Lavrenty

Beria, who served from 1938 to 1953.

In 1941 responsibility for state security was transferred from the NKVD to the NKGB (People's Commissariat for State Security). Both agencies became ministries—the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) and the Ministry of State Security (MGB)—in 1946. Beria, as a member of the ruling Central Committee, continued to supervise the two ministries while serving as head of the MVD. Beria also was responsible for the Soviet Union's nascent nuclear weapons program and oversaw intelligence operations directed at the U.S. and British atomic bomb projects.

The MGB, directed by V.S. Abakumov under Beria's supervision, played a major role in the Soviet Union's war effort in World War II and in the subsequent consolidation of its power in eastern Europe. During the war, the MGB conducted espionage and counterespionage operations, administered prisoner-of-war camps, and ensured the loyalty of the officer corps. It also supervised the deportation to Siberia and Central Asia of groups suspected of disloyalty, including more than one million Volga Germans, Crimean Tatars, Kalmyks, Chechen-Ingush, and other people of the Caucasus.

After the war, the MGB helped to crush all opposition, whether real or suspected, in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union; between 1945 and 1953 more than 750,000 Soviet citizens were arrested and punished for political crimes. Information uncovered in the 1990s indicated that by 1953 some 2,750,00 Soviet citizens were in jail or in forced-labour camps, and approximately the same number were in internal exile.

Soviet foreign intelligence in the last decade of Stalin's life was remarkable in both its scope and success. During World War II the MGB conducted operations in Nazi-occupied Europe. One of its networks, the “Red Orchestra,” comprised several hundred agents and informers, including agents in the German ministries of foreign affairs, labour, propaganda, and economics. Declassified Russian and American documents indicate that the Soviet Union had placed at least five agents in the U.S. nuclear weapons program and possibly as many as 300 agents in the U.S. government by 1945. The British diplomatic and security establishments also had been infiltrated by important agents, including Kim Philby, a senior British intelligence officer. Evidence suggests that Soviet agents in Britain passed 15,000 to 20,000 documents to Moscow between 1941 and 1945. British and American agents of Soviet intelligence were for the most part ideological supporters of the regime, and many were members of communist parties.

Immediately following Stalin's death in March 1953, the MGB was merged back into the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), still under Beria. Before the end of summer, the post-Stalinist leadership under Nikita Khrushchev turned against the power-hungry Beria, and he was deposed and executed. A series of trials and executions continuing into 1956 eliminated a number of his senior associates. In the meantime, millions of political prisoners were released from the MVD's vast system of forced labour camps and from internal exile. The MVD was gradually dismantled and finally abolished in 1960.

### **Creation and role of the KGB**

The KGB was created in 1954 to serve as the “sword and shield of the Communist Party.” The new security service, which played a major role in the purge of Beria's supporters, was designed to be carefully controlled by senior Communist Party officials. It was divided into approximately 20 directorates, the most important of

which were those responsible for foreign intelligence, domestic counterintelligence, technical intelligence, protection of the political leadership, and the security of the country's frontiers. In the late 1960s an additional directorate was created to conduct surveillance on suspected dissidents in the churches and among the intelligentsia. For the next 20 years the KGB became increasingly zealous in its pursuit of enemies, harassing, arresting, and sometimes exiling human rights advocates, Christian and Jewish activists, and intellectuals judged to be disloyal to the regime. Among the most famous of its victims were the Nobel laureates Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Andrey Sakharov.

After World War II the KGB gradually expanded its foreign intelligence operations to become the world's largest foreign intelligence service. As the Cold War with the United States intensified, the KGB came to be viewed as a counterpart of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency; however, unlike the CIA, the KGB conducted most of its activities domestically, on Soviet soil and against Soviet citizens. The KGB's many agents sometimes posed as businessmen and journalists, though many used the more conventional diplomatic cover. Its successes included the infiltration of every major Western intelligence operation and the placement of agents of influence in almost every major capital. The KGB also was able to procure scientific and technical information for the Soviet military, and it repeatedly obtained advanced technology necessary for the development of Soviet submarines, airplanes, and rockets. Along with the GRU (Chief Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff), which was responsible for purely military operations, the KGB enjoyed tremendous access to the secrets of both its adversaries and its allies.

By the end of the 1960s, the KGB had become firmly established as the Communist Party's security watchdog. Its value as an instrument of political control was reflected in the appointment of its head, Yury Andropov, to the Politburo (1973) and his succession to the head of the party and the country in 1982. Under Andropov, the KGB recruited the "best and the brightest" members from the party establishment. Although it was aware of the extent of corruption in the decaying Soviet Union and did investigate and arrest some minor figures, it continued to be a servant of the party and was thus powerless to halt the country's decline.

The KGB did not fare as well under the reformist Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev (1985-91). Although Gorbachev respected the KGB's prowess in foreign intelligence, his reform agenda undercut its authority as well as that of the Communist Party. In the summer of 1991, several senior KGB officers, including KGB chairman Vladimir Kryuchkov, played key roles in an abortive coup designed to return the Soviet system to ideological and bureaucratic purity. Afterward the KGB was systematically stripped of its extensive military units and many of its domestic security functions.



With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the KGB came under the control of Russia. The government of Russian President Boris Yeltsin supervised the division of the KGB into several major services responsible for internal security and foreign intelligence. Ukraine, Belarus, and other former Soviet republics established their own intelligence and security services, which maintained links to those of Russia. Nevertheless, efforts in Russia to reform the intelligence services were at best incomplete. The KGB and its leaders were never held accountable for crimes against the Soviet people.

### Assessment

At its peak the KGB was the largest secret-police and foreign-intelligence organization in the world. Researchers with access to Communist Party archives put the number of KGB personnel at more than 480,000, including 200,000 soldiers in the Border Guards. Estimates of the number of informers in the Soviet Union are incomplete but usually range in the millions. Every Soviet leader depended on the KGB and its predecessors for information, surveillance of key elites, and control of the population. With the Communist Party and the army, the KGB formed the triad of power that ruled the Soviet Union. The KGB played a particularly important role in Soviet foreign policy. Foreign intelligence allowed the Soviet Union to maintain rough parity with the West in nuclear weapons and other weapons systems. Inside the country, however, the role of the KGB was baleful. Scholars disagree about the human cost of the KGB and its predecessors, but many estimate that they were responsible for the deaths of tens of millions of people.

A critical question in evaluating the KGB's foreign and domestic operations is why it failed to prevent the eventual collapse of the Soviet system. There is ample evidence that the KGB suffered from the same problems of bureaucratic inefficiency and corruption that plagued the sclerotic political leadership. In addition, during the last decade of Soviet power, numerous KGB officials defected to the West or agreed to work as agents in place in Moscow. Moreover, some studies suggest that, despite its vaunted reputation for espionage, the KGB lacked the analytical skills necessary to form an accurate picture of the regime's declining international and domestic situation. *See also* Federal Security Service.

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### Additional Reading

An excellent general history of the KGB is Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordiyevsky, *KGB: The Inside Story of Its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev* (1990). Yevgenita Albats, *The State Within a State: The KGB and Its Hold on Russia* (1994), is a history of the KGB by a distinguished Russian journalist who had access to the archives of the Communist Party and the security services.

The human cost of KGB repression has been addressed in Stéphane Courtois, *The Black Book of Communism* (1999); and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 3 vol. (1974, reissued 1991). Good studies of the KGB's foreign intelligence operations are Christopher Andrew and Vassily Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive* (1999); Alexander Feklisov, *The Man Behind the Rosenbergs* (2001); Nigel West and Oleg Tsarev, *The Crown Jewels* (1999); and Oleg Kalugin, *The First Directorate* (1994). KGB activities in the United States is the subject of John Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *VENONA: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* (1999). Pavel Sudoplatov, *Special Tasks*, updated ed. (1995), contains interesting details about life within Stalin's KGB but must be used with caution, because much of it is based on KGB myths and is not supported by Soviet documents declassified since the breakup of the Soviet Union.

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