

# Scooping the Soviet Press

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*Background on a sensitive overt source of information that has been publicly exposed in exploitation.*

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At a midafternoon press conference on August 30, 1961, President Kennedy said that the American representative at the Geneva talks on a nuclear test ban would continue for another week his efforts to make progress with the Soviet delegation. But within minutes after the press conference was over, top U.S. officials were summoned to the White House for urgent consultation. The reason for the hasty meeting was soon revealed to the world through a statement read to assembled reporters: the U.S. Government had intercepted a transmission of the Soviet news agency TASS for the press and radio in Central Asia which indicated that the USSR had decided to resume the testing of nuclear weapons. In an otherwise routine "international review" not to be released by the regional press and radio before 0200 hours the next day Moscow time (7 p.m. of August 30 EDT), the newsmen were told, TASS had included the following observation:

The decision adopted by the Soviet Government on carrying out experimental explosions of nuclear weapons also serves the interests of strengthening the security of our country and other states of the socialist camp. These forced measures taken by the Soviet Government are inspired by a striving to safeguard a lasting peace and create an insuperable barrier to the unleashing of a new war.

This revealing comment, filed by TASS almost five hours before public announcement of the decision in order that the regional media might be prompt in attempting to shape public opinion, was the beginning of the USSR's massive propaganda effort to justify its new testing to its own people and to the world. That U.S. officials could also take advantage of the advance filing to prepare their own stand before Radio Moscow began its worldwide campaign was not accidental, but the result of a regular watch on an internal TASS circuit maintained at Kyrenia, Cyprus, by Foreign Broadcast Information Service monitors. This circuit had provided a good deal of useful information since early 1960, and the gain realized in publicly exposing the operation must be weighed against the hazards therein to the source.

## **Monitoring Procedure**

The circuit in question is a radioteletype transmission in Cyrillic characters, apparently a trunk line, carrying some 30,000 words a day from Moscow to the Soviet hinterland. The vast bulk of the copy is routine material more easily obtainable from TASS's international transmissions and Moscow broadcasts, some 60 percent international "news" reflecting the Soviet view of world events and 40 percent domestic propaganda like production pledges and achievements. There is a small service file providing guidance on how the material is to be handled, where it is to be printed, and so forth. But the special value of the channel lies in its prereleases, speeches, communiques, notes, announcements, and commentaries "embargoed" for publication or broadcast until a stated future time.

The FBIS bureau on Cyprus has been able to monitor about 80 percent of the total file, the figure varying with reception conditions. Its mode of transmission demanded at the beginning the solution of certain technical problems such as the modification of twinplex teletype converters and the construction of teletype "baskets" to reproduce the Cyrillic alphabet. The twinplex circuit—one that carries two transmissions simultaneously—in this case carries the same material on both sides, one

transmission lagging behind the other, as a backstop against garbling by bursts of interference. It has generally been necessary to monitor only one side of the circuit if fading and drift are overcome by careful tuning.

The material received is scanned at frequent intervals by the bureau's Russian linguists and items of significance selected in consultation with editorial supervisors. Of these an accurate English-language version is rapidly produced for transmission to Washington. When there is a development of major interest, Washington is alerted in a brief message transmitted over special radioteletype channels in a matter of seconds. Short informational summaries or excerpts of critical passages are sent first, followed by a complete textual translation when required.

Occasionally the entire Russian language staff must be mobilized to get an item processed quickly, and frequently the initial portions of a lengthy note or speech are in the hands of the interested officers in Washington before TASS has reached the end. The selection for processing is coordinated rapidly with the FBIS bureau in London, which receives material from BBC's monitoring of Moscow broadcasts and TASS international beams, in order to avoid duplication.

## **Value of the Take**

On numerous occasions speeches written for subsequent delivery by Soviet leaders have been carried in advance over the TASS Cyrillic circuit. Khrushchev's speeches, for example, have sometimes been filed as much as 30 hours before actual delivery and thus made available to the intelligence community and policy offices at a substantial time advantage. A problem in utilizing the prerelease and a matter of interest to the propaganda analyst lies in the fact that TASS frequently transmits an extensive series of corrections to bring the advance text into line with the speech as delivered or sometimes to eliminate passages that may be sensitive.

An unusual departure from prereleased material occurred during Khrushchev's visit to France in March 1960. The circuit carried three speeches to be delivered by the Soviet premier, all embargoed "until

further notice." As it turned out, one speech was delivered by Gromyko, and another was apparently discarded by Khrushchev out of displeasure with ungratifying aspects of his reception. Such cancellations could give us evidence of contemplated Soviet gambits that never materialize, and knowledge of unsurfaced instances of accommodation or stiffening in Soviet positions could be of considerable value to the analyst probing areas of Soviet flexibility or intransigence.

A frequent advantage of the monitoring of this internal press transmission is advance receipt of such materials as major diplomatic notes, which may be disseminated by TASS in clear text for release at a later date. During the Cuban affair of last April, a letter from Khrushchev warning President Kennedy against taking a "highly dangerous road" was intercepted and delivered to the White House before it reached the President through normal channels.

The TASS service file, although constituting only a small segment of the circuit's traffic, is often revealing as to Soviet methods of manufacturing "public opinion." Domestic bureaus and republican press agencies are frequently told what is desired in the way of "reaction reports," as well as types of material "not desired." In May 1960, TASS asked for reaction reports on public meetings denouncing the U-2 flights. Just before Premier Khrushchev torpedoed the summit conference in Paris the same month, TASS carried numerous commentaries for use by the regional radio and press, but then suddenly advised recipients that "where possible, the various commentaries transmitted in connection with the summit conference are not recommended for publication." A major Soviet internal development was foreshadowed by a message that the celebration of the 40th anniversary of Soviet Armenia had been postponed, a fact not formally announced by Moscow for a number of days. Later a broad shakeup in the Armenian party organization occurred.

TASS instructions accompanying items serve to control the content of regional publications and broadcasts. Copy is generally preceded by a "flag" indicating what papers should use the material. The wordage is tailored to the level of the publication: republican papers, for example, received 325 words on a Khrushchev return to Moscow, territorial and regional (oblast) papers 245, and district, town, and komsomol papers 115. Some items are accompanied by instruction on what headline to use, for example "Interference of the United States in the Affairs of the Dominican Republic." An interesting sidelight is that when Khrushchev is

scheduled to make a nationwide talk, the papers are told that the announcement is "not to be published on the front page or in a prominent place," apparently a reflection of efforts to hold down the "cult of personality."

## **Hazards to the Source**

The monitoring operation, like all others in FBIS, is done overtly. Intercepts from Soviet internal circuits are distributed with the designation "Official Use Only" and not given to the press as much of the FBIS product is; but foreign nationals are used in processing them, and they are radioed in clear text to Washington. It is to be assumed that Soviet intelligence has long been aware, through monitoring if in no other way, that FBIS systematically intercepts and exploits this TASS circuit. Presumably the need for rapid, inexpensive dissemination of news and guidance to the regional press and radio has overshadowed any apprehension about its being tapped.

The U.S. scoop in being able to express dismay over the Soviet resumption of testing before Moscow could begin its own worldwide propaganda justification may, however, have brought the vulnerability of materials carried on the circuit dramatically to the attention of the top Soviet leaders and so occasioned a reexamination of press copy dissemination procedures. There are already tentative and inconclusive indications that practices have been modified: no important embargoed items have been intercepted since the White House announcement, and in one case only alternate takes of a story were carried on the circuit monitored. These anomalies may have occurred by chance, but additional equipment is being shipped to Kyrenia to check out the other half of the twinplex circuit and branch circuits that hitherto carried only duplicate material. If the Russians were sufficiently determined to avoid interception they could switch sensitive materials to landlines, VHF circuits, or more complex modes of radioteletype transmission that would make monitoring at least more difficult.

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