

Lubyanka in the Days of the Battle for Moscow: Materials from the Organs of State Security SSSR from the Central Archive FSB Russia

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

By V. S. Khristoforov, et al. Moscow: Izdatel'skii dom "Zvonnitsa-MG," 2002.
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Reviewed by Benjamin B. Fischer

This is the third in a series of historical monographs based on declassified documents from the Central Archive of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), successor to the KGB. The other two books, *Stalingrad Epoch* and *The Agony and Death of Adolf Hitler*, were published in 2000, although neither has yet appeared in English.¹ Vasilii Khristoforov, chief editor and coauthor of the introductory essay, is chief of the FSB's archival services.²

All three books address the history of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs during World War II and cast the infamous NKVD in a patriotic and heroic light—no mean task, since it was the most murderous

secret-police apparatus in modern history. The NKVD was Stalin's main instrument of terror and death, and its victims number in the millions. By trumpeting the NKVD's role in the most important Soviet battle of the war, when the nation's fate hung by a tattered thread, the book comes close to achieving its desired effect. But Soviet history is nothing if not ironic, and one must maintain balance and perspective. In the movie *K19: The Widow Maker*, Soviet submarine captain Mikhail Polenin (Liam Neeson) says to Capt. Alexei Vostrikov (Harrison Ford): "There are two stories about your father. One is that he was a hero of the civil war. The other is that he died a traitor in the Gulag. Which is true?" "Both," Vostrikov replies. So it was with the NKVD. Heroism and horror coexist, however uneasily, in its history.

Lubyanka in the Days of the Battle for Moscow documents the NKVD's part in staving off Hitler's attempt to capture Moscow during October–November 1941 and subjugate the Soviet Union. The story has been told only once in English—in 1994, in Pavel Sudoplatov's controversial *Special Tasks*³—and is not well known even in Russia. The Khristoforov collection substantiates and expands on Sudoplatov's admittedly biased account.⁴ NKVD paramilitary detachments played a vital, perhaps critical, role in the defense of Moscow by slowing down the Nazi war machine, which had been steamrolling across European Russia since 22 June 1941, and giving Stalin's military genius, Gen. Georgy Zhukov, time to prepare a defense of the Soviet capital while reinforcements arrived from Siberia.

The Soviet-German struggle in, around, and for Moscow was decisive for the USSR, and perhaps for the West as well. Had Moscow fallen, the Red Army might have disintegrated and the Soviet people might not have rallied to the side of a regime they otherwise had reason to fear and hate. If the Allies' Eastern Front, where the largest, longest, and deadliest land battles were fought, had collapsed, the West might well have reached an accommodation with Hitler.⁵

At Moscow, Stalin and the Red Army stood like Horatio at the bridge, declaring that they would fight to the death rather than retreat or surrender. Their halting of the *Wehrmacht* had an important psychological effect. It marked the first Nazi defeat following an unbroken string of *blitzkrieg* victories that began with the invasion of Poland in September 1939. The battle's scope and scale were a microcosm of the entire war and foreshadowed its outcome. The Germans arrived with 60 divisions, and the Soviets committed 100. By mid-December 1941, the German side had suffered more than 775,000 casualties.⁶ In the first few weeks of the Nazi-Soviet war, Hitler's forces took 3 million prisoners and destroyed 20,000

tanks and 18,000 artillery pieces.

A Major Declassification Effort

Khristoforov and his team promise a lot, and by-and-large they deliver. The book contains more than 100 documents, many of which were classified Top Secret. The title page teaser is enough to summarize the contents and whet the historian's appetite. It reads:

From declassified documents of the FBS RF:7
Camouflaging the Kremlin
Evacuation of Lenin's Corpse
Mining of Key Sites and Organization of the Underground
Creation of Military Counterintelligence and Behind-the-Lines Groups
Letters from Soldiers of the RKKAA and the Wehrmacht

The documents are divided into four, chronologically arranged, thematic sections, which cover the evolution of NKVD special operations from the hastily improvised defense of Moscow to the organization of partisan and intelligence operations behind German lines in occupied Russia. Part I ("Under Conditions of the Special Regime . . .") deals with the period from the beginning of the German invasion (Operation Barbarossa) through what the Russians call the "great panic" of October 1941, when the Soviet government declared a state of siege as the *Wehrmacht* lodged itself in the suburbs of Moscow in preparation for a final assault. The NKVD worked furiously to plan the defense of the city while preparing to destroy its infrastructure and continue fighting an urban guerrilla campaign if the Germans proved victorious. Its priority assignment was to protect the Kremlin and the top leadership, especially Stalin, and prepare evacuation plans. On the night of 15-16 October, the government evacuated to Kuibyshev (Samara) east of the Urals, which became the temporary Soviet capital. Stalin deliberated for 24 hours and then decided to remain in Moscow.

Dead Man Traveling

The most important evacuee was already dead. On 26 June, the Politburo decided to remove Lenin's corpse, which had been on public display for 17 years in a mammoth red granite mausoleum in Red Square, and ship it in a special paraffin-sealed coffin on board an NKVD-guarded "fast" train to Tyumen, a west Siberia town small enough and distant enough to keep Vladimir Ilich (or what was left of him) safe from *Luftwaffe* bombers.

Lenin did not make the trip alone. The NKVD moved an entire laboratory and a group of scientists headed by a father-and-son team of embalming specialists to Tyumen.⁹ The scientists spent the rest of the war surrounded with chemicals and refrigeration equipment and worked on "re-embalming" the corpse, which had fallen into disrepair. Several documents deal with this bizarre episode.

Stalin's Potemkin Village

Deception (*maskirovka*) is a Russian specialty that dates at least to the time of Count Potemkin and his eponymous village. Because of certain natural and man-made landmarks in the Moscow area, the Soviets decided that *Luftwaffe* pilots would not have much trouble finding key targets. The NKVD appointed two special commissions to determine ways to camouflage the Kremlin and the Lenin Mausoleum, among other sites. The Kremlin's walls were repainted to look like house fronts, and major roads were made to look like rooftops. The Soviets disguised key factories and built phony ones out of wood and cardboard. The Lenin mausoleum was sandbagged and covered with netting.

On 3 July, almost two weeks after the German invasion, Stalin addressed the Soviet people for the first time in his famous "scorched earth" speech. "Leave nothing to the enemy," he demanded. The newly released documents reveal that the NKVD was assigned to defend downtown Moscow and the Kremlin, where a last stand would be made against the Nazi marauders if the Red Army were defeated. NKVD units worked with the commandant of the Kremlin garrison to stockpile weapons and ammunition and positioned themselves in the Hall of Columns adjacent to the city's most famous landmark.¹⁰

The documents reveal that Stalin was prepared to destroy Moscow to deny

it to Hitler, just as Alexander I had denied the city to Napoleon by ordering its destruction in 1812. The French emperor had hoped to replenish his army with grain, gunpowder, and ammunition. Instead, he found a smoldering ruin, a ghost town that had been burned to the ground. Still, Napoleon lingered for a month, expecting the Russian emperor to sue for peace. He was disappointed. Hitler evidently learned nothing from Bonaparte's experience and might have repeated the same scenario if his forces had taken Moscow.

In 1812, Moscow was a city of wood, and Muscovites were able to destroy it by setting fires. In 1941, the situation was more complicated. A new NKVD special operations force called OMSBON (Independent Motorized Brigade for Special Operations) was formed in October 1941. It was the only unit with the technicians and explosives needed to mine the city's most famous sites, including the Kremlin, the orchestra pit of the Bolshoi Theater, the Metropole and National hotels, the Cathedral of the Epiphany, the residence of the Soviet foreign minister, the Foreign Ministry building, and the *dachas* (country houses) of all Soviet leaders except Stalin, who was afraid that the explosives might be used against him.¹¹ Plans were made to destroy Moscow's telephone system, its water supply, and its power stations, as well as other parts of the urban infrastructure, which would have made the city all but uninhabitable.

Behind Enemy Lines

Part II ("Destroyed by Intelligence-Diversion Group . . .") documents the NKVD's role in organizing the defense of Moscow in cooperation with Zhukov, the commander Stalin appointed to defend the Soviet capital. In addition to OMSBON, the NKVD created special intelligence-diversion groups, which conducted partisan warfare and organized intelligence, counterintelligence, and diversionary operations behind German lines in occupied Russia. In October, the Soviet government declared a state of siege, and the Military Council of the Moscow Defense Zone—three combat sectors in front of the city and two lines running to the rear—ordered the construction of a continuous anti-tank and defensive barrier in the outlying areas. OMSBON was charged with laying mine fields in the zone and later guided Soviet forces back through the mined areas as they pursued the Germans. During the major battle of October–November 1941,

NKVD special forces mined 70 kilometers of highways and 19 bridges, planted 12,000 anti-tank and 8,000 anti-personnel mines, and set 160 large explosive charges in strategic positions. They also blew up sections of the Leningrad highway and a major bridge across the Moscow River to slow the German advance.

While preparing to defend the city sector-by-sector with elaborate combat plans, NKVD forces also geared up for the worst. They organized two autonomous underground networks to wage urban guerrilla warfare, terrorist attacks, and assassinations in the event the Germans captured and occupied Moscow. The combatants (called *podpol'shchiki*, literally "undergrounders") were recruited from the ranks of loyal communists with experience in special operations during the Russian and Spanish civil wars.¹² The NKVD established fixed and mobile radio stations, both to communicate with the guerrillas and to broadcast anti-Nazi propaganda. Members of the "illegal" *rezidenturas* (intelligence stations) were given operational legends and false documents and were assigned to jobs from which they could conduct sabotage and assassinations. For example, an NKVD officer received false documents and was assigned as chief of water and sewage systems in the Moscow suburb where Stalin's *dacha* was located. Had the Germans occupied the city, he would have run sabotage operations, using agents hidden in water and sewage tunnels.

The NKVD recruited many artists and performers, including ballet dancers and even circus jugglers and acrobats, and armed them with weapons and grenades on the assumption that they could get close enough to German officers and soldiers to kill them. A special case was that of composer Lev Knipper and his wife, Margareta. Knipper was related to a well-known Russian actress living in Berlin, who was a favorite of Nazi bigwigs, including Hitler's air minister, Hermann Göring. If the Nazis won, and Hitler decided to come to Moscow on a victory tour like the one he made to Paris after conquering France, the NKVD reckoned that he might pay the Knippers a (fatal) visit. The Knippers kept grenades close at hand for an opportunity that never presented itself.

Their Finest Hour

The Battle of Moscow was the NKVD's finest hour—no doubt about it.

Twenty-four *omsbonovtsevi*, as the detachments' members were called, received Hero of the Soviet Union medals, the USSR's highest military award for bravery, equivalent to the Congressional Medal of Honor. Stalin and Zhukov both acknowledged their role in saving the city. Thereafter, however, the NKVD and its OMSBON detachments would play second fiddle to the Red Army. From January 1942 on, the main emphasis was on forming special operations units and inserting them in the enemy's rear, where they carried out their own attacks or acted in conjunction with local partisan forces (Part III "The Special Department Reports . . ."). The NKVD conducted a wide range of intelligence and counterintelligence operations behind enemy lines, gathering order-of-battle data on German forces and trying to discern their locations, intentions, combat strengths, and morale. It also carried out assassinations of key Nazi officials, police officers, and Soviet collaborators and traitors in the occupied areas. Occasionally, OMSBON assisted the regular forces, even paving the way for some of the major Soviet counteroffensives of 1943-44, but its role was subordinate rather than independent of the military command.

As the Red Army pushed the Germans back from Moscow, the NKVD began laying the groundwork for intelligence operations and partisan warfare in the areas overrun by the Germans in the first months of the war (Part IV "Fare Thee Well Moscow . . ."). The Moscow Center organized *rezidenturas* in the occupied areas to spy on the Germans, as well as on the Soviet people living there. NKVD operatives gathered information on the mood and morale of the people, which in the early stages of the war was important for gauging whether the ethnically diverse population, which had suffered greatly under Stalin's bloody dictatorship, would remain loyal to Moscow or go over to the other side. While many did welcome the Germans and then collaborated, most did not. Early NKVD reports indicating that the people considered the conflict to be a holy war to the death convinced Stalin and his entourage that sooner or later the Soviet Union would prevail. The NKVD also monitored the mood and morale of Soviet forces, again looking for indications of discontent and dissatisfaction that might undermine the war effort. They also developed ways of gathering information on the state of mind of Soviet prisoners-of-war—they interrogated German POWs and studied letters intercepted from the Germans.

In their introduction, the compilers note that the NKVD placed a great deal of emphasis on the "human factor" during the war. This undoubtedly reflected Stalin's egocentric concern with his personal security and the security of his regime. Since the 1930s, he had been waging what

amounted to war on his own people. He had reason to fear widespread collaboration with the Germans, a popular uprising, a military coup, or some combination of the three. He panicked in June when the Germans invaded, and again in October as they approached Moscow—he even sent peace feelers to Hitler. Yet, remarkably, the center held, and Russia did not produce a large fifth column or a major quisling. By November, he felt confident enough to declare that "If the Germans want a war of extermination, they shall have it," knowing that the Soviet people would remain loyal.

Other Duties

The NKVD performed other assignments during those hectic days. One was VIP security and counterintelligence during the Moscow Supply Conference of September 1941, where British and American representatives discussed plans for sending food, arms, and materiel to the USSR. The NKVD was tasked with protecting Lord Beaverbrook, Churchill's aviation czar and head of the UK delegation, and Averill Harriman, who later became the US ambassador to the Soviet Union. Stalin needed to guard them at all costs from the surrounding danger in order to convince still skeptical Western leaders that he could hold on and eventually prevail.

One of the most dramatic events in Soviet history was the 7 November 1941 military parade in Red Square on the USSR's national holiday. Stalin was determined to hold the event, even though some German forces were so close that they could see the spires of the Kremlin. It was a bold act of national defiance.¹³ The NKVD provided security for the extraordinary celebration, and OMSBON detachments marched along with regular army officers and soldiers—an indication of their high standing at the time. The assembled troops passed by the Lenin Mausoleum, which had been decamouflaged for the day. Stalin, the Politburo, and the high command saluted the passing troops from the reviewing stand as they proceeded directly to the nearby front.

An Ambiguous Legacy

Between 1945 and 1995, more than 5,000 books on World War II were published in the Soviet Union. Only a handful make reference to the NKVD or its spin-off wartime special military counterintelligence unit, SMERSH ("death to spies"). The NKVD, to be sure, had a good war. Members of the Fourth Department (special operations) and OMSBON were the most highly decorated units of the Battle of Moscow. They killed 137,000 German officers and soldiers, assassinated 87 high-ranking officials through terrorist acts, and liquidated more than 2,000 Nazi agents and collaborators. They claimed destruction of 30 enemy tanks, 20 armored vehicles, 68 troop carriers, 19 light vehicles with officers, and 53 motorcyclists. And they dispatched 212 guerilla units behind enemy lines; sent 7,316 of their own officers, trained technicians, and saboteurs to the Red Army; and parachuted 3,000 guerillas behind enemy lines.

So why have Soviet historians ignored the NKVD? The main reason is its association with Stalin's massive crimes. During the Soviet period, Kremlin leaders did not encourage glorification of the secret police but moved to suppress criticism. Even with *glasnost*—and the advent of a social movement known as "Memorial," dedicated to exposing NKVD crimes and locating Stalin's killing fields—Mikhail Gorbachev made efforts to suppress rather than reveal the truth.

The Soviet military establishment, which dominated the writing of World War II history, had a special animus toward the NKVD. Stalin encouraged rivalry between the two institutions as a way of keeping potential opposition forces weak and divided. Rivalry turned into a blood feud during the Great Terror of 1936-37. The NKVD arrested and tortured 45,000 Red Army officers and soldiers, wiping out the high command and much of the senior officer corps—15,000 were executed. Even when the enemy was at the gates of Moscow, the NKVD kept on torturing and killing members of the armed forces. The most senior officers were transported from Lubyanka by trains heading east in mid-October. The others, at least 300, were shot because there was no space for them on the trains.

Popular resentment over the NKVD's relatively privileged position was still another reason for ignoring its wartime role. Stalin mobilized the secret police in place, which meant that they did not have to fight at the front. He needed his praetorian guard and wanted to keep it loyal, satisfied, and close by. Thus, some 2 million men and women were exempt from combat

and spent the war years in relative safety. They also had access to special food stocks at a time when many Soviets were starving and even resorting to cannibalism.

OMSBON

The mere existence of the wartime NKVD special operations detachments remained classified during the Cold War. All omsbonovtsevi took a secrecy oath. The first veterans to acknowledge their wartime activities did not do so until 1994, and then only in the Western press. Since then more information, most of it on the Internet, has trickled out.

There are no museums or monuments commemorating OMSBON. There is a small plaque, known only to a few insiders, on the north wall of Dynamo soccer stadium in central Moscow that marks the place where the first recruits, many of them athletes, assembled. An inscription reads:

Here, at the "Dynamo" Stadium, during the first days of the Great Patriotic War, volunteers formed the Independent Motorized Brigade for Special Operations. Along with Chekisti and Border Guards the Brigade comprised many outstanding athletes, as well as Spaniards, Bulgarians, Slovaks, and anti-fascists from other countries.¹

The Brigade achieved glory in the Battle of Moscow and in military operations in the enemy's rear. Glory to the heroes, defenders of the Fatherland!

In May 1999, Russian Foreign Minister Igor S. Ivanov presided over a small gathering of the few OMSBON veterans who were still alive.² Ivanov's father had commanded an OMSBON regiment that marched through Red Square on 7 November 1941.

¹ Chekisti (cheka men) refers to the NKVD and is derived from the name of the original Soviet secret police, the Cheka. Many foreign communists, including Spaniards who fled to the USSR after Franco's victory, joined OMSBON and fought as Soviet partisans.

² Pictures of the plaque and the veterans' ceremony can be seen at: <http://www.soldat.narod.ru/omsbon/omsbon.htm>