

# Russia's Secret Services

*Valuable insights into the newly available Russian sources on the Russian and Soviet Secret Services*

Erik Kulavig: *KGB: De russiske sikkerhedstjenester fra Ivan den Grusomme til Vladimir Putin. Aschehoug, 2007. 287 s. ill., 299kr.*

By Rósa Magnúsdóttir

Russia's Secret Service is an organization that in everyday narratives immediately brings up images from popular culture, anything from Sergei Eisenstein's depiction of Ivan the Terrible and his Secret Service (the oprichnina) to KGB agents on the defensive from Cold War heroes such as Her Majesty's James Bond. Thus, the popular narrative most commonly refers to Cold War spies and medieval monsters. Those a bit more familiar with Russia's history, however, will be able to recount the violence of the rule of Ivan the Terrible and the Great Purges under Stalin, and to some the mere mention of the prison Lubianka or Felix Dzherzhinsky, the first head of the Soviet Secret Service, will bring out shudders of fear, disgust, and memories of an all too recent and difficult past. Even in today's Russia, the Secret Service has not succeeded in becoming a trusted institution, it is by many seen as a state within the state and has a reputation for being corrupt and too involved in the everyday life of the Russian people.

Erik Kulavig's new book, *KGB: De russiske sikkerhedstjenester fra Ivan den Grusomme til Vladimir Putin*, seeks to put the history of the Russian Secret Services into historical context, explain their origins and developments with the main focus on Stalin's Soviet Union. The book is not based on original research, rather, the goal is to present and summarize newly available archival findings about the nature of the Russian (especially Soviet) Secret Services. Most of this material is not available in translation, and the book must therefore be viewed as a valuable introduction on the topic to a broad Danish readership. Kulavig—or perhaps his publisher—capitalizes on the popular memory by choosing KGB as the title of the book but while captivating, it inaccurately describes the content of the book. More correctly, the subtitle refers to Russia's Secret Services in plural, as their structure and organization has changed much over time, and what is commonly referred to as the KGB is the Russian abbreviation for the *Committee on State Security* (Komitet gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti), as the Secret Service was called from 1954 to 1991.

In a short first chapter, Kulavig discusses the development and the varying roles of the Russian Secret Services in the pre-Revolutionary period. He correctly points out, that during pre-Revolutionary times the main role of the Secret Services was to protect the tsar and the ruling elite from competing elites and popular dissent (15). Even with the somewhat changed focus of

the Secret Service during Soviet times, and especially under Stalin, some elements are already recognizable in the earlier periods, such as Ivan the Terrible's suspicion of his closest associates and executions of perceived enemies. Also, the gathering of informational reports on the popular mood, which produced a useful yet highly contested source category we also know from Soviet times, originated during Catherine the Great's restructuring of surveillance in Russia as did the censorship of private correspondence. Both practices continued throughout Soviet times where these instruments of social control were mastered and shaped the everyday life of Soviet citizens who could expect to be informed on by their friends and neighbours or had to be careful in their utterances on the streets or on public transportation lest someone related to the Secret Service overheard and reported on their comments.

Upon gaining power, the Bolsheviks continued some of the practices from the tsarist empire but also introduced many new ones in their organization of the Secret Service. The All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Fighting Counter-Revolution and Sabotage, or the Cheka, was established in 1917 under the direction of Felix Dzherzhinsky. During Soviet times, the Secret Service then frequently underwent both structural and organizational changes, including name changes, which Kulavig accounts for in an accessible index on pp. 266-267. Kulavig argues that in order to make up for the limited legitimacy of the new Bolshevik state, Lenin had no alternative but to base his regime on violence and suppression (66), thereby eliminating opposition to the young state during the Red Terror and the Civil War and in turn—with the opposition out of the way and the necessary institutional mechanisms in place—making it easier for Stalin to take power in the 1920s.

## The Secret Service under Stalin

The Secret Service under Stalin gets the most space in the book. Under Stalin, the everyday lives of many Soviet people were certainly heavily influenced by the Secret Police. The search for kulaks (rich peasants) and branding of socially harmful elements and enemies of the people kept large parts of society in constant fear as "enemy" definitions were fluid and control was harsh. Without specifically going into the Soviet Criminal Code and its article 58, which defined anti-Soviet and counterrevolutionary behaviour, Kulavig touches upon the issues of whether or not anti-Soviet utterances should be seen as an indicator of popular opinion in the Soviet Union and without going into the debates on these issues, he draws the conclusion that anti-Soviet utterances were most likely real. While it is good to include examples of these anti-Soviet utterances, the

larger question of what people really thought about Soviet rule is difficult to answer and one should not rely on police or secret service documents alone in reaching conclusions about Soviet popular opinion.

In a short reference to the Cold War, Kulavig counters traditional understandings of the Cold War as a post-war phenomenon and claims that “in reality, the Cold War began already with the Bolshevik takeover in 1917, and the alliance during World War II can at best be understood as a necessary evil for both parties”<sup>1</sup> (156). However, in the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet Union, while ideologically at odds with the United States from its conception, looked to the US as a model in technology and production, and Soviet people interacted relatively freely with Americans. To speak of a Cold War in these years, is to underestimate the effects of the propaganda wars, the arms race, and the nuclear bomb threat that dominated the post World War II period. After the horrible experience of the Second World War, the prospects and rumours of a another war made it easy for the Soviet government to manipulate and maintain unprecedented fear amongst its population, and the Communist paranoia in the United States served a similar purpose. Soviet-American Cold War relations were very different from the pre-World War II relations.

Also debatable is the author’s citation of Amy Knight’s assertions that Gorbachev at least knew in advance about the August 1991 coup, and perhaps was even one of the masterminds behind it. Without then taking a clear stand in this issue—and without presenting to the reader the counter-arguments made to Knight’s assertions (see for example the discussion in the *New York Review of Books*, vol. 44, no. 5 (March 27, 1997) and vol. 44, no. 11 (June 26, 1997))—Kulavig uses the assertions to conclude that “politically [Gorbachev] was closer to his KGB-chef than to Yeltsin” (201). While Gorbachev’s failure at reform and his many mistakes in 1990-1991 are commonly acknowledged, not many scholars agree with Knight’s claims and it would be fairer to the reader to present a more balanced account of the literature.

Erik Kulavig’s history of Russia’s Secret Services is in part a contribution to the debate about Russia’s potential to develop into a democratic society with a focus on market economy. He argues that while Russia’s road to democracy and market economy has been “longer and more dramatic” than for “other European countries,” (8), it has had the potential to catch up with the rest of Europe since the 1990s. While pointing out some alarming tendencies of the Putin era, such as the killings of critical journalists and the role of the Secret Services in the war in Chechnya, the author remains relatively optimistic about the future of Russia. Especially important, according to Kulavig, is the more Western orientation of the Russian state and the fact

that Russian society is no longer aiming for a socialist utopia, maintained through strict social control, surveillance, and a certain amount of terror.

### New Evidence

Overall, the author can certainly be lauded for presenting the reader with much new evidence about the Soviet Secret Police in this book, but at the same time the scope of the book does not allow for much detailed, topical analysis of specific issues. For example, while the main focus is on the Secret Service within Russia, there is some attention devoted to foreign activities—mainly in Denmark—but instead of adding much to the overall narrative, the chapter on the KGB in Denmark comes a bit out of the blue and lacks coherence with the rest of the book. Choosing to spend so much time on the Stalin era diminishes the value of this supposedly longue-durée approach somewhat and while touching upon most relevant topics, it still leaves many questions unanswered, especially about the Russian and Soviet Secret Service as seen from below. The focus is mainly on social control from the top but popular participation in or reaction to the great terror gets only minor attention.

Despite some of the above mentioned reservations, the book is written in an accessible prose and should appeal to a broad readership. The major strength of the book is the author’s excellent command of newly published Russian document collections. Increased, although still limited, access to the archives of the Secret Services will continue to shed light on an institution that has played and (in a somewhat milder form) continues to play a major role in Russian domestic politics and the everyday life of Russian citizens. Many of the questions not raised or touched upon only in passing will hopefully be answered in due time as more documentation becomes available, but in the meantime, Danish readers are fortunate to get literature in their native language that gives them valuable insights into the newly available Russian sources on the Russian and Soviet Secret Services.

*Rósa Magnúsdóttir is Assistant Professor in Russian and Soviet History at the Institute of History and Area Studies, University of Aarhus.*

<sup>1</sup> All translations are mine. R. M.