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KGB: The Perils of Arbitrary Power

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"The KGB is everywhere, in everything, and that itself frustrates democracy."
Former KGB Maj. Gen. Oleg Kalugin(1)

"We have had as much democratization as we can stomach."
KGB Chairman Vladimir Kryuchkov(2)

In trying to construct a "law-governed state" that would preserve the supremacy of the center, Gorbachev laid down the legal framework for his own overthrow. His decrees flouting the democratic process and his refusal to promote parliamentary oversight of the internal security organs and the military permitted those forces to engineer his ouster.

Ultimately, the botched August 19 coup unwittingly may have unleashed an accelerated process of reform that could dramatically reduce the powers of the security apparatus. But even if he does manage to purge the KGB, Interior Ministry, and the military, Gorbachev deserves none of the credit, for prior to being the victim he was an active co-conspirator.

Following the 28th Party Congress in July 1990 at which KGB Chairman Vladimir Kryuchkov made a militant speech in favor of communist orthodoxy, Gorbachev conspicuously acquiesced time and again to the state security and other repressive organs.
As Gorbachev's reformist advisors fell away, they were replaced by officials reportedly working for or dependent on the KGB. Maj. Gen. Oleg Kalugin, a former leading KGB counterintelligence officer, publicly warned at the time of the Party Congress that the Presidential Council included "KGB people, not identified as such but KGB all the same, not KGB officers but people who have cooperated with the KGB and are dependent on the KGB." He added, "Gorbachev may not know who they are . . . he probably does not."(3) Thus KGB men replaced reformers in Gorbachev's inner circle.

By the time he fired his moderate Interior Minister Vadim Bakatin on December 3, it was clear that Gorbachev had been co-opted by the security apparatus. Thereafter, Gorbachev meekly followed the lead of the security troika of KGB Chairman Kryuchkov, new Interior Minister Boris Pugo, and Defense Minister Dmitri Yazov. Kryuchkov made an unscheduled live television appearance on December 11, pledging—in the name of the president—to smash the "anti-communist tide" sweeping the Soviet Union.(4) Gorbachev made no attempt to disassociate himself from Kryuchkov's remarks. Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze's dramatic resignation speech, in which he warned of impending dictatorship, should have prepared the world for what was to follow. Gorbachev embarked on a course of almost slavish obedience to the security troika's every whim.

When army, MVD and KGB forces cracked down against the democratic governments of Lithuania and Latvia in mid-January 1991, Gorbachev was nowhere to be reached and later protested that he was not responsible for the bloody acts of repression there. The state terror against independence-minded republics continued.

**KGB's old ways made 'legal'**

Gorbachev helped put in place the machinery that was employed to overthrow him in August. Consistent with his drive to turn the USSR into a "law-governed state," the Soviet government moved in 1990 to legalize the KGB's functions. However, the process was then directed by the KGB with the president's approval. The state security
apparatus itself drew up the "Draft Law on State Security Organs" for parliament to enact. Though ready for submission to the Congress of People's Deputies on December 3, it was not actually presented until February 28, 1991. This lag coincided with Gorbachev's removal of reformist MVD chief Bakatin and the subsequent decrees which led to the crackdowns in the Baltic states, Georgia, Armenia and elsewhere.

**Law rammed through parliament**

According to *Moscow News*, the law was rammed through the Congress without committee review, leaving lawmakers little chance to study or debate the document. Many deputies expressed dissatisfaction with the manner in which the law was presented and voted upon. *Moscow News* commented, "the legislators who voted 'for' did not fully understand the nature of the vote since the draft circulated among them, as announced in the conference hall, did not contain the latest changes and addenda, *i.e.*, it was simply incomplete."

Reformist deputies were dismayed to learn that unknown to them when they voted, the law contained a series of secret amendments granting the KGB extraordinary powers. The amendments had been ruled unconstitutional by the USSR Constitutional Oversight Committee the previous November, even before the draft law was completely written.

The law, which Gorbachev supported, permits the KGB to continue operating as it had in the days before *glasnost*. With constitutional rule restored August 21 upon the quick collapse of the junta, this law nevertheless remains in force, constituting a major obstacle to true democratic reform. The law leaves the KGB structure intact. It grants state security secret powers through 1992, total control over files, continued widespread use of secret informants without allowing the accused to face his accuser, warrantless searches, and warrantless telephone taps and mail interception. It makes no provision for effective parliamentary oversight.(5)
Little glasnost' in security forces

At least until the collapse of the junta, the KGB, MVD and the military remained impervious to glasnost'. Although the KGB in recent years has been more accessible and outspoken than ever, the organization remained closed to scrutiny for past abuses. As it drew up laws, authored presidential decrees, and surrounded Gorbachev with co-optees, the KGB (and more recently the MVD) opened public relations centers in Moscow and in the capitals of the union republics, held news conferences, participated in seminars, and provided information to journalists.

The 1991 Law on State Security Organs, in Article 14, Point 16, ensures that glasnost’ will not be imposed on the KGB by the president or the parliament; the law grants the KGB complete authority to control all files concerning state security. Several reports indicate that the KGB at the republic and union levels has been destroying files, including data concerning the repression of dissidents.(6)

Despite the repeal of Article 6 of the constitution which had guaranteed the party's monopoly on power, the KGB has ensured communist orthodoxy within its ranks. Kryuchkov stated in late 1989, "Virtually all our employees are members of the Communist Party or the Komsomol. The secret services always were, are, and will be political organs."(7) He affirmed in early 1991 that the KGB cadres remained free of non-communist party activism.(8)

Party loyalty remained an obligation of rank-and-file KGB personnel throughout Gorbachev's administration. Only time will tell how soon the situation will change. One former counterintelligence officer, in a remarkable Soviet television interview six weeks before Gorbachev was overthrown, termed the KGB "an armed detachment of the party." On the same program, a distinguished former foreign intelligence officer who had been rezident(head of Soviet espionage) in Denmark, criticized the KGB as "an instrument in the hands of right-wingers in the Communist Party."(9)
The KGB’s public relations offices worked hard to convey the impression that it had become a professional, non-political force, highlighting the abolition of the feared Fifth Department which combatted "ideological diversion." Yet domestic critics and a few western Sovietologists maintained that the Fifth Department was not abolished after all, but had simply been renamed the Administration for the Protection of Constitutional Order to fit the "law-governed state" theme.(10) Kryuchkov came close to affirming this view. A month after announcing that the Fifth Department was abolished, he implied that it remained in full force when he gave the televised speech pledging the smash the "anti-communist tide."

Disillusionment grew throughout the ranks

Anticommunism is widespread even in KGB ranks. Disillusionment with the party has been expressed in the open. In 1990 and 1991 the Soviet press reported several instances of disciplinary action against loyal KGB officers who publicly criticized or resigned from the party. Superiors in at least two cases ruled that any officer who quit the party had to leave the KGB as well.

Discontent is not restricted to young personnel, although junior active-duty officers have been more outspoken than their superiors, as in Sverdlovsk, where over sixty officers publicly criticized the KGB’s subservience to the party rather than to the parliament. Several colonels and generals have resigned in protest of the KGB’s politicization. Maj. Gen. Kalugin, the highest-ranking and best known of these officers, said that disgust and frustration with the party festered inside him for two decades before he quit. In an interview with an American journalist, Kalugin admitted that he "started to question things in the late 1960s," and that the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia being a "critical" turning point. He finally decided to make his break "four or five years" before resigning in 1990.(11)

Kalugin's reasoning is similar to that of many of his colleagues who defected to the West in earlier years. However, like his contemporaries in the age of glasnost', Kalugin
supported a strong KGB but found it unconscionable to serve as a tool of what they saw as a politically and morally corrupt system. "There I was," he recalled, "charged with hunting down dissidents and ferreting out possible defectors and spreading the cause of communism, and I was more and more harboring some of the same doubts, the same thoughts as those we were imprisoning."

It is difficult to believe, especially after the grotesquely unprofessional conduct of KGB, MVD and military leaders in siding with hard-core communist apparatchiki against Gorbachev, that lingering discontent in the security forces has eased since the coup. Kryuchkov, Pugo, Yazov and those who obeyed them brought disgrace and ridicule to their already troubled services. Cracks within the security apparatus will likely expand and deepen in the course of the expected post-coup purges of its personnel.

**Denial of power to parliament aided coup plotters**

One of Gorbachev's almost-fatal errors was to resist democratic efforts to bring the security forces under the control of parliament. Instead, he sought to project the image that the KGB, MVD and military were overseen by elected officials, while allowing these bodies to proceed almost as they pleased.

Elements in parliament sought, but failed to achieve, oversight of the instruments of force. A Defense and National Security Committee of the Supreme Soviet set up as an oversight body was not even able to obtain information about the non-secret KGB Border Guards. Deputies were similarly frustrated in trying to glean basic data from the military.

Indeed, the security forces proved that they were not subordinate to the parliament on August 19, when they staged the coup against Gorbachev and declared a state of emergency which attempted to suspend all elected assemblies.
At the same time, however, profound splits in all levels of the armed services—even in elite units—revealed substantial sympathy for elected leaders like Yeltsin and for parliament. Breakdowns of discipline in the KGB, militsia, and military led to overt defections to Yeltsin and open defiance of the KGB, MVD and Defense chiefs on the junta. Troop commanders declared that, even though they had followed orders and mobilized in the streets, they would not storm republican parliaments or fire on the civilians protecting them.

**Signs that Gorbachev had lost control**

The west was provided with ample warnings that Gorbachev had lost control of the Soviet security forces, yet expressed almost universal surprise that the Kremlin leader was overthrown.

One early sign of Gorbachev's impotence was his repeated insistence that attacks by KGB, army, and the MVD's OMON special designation units in the Baltics and the Caucasus were beyond his control. These attacks lasted from January through July 1991. In the end, they appeared timed to embarrass and discredit Gorbachev.

During Gorbachev's historic June visit to Sweden on the eve of his trip to Norway to deliver his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, army units moved threateningly around Lithuania while the USSR Procurator General issued an inflammatory report absolving the military from any wrongdoing during the bloody January crackdown there, blaming the civilian deaths on Lithuanian "militants."(12)

On June 27, just as Gorbachev was preparing to travel to London as a special guest at the Group of Seven summit, the OMON raided the Vilnius telephone exchange and claimed to have found a cache of weapons. For the first time, the Kremlin publicly criticized the OMON attacks.(13) A third major embarrassment for Gorbachev was staged during the Moscow summit with President Bush. Gunmen burst into a Lithuanian customs post on the Belorussian border, rounded up the eight officers inside, and shot
each of them execution-style in the back of the head: only one officer survived. Though Gorbachev pledged a full investigation, Lithuanian officials charged that the central authorities were not willing to cooperate.(14)

As if these demonstrations were not enough to humiliate Gorbachev, White House officials had the message personally delivered to them during the July summit. When Bush visited Kiev (where his remarks against national independence did little to reassure democrats or dissuade centralists), KGB personnel flown in from Moscow harassed, manhandled, and assaulted members of his entourage, including Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater.(21) Yet the significance was lost on the administration.

**Historic opportunity for parliament**

Democratic forces in the Soviet Union now have an historic opportunity to consolidate their gains and begin dismantling the Soviet police state. Armed with a new sense of purpose, enhanced prestige, and the realization that people power really works, the union and the republican parliaments can exploit the humiliating political defeat of the KGB, MVD and military and take concrete steps to ensure that such abuses of power can never happen again.

They can begin by repealing the 1991 Law on State Security Organs and enacting real power of the purse and strict oversight laws, along with civil penalties for abuses of authority. With these actions, democratic forces can begin the lengthy process of irreversible reform.

Notes:
3Kalugin, *ibid.*


11The former officers were, respectively, Valentin Yuryevich Korolev and Mikhail Petrovich Lyubimov, in Soviet television broadcast, 1445 GMT, 30 June 1991; see FBIS-SOV-91-127, 2 July 1991, 24-28.


15Kalugin, *ibid*.

16Ibid.

17*The Economist Foreign Report*, 5 April 1990, 4-5.


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