

SMERSH: THE ACTIVITIES OF THE SOVIET MILITARY COUNTERINTELLIGENCE DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR³⁸

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One of the first acts of the Russian liberal democratic provisional government after the revolution in February 1917 was the dissolution of police units and the entire Ochranka security system which symbolized the repressive Tsarist regime. In ironic contrast the Bolsheviks, within six weeks of seizing power in October of the same year, established a political police force under Felix Dzerzhinsky in the form of an “All Russian Extraordinary Commission for the Suppression of Counterrevolution and Sabotage”, known by its Russian acronym Cheka. It doubtless owed its origin to Lenin’s thesis that revolution cannot exist without counterrevolution and that organs must therefore be created to protect the revolution from its enemies.³⁹

³⁸ The first version of this chapter has been prepared for the Czech journal *The Slavonic Review* (see LITERA, B., *SMĚŘŠ. K činnosti sovětské vojenské kontrarozvědky za druhé světové války. Slovanský přehled*, 86, 2000, no. 1, pp. 1–24.

³⁹ Because of the character of the problems, the earlier Soviet literature tends to be more schematic than other work: see for example D. L. Golinkov, *Krach vrazhbeskogo podpolya. Iz istorii borby s kontrrevolucii v sovietskoy Rosii 1917–1924 gg.*, Moscow 1971. P. G. SOFINOV, *Ocherki istorii vsherossiskoy chrezvydchnoy komissii 1917–1921 gg.*,

The activities of the Cheka quickly expanded to include not only all spheres of life throughout Soviet Russia but also the creation of an external intelligence service. Nor was the military excluded from its purview, although the Red Army of Workers and Peasants possessed its own system of political commissars, Party cells and military control units. However, several incidents in 1918 showed that the rapid expansion of the army and the incorporation of Tsarist officers had, despite all security measures, weakened its reliability. The Cheka presidium discussed the problems of monitoring army reliability and of military counter-intelligence in general as early as 9 April 1918 and set up a special committee to deal with them. But they were already the subject of attention by four separate organs within the Red Army, which in September 1918 were unified under the authority of the Revvoyensoviet.⁴⁰

After military reverses in the Perm region and on the southern front at the end of 1918, the result of sabotage by former Tsarist officers, the Bolshevik government took vigorous measures. The appropriate plans were presented by a special commission formed in November 1918 and headed by Dzerzhinsky. Purges were carried out in the organs of military control, and on 19 December the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party ordered that they be merged with the Cheka military sections. "Special Sections" (*osobiye otdyela* or "OO"), answerable not to the army but to the Cheka, were established in units of the army and navy.⁴¹

Thus, for the first time in modern history there arose a centralized military counterintelligence service which was not answerable to a military body, which meant that the army was under the control of an agency independent of the military. The system, despite various modifications, continued throughout the existence of

Moscow 1960. More critical work appeared in the 1990's, such as the collection of documents *VCHK-GPU. Dokumenty i materialy*, Moscow 1995. However, much remains concealed in Russian literature and source editions. The best survey is G. LEGETTA, *The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police*, Oxford 1981.

⁴⁰ S. OSTRYAKOV, *Voyennye chekisty*, Moscow 1979, 24. Revvoyensoviet was the highest Red Army collective organ until 1934.

⁴¹ G. LEGGETT, *The Cheka*, 97 ff.

the Soviet Union and the military counterintelligence, except for a brief interlude, remained answerable to non-military security organs.

The first chief of the Special Section was the Cheka officer M. S. Kedrov. On 27 December 1918 the Cheka ordered all its provincial organizations to form Special Sections and on 4 January 1919 Kedrov ordered the creation of Special Sections in military units by merging existing military control bodies with the military sections of the Cheka. The Special Sections were thus hierarchically subordinate to the Cheka, but in their activities they betrayed a certain dualism in that they also carried out orders received from the Revvoyen-soviet. Kedrov himself became a member of the Cheka presidium.

The task of the Special Sections was to fight against counter-revolution and espionage in the army and navy, but also to carry out espionage outside the territory of Soviet Russia and in regions occupied by the White Guard. This was therefore not classic counterintelligence, but its combination with active intelligence, a combination guaranteeing the best results. The Special Sections were empowered to pursue and arrest suspects, conduct searches and in special circumstances to execute prisoners. Broader duties included dealing with desertion, criminality and corruption in the army, rooting out all anti-Soviet tendencies and providing a rear guard. From the viewpoint of Bolshevick power it was clearly a most important body, assuring the political loyalty and fighting capacity of the army. As such the Special Sections in the army participated fully in the red terror during the civil war.⁴²

The Special Sections carried out essentially the same function throughout the interwar period, when they took part in the purges and repression within the Red Army. But the repression was also turned against themselves, and some of their members were imprisoned and executed. One of the key documents defining the duties of the OO at the height of the repression and just before the Second World War was a joint order by the Commissars of Defense and the Interior, K. Voroshilov and L. Beria, dated 13 January 1939.

⁴² G. LEGETT, *The Cheka*, 100 ff. *VCHK - GPU. Dokumenty i materialy*, Moscow 1995.

The Special Sections of the NKVD continued to have as their primary task the struggle against counterrevolution, espionage, and manifestations of anti-Soviet sentiment in the army and navy, but also in the border troops and those of the NKVD.⁴³

The Special Sections therefore created a network of informers within military units and among the civilian populace who had any dealings with the army, and continued to have the power to arrest, conduct searches, and so forth. The approval of the Special Section of the military unit was required for the arrest of enlisted men and petty officers, while the arrest of higher ranking officers required approval from the Special Section of the NKVD and the Ministry of Defense. Special Sections were formed in all military units to brigade level, while in lower units, at the regimental level, their deputies were appointed. Chiefs of the Special Sections were also members of the Military-Political Commissions of these units.⁴⁴

The Special Sections did not serve merely as a repressive security organ but also apparently functioned as an extra, independent channel of control by which the NKVD and its chief Beria obtained independent information concerning the state of the army, which was doubtless useful in the struggle for power. This is suggested for example by a report of the OO NKVD of the Leningrad Military Region concerning shortcomings in civil defense, dated 4 September 1939, or Beria's directive of 2 August to the Special Sections in the army concerning a number of problems arising during mobilization. Beria ordered the Special Sections to make a full report to the NKVD Special Section of all shortcomings connected with the mobilization and also of any individuals showing "defeatist" or "terrorist" tendencies.⁴⁵ The Special Services also investigated attempts by military personnel to flee the country as part of the constant struggle against desertion.

According to the NKVD organizational scheme at the end of 1939, the Special Sections formed the fourth section of the state

⁴³ *Organy gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti SSSR v Velikoy Otyechestvennoy voyne. Sbornik dokumentov. Tom 1, kniga 1*, Moscow 1995, 29.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 57-58.

security administration (GUGB), which was in turn divided into thirteen sections corresponding partly to the types of military units (section 3, Air Force; section 4, technical units; section 5 motorized units, etc.), and partly to spheres of activity (section 1 was devoted to the army staffs, section 2 to the active intelligence). The investigative section was classified as independent.⁴⁶

On 7 September 1940, following the occupation of eastern Poland, the Baltic States, Finland and Rumania and in connection with the sharp increase in the number of military personnel, the chief of the Special Section of State Security (OO/GUGB/NKVD) A. V. Micheyev issued an order detailing the duties of the Army Special Sections. Their chief activity was to be aimed at uncovering anti-Soviet sentiment in the army, gathering information about damage ascribed to "enemy elements or criminal negligence". The Special Sections were to focus especially on attacks against the Soviet Union, desertion, German violations of Soviet air space, terrorist and diversionary activities, all air accidents and cases of mass poisoning or infection among the troops.⁴⁷

It is interesting that the order failed to emphasize the need for classical counter-intelligence activity by the Special Sections even though the German espionage services were conducting a massive campaign against the Soviet Union. In 1940 and the beginning of 1941 the NKVD uncovered and liquidated 66 Abwehr agencies comprising about 1,600 agents. Of these about 1,400 were in the newly attached western Soviet regions.⁴⁸

However, the activities of the German secret services were the subject of special instructions from the Special Section of the GUGB NKVD of 30 November 1940. Here Micheyev warned that the Germans were sending not only individual agents but entire groups to gather information about the Red Army, encourage troops to

⁴⁶ A. I. KOKORIN, N. V. PETROV, eds., *Lyublyanka: VCHK - OGPU-NKVD-NKGB-MGB-MVD-KGB. 1917-1960. Spravochnik*, Moscow 1997, 247-248. The entire NKVD included 30 main administrations.

⁴⁷ *Organy gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti, tom I, kniga I*, 248-249.

⁴⁸ S. OSTRYAKOV, *Voyennye chekisty*, 142.

desert and flee the country, and make use of the populace in the recently annexed regions of Byelorussia and the Ukraine. According to the instruction, the Abwehr made use of qualified espionage agents of the UON (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists), Polish members of “illegal nationalist organizations formed in Germany”, Polish military personnel returning from captivity, Poles and Ukrainians returning from France where they had been working before 1939, and refugees from western Byelorussia and the Ukraine. The Special Sections were therefore to verify contacts between soldiers and suspicious persons and where they occurred in border regions, they were to move to the rear to complete the investigation.⁴⁹

Similar instructions in response to activity by the Abwehr and analyzing its methods are quite plentiful in the printed sources. Mikheyev for example issued a circular on 29 January 1941 detailing German espionage activities and ordering countermeasures, while on 18 April another analyzing activity by all intelligence services, not merely the German, aimed at the Soviet Union.⁵⁰

A circular of 25 May 1941 contained a relatively detailed analysis of activity by the Abwehr and (according to Mikheyev) also the Gestapo aimed against the Soviet army, which identified the main areas of German interest, discussed their operational approach and the background of their agents (52 percent were said to be Poles, 30 percent Ukrainians).⁵¹

The Special Sections, however, did not limit their attention to the army. Their agents were concerned with the most varied “counter-revolutionary espionage and diversionary formations”, i.e. nationalist organizations, especially on recently annexed territory. They conducted operations in cooperation with other security organizations and in some cases independently.⁵² According to official Soviet

⁴⁹ *Organy gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti, tom I, kniga 1*, 280–281.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, tom 1, kniga 2, 22–23, 103–106.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 158–160.

⁵² See the circular of the chief of the 3rd Directorate of the Ministry of Defense of the USSR Mikheyev dated 22 May 1941, in *Organy gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti, tom I, kniga 2*, 152–153.

sources such operations were to be frequent. Ostrayakov asserts that from April to October 1940 38 such groups were liquidated in western Ukraine, while in western Byelorussia a large illegal organization, the *Zwazek walki zbrojnej* or Union of Armed Struggle set up by Polish officers, was destroyed. The group controlled eight battalions, a supply of arms, and had a membership of 2,500. It carried out espionage activities and was preparing to launch a diversionary campaign in the rear of the Red Army. Further organizations existed in Latvia and Lithuania.⁵³

The events portending war took place in a situation where "specials organs of the NKVD were mobilized" and operated under orders which have remained secret down to the present. On 27 January 1941 I. I. Maslenikov, deputy commissar of the interior, ordered that "special organs of the NKVD" begin mobilization, which doubtless meant increasing their numerical strength and expanding their authority.⁵⁴

A second substantial change was a resolution of the presidium of the Supreme Soviet which formally sanctioned a resolution of the Politburo of the Bolshevik Party separating the existing Commissariat of the Interior into two entities: the interior (NKVD) and state security (NKGB). The motive for the reorganization remains unclear. The Russian literature indicates merely that it was prompted by the prevailing political and security situation. But it is certain that the NKVD had become a colossus, concentrating vast authority and resources.

The newly formed NKGB included the Bureau of Intelligence and Counterintelligence, the Secret Political Bureau, the Kremlin Bureau, the Bureau of Investigation and several others. The NKVD continued to be responsible for border protection, civil defense, firefighting, prison administration (including prisoner of war camps), care of orphaned or deprived children, but also the construction and repair of important roads, the national archives and the civil sector.⁵⁵ L.

⁵³ S. OSTRYAKOV, *Voyennye chekisty*, 145.

⁵⁴ *Organy gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti, tom I, kniga 2*, 22.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 25. For the division of duties, 40–43.

Beria remained at the head of the NKVD, while his deputy V. N. Merkulov became chief of the NKGB.⁵⁶

The reorganization removed the Special Section from control of the NKVD, and by resolution of the Central Committee of the VKS(b) and the Council of People's Commissars dated 8 February 1941 it was made the 3rd Bureau of the People's Commissariat of Defense (LKO). It continued to be headed by A. I. Mikneyev, earlier chief of the OO/GUGB/NKVD. The duties of the Third Bureau remained essentially unchanged: "struggle against counter-revolution, espionage, diversion, treason and all forms of anti-Soviet sentiment in the Red Army and Navy." Further, it was to inform the Commissar of Defense and Navy of "any compromising material concerning members of the armed forces."⁵⁷

A central committee, composed of the interior and state security ministers together with the chiefs of the third bureaus of the Ministries of Defense and the Navy, was to coordinate the activity of the individual ministries. The committee was to meet at least once each month and was also to decide on methods, resolve conflicts over competence and plan further activity. Organs of the third bureaus of the LKO and the navy were authorized to make use of operational technology and other means possessed by the Ministry of State Security.

The chiefs of the third bureaus, however, were again subject to dual supervision. On the one hand they were subordinate to the Chief of the Third Section in the organizational scheme and on the other to the commander of the superior military unit. The chief of the Third Bureau of the division was responsible to the chief of the Third Bureau of the Corps and the Corps commander. The Chief of the Central Third Bureau was theoretically only subordinate to the Minister of Defense.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ T. P. KORZHIKHINA, *sovietskoye gosudarstvo i yego uchrezhdyeniya*, Moscow 1994, 387.

⁵⁷ *Organy gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti, tom I, kniga 2*, 28.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 30. Documents and materials concerning the Special Sections, the Third Bureaus and later Smersh are still semi-secret, so that even when published significant parts have been omitted. For example the duties of the Third Bureaus were apparently defined in four points of which only the first two have been published.

It soon became apparent that the organizational changes and the classification of the Special Sections with their subordination to the LKO hampered communication between individual security organs to such an extent that for example the Central Committee of the VKS(b) and the Committee of People's Commissars were obliged to issue special resolutions as early as 19 April 1941. In the Third Bureau system up to the brigade level the post of deputy chief was instituted, who was subordinate to his commander and to the corresponding territorial organs of the Ministry of State Security. The Ministry of Defense, however, had no influence on the appointment, activity or dismissal of these deputies, since personnel questions in this respect were the exclusive prerogative of state security, not defense. It was the duty of the new deputies to inform the chiefs of the Third Bureau or Section of "Activities of organs of State Security related to the work of the Third Bureaus". At the same time they informed state security of all activities of the corresponding sections of the Third Bureaus. The deputy was thus in a way the legal agent in an agency which formally belonged under the LKO.

The resolution invested State Security with the authority to take over from the army any activity or agent network which it considered necessary. The army and navy, on the other hand, could request organs of State Security to turn over all matters directly concerning the army or navy. From the point of view of the division of power this meant a strengthening of the Commissariat of State Security all the more in that according to the final point of the resolution, the chairmanship of the joint committee coordinating the activities of the NKVD, NKGB and the Third Bureau was to be occupied by a representative of the Ministry of State Security.⁵⁹

From the beginning, then, the Special Sections played a key role in the liquidation of all enemies of Bolshevik power, not merely spies and people working for foreign intelligence services. In cooperation with other security elements they created a network covering the entire territory of the military establishment. They carried out their

⁵⁹ *Organy gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti, tom 1, kniga 2, 107–108.*

functions on an immeasurably larger scale during the war and doubtless were a major factor in the victory and in the control of liberated territory.

The first months of the war, as German panzer columns penetrated, were a disaster for the Soviet Union. Though the figures vary, it is clear that by 26 November 1941 the Soviet Army had lost half a million men, with over a million wounded, half a million missing and 3.8 million taken prisoner. Nearly the entire pre-war army of 303 divisions had been destroyed. In the face of the catastrophe Stalin set about reorganizing the army. Less than a month into the war, on 17 July 1941 a resolution of the State Committee for Defense (GKO) reconstituted the Third Bureaus as Special Sections and returned them to the control of the Ministry of the Interior, where they were placed under the Bureau of Special Sections of the NKVD. The chief task of the Special Sections was once again counter-intelligence, "the struggle against espionage and treason" and "the liquidation of desertion" at the front. The Special Sections were authorized to arrest deserters and "under necessity" to execute them on the spot. Other elements of the NKVD were to provide military units with extra troops for certain operations.⁶⁰ The reorganization continued as on 20 July the Ministry of State Security was reconstituted as the Central Bureau of State Security, GUGB, within the Interior Ministry.⁶¹

The chief of the Special Section Michayev, assigned to a unit in the Ukraine where he was killed in September, was replaced by the Commissar of State Security, 34-year-old V. S. Abakumov, whose star was rapidly rising.⁶²

Some authors, such as A. Werth, have noted the renewal at this time of the notorious blocking units of the NKVD in order to cut off retreat and force troops to fight.⁶³ This, however, did not concern the

⁶⁰ Text of the GKO resolution: *Voyenno istorichesky zhurnal* (hereafter VIZ) 1992, no. 3, 20.

⁶¹ T. P. KORZHIKHINA, *Sovietskoye gosudarstvo*, 388.

⁶² I. I. KUTNETSOV, "Stalin's Minister V. S. Abakumov 1908-1954", *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1 (March 1999), 151.

⁶³ A. WERTH, *Russia at War, 1941-1945*, New York 1964, 227.

Special Sections, which were not equipped for this kind of work, though they did collaborate fully with them, as the struggle against desertion and defeatist attitudes was one of their chief tasks. The Special Sections were created in the army as an instrument of political oppression, a counterintelligence organization and a tool for uncovering diversionary groups within the operations territory of the Red Army, i.e. up to 150 kilometers from the front lines. Thus they concentrated rather on intelligence activities, the formation of information networks both within army units and on the territory of the military regions as well as regions under German occupation or into which the army was to advance. The arrest of enemy agents and liquidation of their formations was the task both of the Special Sections and the internal military units of the NKVD, to whom officers of the Special Sections provided information. In view of the fact that they had detailed information about the enemy, they often assumed command of individual operations.

There is little doubt that in the first months of the war the Special Sections played a significant role in preserving the fighting capability of the Red Army, prevented its collapse and upheld its morale, however brutal their methods may have been. It appears that the first major task of their new leadership was to investigate the catastrophic defeats of the previous weeks on the Northwestern Front, which had practically collapsed under German attack, while the 34th Army was said to have lost 80 percent of its troops and all of its artillery in an unsuccessful counteroffensive. The situation at the front was first investigated by Abakumov, who was sent there at the end of August 1941 by Beria. Later, on 9 September, he was joined by further committee members N. A. Bulganin, K. A. Mereckov (deputy of the supreme command) and L. Z. Mechlis, chief of the political directorate of the Red Army.

Abakumov cooperated closely with state security captain M. I. Byelkin, chief of the Special Section of the 34th Army, who supplied him with material against a number of military commanders. Bulganin and Abakumov soon returned to Moscow, while Mereckov took over command of the new Volknov Front on 17 September and

Mechlis directed the repression until 2 October. As early as 12 September Artillery General V. S. Goncharov was executed, while General K. M. Kachanov was arrested and sentenced to death on 26 September. Several division commanders were also replaced.⁶⁴

The re-centralization enabled the OO/GUGB/NKVD to reorganize and replenish its ranks, for in the first two years and nine months of the war "i.e. to the spring of 1944" more than six thousand members of the Special Sections had been killed.⁶⁵ At the same time they built networks which later allowed them to take offensive counterintelligence measures. The incorporation of the Special Sections into the NKVD system provided better conditions for the formation and direction of the networks left on German-occupied territory. These were directed by officers of the Special Sections, not the counterintelligence directorate of the GUGB NKVD, which was focussed more toward the rear. It was also significant that they were able to make use of various organs of the NKVD and that the Special Sections officers were independent of the military commanders. Thus they were able to concentrate on security work in its widest sense, since during the war more than 130 German espionage, diversionary and counterespionage organizations operated against the Soviets on the Eastern Front, belonging to the Army, SS, RSHA and others, which established more than sixty training facilities for spies.⁶⁶

The German secret services, which suffered from a dearth of intelligence information about the USSR, therefore put in place a large number of agents at the beginning of the war. According to the official history of the Special Sections, during the battle for Moscow alone Soviet military counterintelligence uncovered over 200 German agents and more than 50 diversionary and espionage groups in the battle area and the rear of the Western Front. In 1941, military counterintelligence and NKVD troops protecting the rear were said to have uncovered and liquidated over a thousand enemy agents on the Western Front, 650 on the Leningrad and Southern Fronts and a

⁶⁴ M. PARRISH, *The Lesser Terror. Soviet State Security 1939-1953*, Westport 1996, 112 ff.

⁶⁵ S. OSTRYAKOV, *Voyennye chekisty*, 237.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 155.

further 300 on the Northwestern Front.⁶⁷ But how many of these were actually carrying out espionage activities remains unknown.

According to available archival material, the NKVD contained about 47 bureaus as of 20 May 1941, each with multiple agencies. In this structure the Special Section was the 5th bureau of the NKVD, with 225 places in the headquarters.

Aside from the bureau secretariat, operations section and investigation agency, the Special Section bureau had nine agencies which were oriented according to the various branches of the army:

1st agency (with 3 sections) covered the Red Army General Staff, Front and Army Staffs and military intelligence.

2nd agency (5 sections) covered the Soviet Air Force including rear units, training bases, academies, civil defense and airborne troops.

3rd agency (3 sections) covered all tank formations, all artillery formations and trench mortar units.

4th agency (4 sections) directed “agent-operative” work among Special Sections at the Front according to the military types “infantry, artillery etc.” and also had responsibility for anti-desertion measures and organized “blocking” operations. Its first two sections directed activities at the Fronts, while the third was focussed on the struggle against desertion, etc, and the fourth dealt with the press, courts martial and the military prosecutor’s office.

5th agency (2 sections) dealt with the rear.

6th agency (4 sections) was classified as a special military unit under the NKVD “border and interior NKVD troops.

7th agency kept track of activities of the Special Sections and made records concerning traitors, spies, terrorists, deserters and other anti-Soviet elements. Its second section vetted cadres of the central committee of VKS_(b), the Committee of Civil Defense and the Navy, personnel authorized to deal with secret information or to be sent abroad.

8th agency (2 sections) secured coded communication within the military.

⁶⁷ G. K. Cinev, “Sovietskoy voyennoy kontrrazvedke 60 let”, in *Vojennye kontrrazvedchiki. Osobym Otdyelam VCHK-KGB 60 let*, Moscow 1978, 15–16.

9th agency (2 sections) dealt with the Navy.

Special Sections also oversaw the mobile artillery divisions and the Kremlin garrison.⁶⁸

Soviet counterintelligence underwent two organizational phases during the war. The Special Sections, as they formally re-emerged in July 1941, were reorganized in April 1943. At this time the all-inclusive Ministry of the Interior was reduced by the creation of a Commissariat for State Security (NKGB), again headed by V. N. Merkulov.⁶⁹ At the same time, however, the Special Sections were separated from the NKVD and again subordinated to the Ministry of Defense as the third main counter-espionage agency of the LKO. Stalin himself gave them the title Smersh, standing for “death to spies”.⁷⁰

There are differences between Smersh and the Special Sections (though the two are essentially the same organization) resulting from the changed overall military situation, so that they operated under different circumstances. Until the end of 1942 the army conducted an essentially defensive war, so the emphasis was on strengthening discipline and morale in the military units, minimizing desertion, and counterintelligence activities. After the battle of Stalingrad, when the Red Army moved on the offensive, it began liberating occupied Soviet territory, then that of eastern and central European states. Thus Smersh was presented with a number of new tasks. There was greater emphasis on insuring the political reliability of the army, the “cleansing” of the liberated territories, liquidation of German networks remaining on these territories, but also dealing with a flood of German war prisoners and in time with the growing numbers of returning Soviet war prisoners from German camps.

The position of Smersh in the Soviet war hierarchy was strengthened by the fact that it became the chief intelligence agency, rather than one of several, and its chief Viktor S. Abakumov became deputy minister of defense, who was Stalin himself, to whom

⁶⁸ *Lyublyanka*, 276–278.

⁶⁹ T. P. KORZHIKHINA, *Sovietskoye gosudarstvo*, 388.

⁷⁰ S. OSTRYAKOV, *Voyennye chekisty*, 179.

Abakumov had direct access. One of Abakumov's deputies was P. I. Myeshik, former chief of one of the agencies of the GUGB NKVD, and others were apparently N. N. Selivanofsky and M. I. Byelkin.⁷¹

The motives leading to the reorganization can only be guessed at. Soviet histories of the Special Sections stress that Smersh was created in order that "in the decisive phase of the war the defense of the country be united, armed security assured and the military leadership obliged to devote greater attention to the work of the chekists and support them with the whole might of Soviet armed force."⁷² Ostryakov further emphasizes that there were ever more profound changes within the German intelligence services. More importance was given to tactical research at the expense of mounting tactical spy operations. From 1941 to 1943 the Germans are said to have sent around 55 percent of their agents to the area of the Front, 63 percent in 1944 and fully 88 percent in the last year of the war. This increases the significance of Smersh, which operated behind German lines as well as at the front lines.⁷³

By placing Smersh directly under his authority Stalin weakened both the NKBD and NKGB, creating a counterweight to them, although its members were from the original NKVD. Thus Stalin concentrated in his hands the administration and control of all military activity. A further, secondary, motive was disinformation to be fed to German espionage services through the creation of the new organization. According to testimony of an Abwehr officer in March 1945 the German services had a relatively detailed notion of NKVD and Special Sections activities, but practically nothing was known about Smersh. He himself had learned of its existence only at the beginning of 1944. The Germans knew that it was the highest Soviet counterintelligence organization but they had little idea of its structure.⁷⁴

⁷¹ J. J. DZIAK, *Chekisty. A History of the KGB*, Lexington 1988, 197. I. I. Kuznetsov, *Stalin's Minister*, 152. M. PARRISH, *The Lesser Terror*, 114.

⁷² S. OSTRYAKOV, *Voyennye chekisty*, 178 ff.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁷⁴ *V poyedinke s Abverom. Dokumentalnoy ocherk o chekistach Leningradskogo fronta 1941–1945 gg.*, Moscow 1968, 193.

According to some authors, Smersh was also assigned to insure the personal safety of Stalin: amid rumors of an assassination attempt by the German secret services during the Teheran Conference, Abakumov's deputy S. N. Kruglov was sent to protect Stalin.⁷⁵ In fact this is an error, since Kruglov remained deputy to the interior minister Beria after the reorganization.⁷⁶

The question of whether Smersh was in competition with the NKVD over the protection of Stalin is secondary, though the reorganization resulted in rivalry over competence and information sources. In his memoirs the chief of the NKVD 4th Agency P. Sudoplatov declares that in 1942 the NKVD together with the GRU launched an anti-German radio campaign of disinformation. At some point (though after April 1943, since he mentions Smersh and conflicts between the NKVD, NKGB and Smersh), Abakumov appeared at Sudoplatov's office to demand that all radio operations be handed over to Smersh, on the grounds that they fall within the competence of military counter-intelligence and not the NKVD. The transfer was in fact effected at the order of Sudoplatonov's superior, though the NKVD was able to retain two of the most significant operations, thanks to the personal intervention of Stalin, who was the direct recipient of their reports.⁷⁷

Sudoplatov mentions two further moves by Abakumov against the NKVD. In 1943 he order the arrest of a high NKVD officer, V. Ilyin, outside normal channels, which required approval from the suspect's superior. Sudoplatov asserts that Abakumov intended to use Ilyin's testimony to compromise Beria and Merkulov. The same motive lay behind the arrest of Ilyin's friend the Air Force general B. Teplinsky on 28 April 1943. Both were said to have been carried out on Stalin's orders. But Ilyin refused to testify against Beria, though he remained in prison until Abakumov's arrest in 1951.⁷⁸

At the end of 1944 Smersh agents also arrested the longtime NKVD agent Prince J. Radziwill and brought him from Poland to

⁷⁵ J. J. DZIAK, *Chekisty*, 108.

⁷⁶ V. NEKRASOV, *Trinadcat "zbeleznich" narkomov*, Moscow 1995, 263.

⁷⁷ P. SUDOPLATOV, A. SUDOPLATOV, *The Special Tasks*, Boston 1994, 160.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 162 ff. See also M. PARRISH, *The Lesser Terror*, 118 ff.

Moscow. Beria was said to have made great efforts to secure the release of his agent, who for example had translated during meetings with Roosevelt's special envoy A. Harriman, whom he had known before the war.⁷⁹ The incident may have resulted from an error, in which one agency was ignorant or the activities of the other, or Abakumov was trying to acquire a valuable source of information.

There is little doubt that the reorganization was motivated partly by politics, partly by the fact that the NKVD had become too large and unwieldy to handle very effectively the multitude of tasks with which it was entrusted. By dividing the NKVD and naming V. N. Merkulov commissar for state security and Abakumov chief of Smersh Stalin again weakened Beria's power base, deprived him of direct control over the most sensitive security problems, and by placing Merkulov and Abakumov in high functions he placed them in opposition to each other. On the other hand, neither Smersh nor the NKGB possessed significant military forces, which had to be supplied by the NKVD. Basically it came down to a classic case of divide and rule, in which all three organizations were supposed to cooperate but in fact competed.

Another factor, which supported Smersh's subordination to the commissariat of defense, was the Soviet police system. Like the military counterintelligence in the broadest sense, it was in fact to carry out espionage, political and security operations in the army and in occupied territories with the aim of protecting the rear or the army. All other Soviet security police organs, except for strategic intelligence, were created for activity outside the army and on Soviet territory. The internal military units of the NKVD, units of the border guard acted in the later phase of the war on foreign territory, but often in order to carry out operations conceived by other organizations. Smersh, however, was an organization which could immediately supply information useful in pacifying newly occupied territories. The army, with its several million troops, was accorded special attention both by classical counterintelligence and by agencies of political control.

⁷⁹ M. PARRISH, *The Lesser Terror*, 119.

Whichever motive predominated in Stalin's thinking in the spring of 1943, the reorganization solved a number of problems at once. Since Abakumov had direct access to the GKO and Stalin as minister of defense, the leadership of military counterintelligence was substantially simplified. Smersh moreover was directly subordinate to Stalin and could carry out his orders without influence from other agencies. The reorganization was carried out as the army went on strategic counteroffensive.

The available Soviet sources do not reveal the internal structure of Smersh or the numbers of its agents. Shortly after the end of the war the American army attempted such an analysis on the basis of captured German material and interrogations of German intelligence officers. They concluded that at the highest level there were about 15 agencies and bureaus:

- Agency for staffs: monitored staff officers in Moscow (the General Staff) and directed the activities of Smersh officers in this regard at lower levels up to the level of army staffs,

- agency for troop: monitored troops in the Moscow region and directed lower-level Smersh activities,

- counterintelligence agency: directed and carried out operations on enemy territory and coordinated all counterintelligence activities of Smersh units at lower levels up to the army level,

- partisan movement agency: used partisan units to carry out espionage and counterespionage tasks and monitored their political loyalty,

- investigative agency: carried out interrogations of all members of the military under suspicion,

- personnel agency: kept records on all members of Smersh, provided for their training, assignment, promotion, etc.,

- technical and communications agency: was responsible for secret radio and other contacts, monitoring of enemy communications,

- military censorship agency,

- information agency: evaluated reports,

- cryptographic agency: provided codes and assured security of code systems,

maintenance agency: maintained buildings and installations belonged to Smersh,

troikas were military courts for misdemeanors, up to the division level,

secretariat – personnel of the chief of headquarters.

inspection agency: investigated charges brought against Smersh members and evaluated the reliability of double agents.⁸⁰

In 1943, however, an independent unit under N. N. Salivanovsky was to be set up within Smersh with the task of placing agents and diversionary groups in the rear of the German army.⁸¹ But it should be emphasized that the published materials do not provide a penetrating view of the Smersh organization. It may be assumed that at the highest level this organization was taken over from the Special Sections.

The American estimate of the Smersh structure from the postwar period mentions that it was created to correspond to the organizational levels of the army, not according to the military types. It appears, however, that the reality was more complex. The organizational scheme of the Special Sections from May 1942 shows that they were organized according to military types and to the various command levels of the army. It is not likely that the Smersh structure would have been fundamentally modified in 1943. The available literature and sources give no such indication, nor would it be consistent with Soviet practice. Smersh had its units in the various army command levels which reflected the structure of the headquarters and were essentially organized according to military types.

At the head of the system was the 3rd LKO headquarters, and at lower levels Smersh formations on the Fronts and in the military

⁸⁰ *The General Staff of the United Army, Survey of Soviet Intelligence and Counter-intelligence, 9 January 1948 (declassified NND 7701)*, cited by R. STEPHAN, "Smersh: The Soviet Counterintelligence during the Second World War", *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 22, 1987, 592 ff.

⁸¹ A. SUDOPLATOV, "Sovietskaya politicheskaya i voyennaya rozvedka", in *Rossiia i Germaniya v gody vojny i mira (1941–1955)*, Moscow 1995, 275.

regions. Their basic organizational structure remained the same as that of the Special Sections. According to German sources Smersh units were deployed at the front with between 70 and 100 officers and a defense platoon of about 100 troops.

Smersh units at the level of the various armies had between 25 and 50 officers under the command usually of a colonel or major general. Units at the division level had somewhat different aims. Since they were "closer" to the troops, they concentrated more on "passive" counterintelligence and general surveillance of the units. They did not conduct active or offensive counterespionage operations against German intelligence. At the division level the units consisted of 15 to 20 officers and a smaller guard unit of 20 to 30 troops. Smersh officers were of course also deployed in lesser units and independent units of all kinds. Smersh soldiers wore the uniforms of the branches to which they were attached, without special insignia.⁸²

Soviet work on the Special Sections and Smersh on the Leningrad Front gives a picture of the structure and functions of Smersh units at the division level. From photographs it is clear that the numbers of officers varied from 15 to 20 and that the main responsibility for the formation and function of information networks in the units fell to officers attached to the battalions. Each of them "selected" several chief informers, who in turn recruited others among the soldiers. Thus practically every unit and soldiers was under constant surveillance.⁸³

Smersh was subordinated to the military authorities, but the corresponding commanders had no authority or operative control over the units assigned. Each unit answered only to higher Smersh

⁸² R. STEPHAN, *Smersh*, 593. J. RUTKIEWICZ, W. N. KULIKOW, *Wojska NKWD 1917–1946*, Warszawa 1998, 52. Rutkiewicz and Kulikov emphasize that the basic unit of the Special Sections was the OO division, consisting of: OO chief at the rank of State Security captain, his deputy (first lieutenant), one or two experienced agents (lieutenants), four to five other agents (second lieutenants), one interrogator (lieutenant), office personnel, interpreters and defense platoon. *Ibid.*, 51. The text does not make clear the period to which this information refers.

⁸³ *V poyedinke s Abverom*, 27 ff, 64 ff. The photo on p. 287 shows 16 Smersh officers of the 109th artillery division.

authorities and thus formed part of a strictly centralized independent security mechanism. Part of the counterespionage operations, and practically all of the offensive ones, were carried out by Smersh units from the army level upward. They engaged in defensive counterespionage and surveillance of units from the level of corps down to battalion, with networks of informers at lower levels. Before the reorganization in April 1943 the Special Sections came under the NKVD headquarters, feeding information to its chief, through whom it reached Beria, who in turn informed Stalin and members of the GKO. By subordinating military counterintelligence to the ministry of defense the process was radically simplified.

No information about the numerical strength of the Special Sections and Smersh is to be found in the published sources. Ostryakov only mentions the six thousand killed during the first two years and nine months of the war. Stephan estimates the total strength of Smersh in the broad range of 15 to 30 thousand officers.⁸⁴

The American postwar survey of Soviet intelligence and counterintelligence organizations concluded that Smersh undertook a variety of tasks:

- Uncovering anti-Soviet activity and potential anti-Soviet elements,

 - measures against desertion, provocation and sabotage,

 - reporting any weakening of discipline and morale in the units or other weakening of preparedness,

 - improvement of discipline and morale,

 - information concerning shortcomings which might compromise preparedness, including conditions in barracks, poor training, hygienic conditions, etc.,

 - uncovering shortcomings in command, or conditions adversely affecting operations,

 - responsibility for "special measures" undertaken in Soviet lines designed to prevent withdrawal and desertion,

 - uncovering traitors who collaborated with the enemy under occupation,

⁸⁴ S. OSTRYAKOV, *Vojennyye chekisty*, 237. R. Stephan, *Smersh*, 596.

protection of secret materials,
protection of important military commands, especially military intelligence installations against sabotage,
discovery and liquidation of enemy agents within the army and among the civilian population who come into contact with the army,
interrogation of enemy agents and evaluation of foreign intelligence services
security for military intelligence agents before their deployment and evaluating their reliability upon return,
evaluation of all enemy materials.⁸⁵

To this must be added the training and deployment of special agents on enemy territory, dispatch of small scouting units behind enemy lines, assuring secure contact with the army, and later other tasks as well. Counterintelligence activity including obtaining information concerning German intelligence services and actions against them, whether liquidating agents or infiltrating enemy networks or training schools. Further tasks included radio disinformation campaigns directed against the German services through double agents. Together the Soviet services, the NKVD, NKGB and Smersh, are said to have undertaken more than 90 such disinformation radio campaigns.⁸⁶

Smersh agents also investigated all sorts of accidents at military installations. For example the deputy chief of Smersh Meshik was sent to Lublin in 1944 to investigate an explosion at a military warehouse. It was also Smersh officers who were the first Soviets to investigate the circumstances of Hitler's death.⁸⁷

Information supplied by Smersh also doubtless played an important role in the planning of various military offensives.

⁸⁵ *Survey of Soviet Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, 51, cited by R. STEPHAN, *Smersh*, 597 ff.

⁸⁶ A. SUDOPLATOV, *Sovietskaya politicheskaya i voyennaya razvedka*, 282. *V poyedinke s Abverom*, 110. On the disinformation see V. V. KOROVIN, "Pojedinki s Abverom", *VIZH*, 1995, no. 1, 31-36.

⁸⁷ *Arhiv novyeshey istorii Rossii, tom I, "Osobaya papka" I. V. Stalina. Iz materialov sekretariata NKVD-MVD SSSR 1944-1953*, Moscow 1994, 54.

According to P. Sudoplatov, for example, the NKVD reported on 7 May 1943 that the German supreme command was planning a large-scale offensive near Kursk with the code name Zitadelle. The information was obtained by its resident in London. As if in confirmation of this report, on 11 May, a Smersh unit on the Bryansk Front reported that its agent behind German lines reported a growing concentration of German troops around the town of Orel.⁸⁸ Similarly the staff of the Voronezh Front received important information from Smersh agents concerning the German defense of Kiev which aided in taking the city.⁸⁹

In the closing phases of the war one of the important tasks of Smersh was the investigation of repatriated or liberated Soviet prisoners of war. The circumstances of their imprisonment, their behavior and opinions, membership of organizations and so forth were all brought under scrutiny. Thus Smersh was more than an agency in the struggle against the intelligence services of imperialist countries. Its officers were empowered to arrest, and in the framework of the Soviet bureaucratic system they were at once investigators, judges and jailers. Soviet work on so sensitive a theme attempts to legitimize Smersh's role and conceal the fact that it functioned as a state within the state. Thus, it is frequently emphasized that "counterespionage work by the chekists was carried out in harmony with the guidelines of state defense committee and the central organs of state security, under the constant control and leadership of the Party organization and the political organs of the Soviet army."⁹⁰

As an organization Smersh possessed immense authority and carried out many operations independently of the NKVD and NKGB, though at the same time it made use of their resources wherever its own were insufficient. It was created not only as a classical counter-intelligence and security agency for the army, but also undertook

⁸⁸ P. SUDOPLATOV, A. SUDOPLATOV, *The Special Tasks*, 142. For the Smersh report see *VIZH*, 1993, no. 8, 7 ff.

⁸⁹ I. I. KUZNETSOV, *Stalin's Minister*, 153.

⁹⁰ *V pojedinke s Abverom*, 297.

security and political operations in formerly occupied regions of the USSR, then later in the countries of eastern and central Europe occupied by the Soviet army, where with other agencies it was responsible for securing the rear of the army.

The many-sided character of Smersh's activities which combined classic counterespionage with political-security operations, is also evident from the official Soviet portrait. S. Ostryakov asserted that "with the shift to an offensive against the enemy, a new facet of Smersh activity opened up: the uncovering and destruction of enemy agencies left behind on occupied territories, the liquidation of diversionary and bandit formations and of traitors and Fascist criminals."⁹¹ Thus Smersh became one of the key instruments in reestablishing control of the liberated regions of the Soviet Union and the subjugation of the occupied states of eastern Europe.

Soviet military counterintelligence operations during the Second World War may be divided into four broad categories: traditional counterespionage, securing the safety of the rear, political security actions and the investigation of criminal and political cases concerning members of the army. R. Stephan stresses that as far as the first category is concerned, "the characteristic counterespionage operations by Smersh clearly demonstrate the Soviet ability to neutralize the operations of enemy intelligence services."⁹²

From the testimony of captured German intelligence officers it appears that the Soviet side deployed its agents on a truly massive scale during the war. According to Abwehr estimates there were about 130,000 of them, about 10,000 every three months. But only about 12 percent of them were planted by the Special Sections and later by Smersh, which would come to about 15,000 of their own agents for the duration of the war. Many of the Soviet agents were only summarily trained, though the Smersh agents were among the best, which brought superior results. The tactic of massive deployment enabled the Soviet side, despite heavy losses, to obtain

⁹¹ S. OSTRYAKOV, *Voyennye chekisty*, 194.

⁹² R. STEPHAN, *Smerch*, 600.

needed information and at the same time repel German counter-espionage organs.⁹³

Soviet counterintelligence was interested not so much in gaining information about the German intelligence services, their agents, installations and activities, as in destroying their operations by liquidating their networks, converting their agents and using them to disseminate disinformation, and infiltrating their ranks with their own agents. It appears that the last was a Smersh specialty, especially infiltration in the German spy schools. This yielded detailed information about German agents attending these schools, whatever their nationality and offered opportunities for undermining their morale, encouraging desertion or defection. One such agent was I. S. Savchuk, who became an interpreter for the Abwehr and worked at their school at Poltava. He was able to pass on to Smersh information about 80 or so German agents and a further 30 Abwehr collaborators. Another Smersh agent went so far as to form his own network consisting of ten men at the Abwehr school at Königsberg. On his return he turned over detailed information on about 140 active Abwehr agents. Agents Michailov and Borisov worked at the Smolensk school, while an agent code named "Grishin" operated for several months in the vicinity of an unnamed Abwehr staff, where he obtained information about over a hundred German agents.⁹⁴

The extensive infiltration was highly effective, for it provided the Special Sections and Smersh with information about current and planned German operations, deployment of agents, methods and aims of training and a quantity of other information which substantially facilitated their discovery and possible use as double agents and disseminators of disinformation. At the same time Smersh obtained information about the German services, their organization, personell and activities. It appears that the Special Sections and other Soviet organs were so successful in this direction that as early as the winter of 1942 the German intelligence services were obliged to make more use of captured Soviet agents than their own. They were forced

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 600 ff.

⁹⁴ S. OSTRYAKOV, *Voyennye chekisty*, 173, V. V. Korovin, *Pojedinki s Abverom*, 35 ff.

to shift from offensive to defensive activities, which yielded a far more limited stream of information, which was manifested in the possibilities for conducting the war. The situation of the German secret services on the Eastern Front worsened to the point that from 1944 they were forced to dissolve several sections for lack of material. This was the case for example of the section for evaluation of captured enemy documents Luststelle III Ost.⁹⁵

Ostryakov asserts that the Special Sections possessed sufficient information about the Abwehr as early as the beginning of 1942, which allowed them to change from a passive to an active posture and launch a campaign for the “dismantling of the mechanism of Hitler’s military intelligence”. However, it appears that the change occurred somewhat later, in the winter of 1942-43,⁹⁶ a judgment confirmed by other Soviet work declaring that “by 1943 the Soviet counterintelligence overcame its difficulties of the first phase of the war and shifted to offensive activity.”⁹⁷

Special Smersh groups carried out a wide range of operations “liquidating enemy agents, occupying key positions or objects along with the first army units, often before the arrival of the main force, attacking and occupying German intelligence installations, interrogating German prisoners. There were also intelligence-gathering operations lasting several weeks, often in cooperation with partisan groups, behind German lines aimed at extracting information from German officers.”⁹⁸

After the definitive turning point in the progress of the war in 1943 the security of the rear of the Soviet army became a priority. The retreating Germans left behind their agents and diversionary groups who became Smersh targets. In August 1943 for example the Abwehr staff “Walli” ordered the creation of 200 agencies equipped with radios, to be deployed in regions which it was thought would be

⁹⁵ R. STEPHAN, *Smerch*, 601.

⁹⁶ S. OSTRYAKOV, *Voyenniye chekisty*, 169. R. Stephan, *Smerch*, 602.

⁹⁷ N. N. KOSHELOV, B. D. LEBIN, “Za poyedinkem poyedinok”, in *Voyennye kontrrazvedchiki*, 192–193.

⁹⁸ See for example *V poyedinke s Abverom*, 110.

vacated. Each was to form its own spy network. According to Ostryakov, in the region of Riga alone, Smersh groups of the 2nd Baltic Front liquidated 4 abwehr agents and a further 48 spies.⁹⁹

Operations of this sort were closely connected with the exposure and liquidation of all “anti-Soviet elements” in regions occupied by the Soviet army. This was especially true in the western Ukraine and the Baltic region but also elsewhere where the operations of Soviet security organs were focussed on the destruction and liquidation of illegal nationalist organizations and their military forces. Units of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) attacked small units of the Soviet army and stores and attempted sabotage on the railways and roads. Their greatest success was an attack along the 1st Ukrainian Front on a column under N. F. Vatutin, whom they mortally wounded.¹⁰⁰ But they were subsequently wiped out. In March and April 1944 Smersh in cooperation with army units and the NKVD mounted 166 operations on the 1st Ukrainian Front against UPA units and OUN (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists) networks. According to Soviet data these operations destroyed 47 UPA units and liquidated 930 of their members.¹⁰¹

Similar operations were conducted behind the lines on practically all fronts. On the 1st Byelorussian Front Smersh, supported NKVD units, destroyed more than 20 Ukrainian groups in the spring of 1944. Similar operations were carried out in re-occupied Baltic territory.¹⁰² Their aim was not only the liquidation of enemy networks, agents and armed groups, but also of anyone standing in the way of Soviet

⁹⁹ S. OSTRYAKOV, *Voyennye chekisty*, 188.

¹⁰⁰ P. APTEKAR, “NKVD protiv rasshitych soroček. Vnutrenniye voyska i nacionalnoye dvizhenye na zapadnoy Ukraine”, *Rodina*, 1999, no. 8, 126. For Ukrainian and other units in the German army see M. TEJCHMAN, *Ve službách Třetí říše. Hitlerovy zahraniční jednotky* (In the Service of the Third Reich: Hitler’s Foreign Units), Prague 1999, 156 ff. J. WANNER, “Odboj a zrada v Pobaltí” (Rebellion and Treason in the Baltic), *Historický obzor* 1994, no 5, 101–108. *Ibid.*, “K otázce spolupráce orientálních národů SSSR a Němci 1941–1945” (Cooperation between Eastern Nationalities of the Soviet Union and the Germans), *Slovanský přehled*, 1994, no. 1, 115–119.

¹⁰¹ S. OSTRYAKOV, *Voyennye chekisty*, 201.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

occupation. Smersh carried out its operations immediately, when the area was still under army control, and assured the initial pacification. It used its agent networks and information gained earlier to direct its activities against illegal nationalist units. Further “pacification” in these territories, however, was the task of NKVD troops and NKGB personnel.¹⁰³ Smersh, however, participated in creating conditions for the re-introduction of Soviet control on occupied territory in the short term.

It appears that Abakumov and Smersh also played a role in the deportation of entire nationalities within the Soviet Union who were accused of collaboration. This was the case of the Chechens and Ingushes in February 1944, when the chief role was played by the NKVD, seconded by Smersh personnel of the Transcaucasus Corps.¹⁰⁴

Smersh played a similar role on a much larger scale during the occupation of Polish territory, where one of the chief aims was the liquidation of the non-Communist Polish resistance gathered around the *Arma Krajowa* (AK). Smersh took part in uncovering AK networks and its officers often assumed leading command posts in operations. In the absence of its own armed force, larger-scale operations were carried out by NKVD troops. The role of Smersh is often therefore shrouded in secrecy, though in cases where there own troops were sufficient, Smersh groups operated independently.

The “pacification” operations in the regions of Białystok and Biała Podlaska in the autumn of 1944 may serve as an example. The operation was led and coordinated by colonel Kozakevich, deputy chief of Smersh for the 2nd Byelorussian Front. A total of ten operative groups composed of 200 “experienced personnel” from Smersh and the NKGB were sent out into the districts. These groups had at their disposal NKVD troops to the strength of three regiments. The mission of the groups was to uncover and arrest the leadership and members of the AK, agents of the Polish government-in-exile in London, members of other Polish organizations opposed

¹⁰³ See P. Aptekar, 125 ff.

¹⁰⁴ I. I. KUZNYETSOV, *Stalin's Minister*, 154.

to the policies of the pro-Communist Lublin Polish Committee of National Liberation, agents of German intelligence services (though this was clearly only secondary), and to take action against groups and individuals opposing the transfer of Russian Ukrainian, Byelorussian and Ruthenian populations from Poland to the USSR.¹⁰⁵ In large part these were tasks which had little to do with classical counterintelligence, though Smersh made full use of such methods for other aims. In the course of operations 2,044 persons were arrested and 1,300 weapons confiscated, along with a quantity of ammunition and other equipment.¹⁰⁶

Parallel and independent operations were undertaken by Smersh groups who by 1 November 1944 had captured 499 individuals in the Białystok region, "active AK members, agents of the London émigré government, German agents and other criminal elements."¹⁰⁷ Such relatively independent operations demonstrate that their chief aim was the liquidation of the illegal network of the Polish non-Communist resistance and the isolation of its armed units in the forests.

The GKO, headed by Stalin, ordered the creation of a system to "cleans the rear of the Red Army from enemy elements". In the first half of January 1945 representatives or "deputies" of the three security organizations, NKVD, NKGB and Smersh, were sent to each of the Fronts to direct and coordinate repressive actions. They were provided with a further 1,050 "experienced Chekists", i.e. about 150 to a Front. They also had NKVD troops at their disposal, while the 31,000 strong NKVD units assigned to protect the rear were reinforced with a further four divisions and regiments totalling 27,900 troops.

The task was everywhere the same: "in harmony with the advance of Red Army Units to conduct all necessary Chekist operations in

¹⁰⁵ See the report of V. Abakumov and Canavi (NKGB chief in Byelorussia) to L. Beria, 3 November 1944, in *Teczka Specjalna J. S. Stalina. Raporty NKWD z Polski 1944-1946*, Warszawa 1998, 90 ff.

¹⁰⁶ Report by Abakumov and Canavi to Beria, 13 November 1944 in *Teczka specjalna*, 107 ff.

¹⁰⁷ Report by Abakumov and Canavi to Beria, 3 November 1944, in *Teczka specjalna*, 91.

liberated territories, to expose and arrest members of espionage and diversionary agencies of the German intelligence services, terrorists, members of various enemy organizations, brigand and rebel groups without regard to nationality, to discover and confiscate illegal radio transmitters, arms caches, illegal printing presses and other technical equipment used by enemy agents.”¹⁰⁸

The broad authority granted to the deputies extended of course to arresting members of the police, administrators of prisons and concentration camps, enemy military commanders, civil servants, directors of industrial and administrative organizations, members of the press, members of Fascist organizations, authors of anti-Soviet publications, members of enemy military groups and also the so-called Russian Liberation Army, together with all other suspicious elements.¹⁰⁹

The figures show that the Soviet leadership were combining normal military security operations and the elimination of remnants of the occupying German forces with the liquidation of the non-Communist resistance, nationalist groups and all “elements” considered to be anti-Soviet. It appears that in the middle of January 1945 members of Smersh of the 151st artillery division, 7th Guard Army on the 2nd Ukrainian Front also arrested the Swedish Red Cross agent R. Wallenberg, who later died in a Soviet prison.¹¹⁰

The results of the extensive security operations in the rear of the Soviet army, which lasted nearly three months, were reported to Stalin by Beria on 29 March 1945. 171,228 enemy personnel were arrested, including 7,000 agents and collaborators of enemy intelligence services, 77,000 members of Fascist organizations, over 12,000 members of “other enemy organizations”, several thousand police officers, prison administrators, German civil servants, nearly

¹⁰⁸ Letter from L. Beria to J. Stalin, 11 January 1945, in *Teczka specjalna*, 166. The document names all the deputies involved. For example on the 3rd Byelorussian Front the function of NKVD deputy was filled by Commissar of State Security, Second Class, Abakumov (Smersh), while his deputy was General Zelenin (NKVD) and General Luby (NKGB of the Lithuanian SSR).

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹¹⁰ M. PARRISH, *The Lesser Terror*, 122 ff.

13,000 “traitors collaborating with the occupiers” and over 29,000 further enemy elements. They included 101,000 Germans, 35,000 Poles, 8,000 Russians and more than 6,000 Lithuanians.¹¹¹

Meanwhile the Soviet side strengthened the organs of the Polish provisional government, the Polish Committee of National Liberation, over which it extended its control. In October 1944 the Interior commissar I. A. Serov conducted an inspection of the Polish divisions. His alarming report led to the dispatch of 100 Smersh personnel to reinforce the Polish military counterintelligence (though Serov had requested 500), while 15 officers of the NKVD-NKGB were attached to Polish state security.¹¹²

With the approaching end of the war the activities of Smersh shifted toward securing the administration of occupied territories. Thus the NKVD gained authority as its personnel played the most prominent role, though in the early stages it shared information and personnel with Smersh and the NKGB. In April 1945 the GKO issued a resolution creating the post of deputy to the Front Commander for civil administration on German territory behind the 1st and 2nd Byelorussian and 1st Ukrainian Fronts. Interior commissar I. A. Serov was appointed to the 1st Byelorussian Front, while the 2nd was covered by the state security commissar, grade 3, L. F. Canava, until now state security commissar in Byelorussia, and General P. I. Myeshik of Smersh was appointed to the 1st Ukrainian Front.¹¹³

The three security services, then, shared the functions, though the most important was the 1st Ukrainian Front, so that Smersh occupied the prime position. The task of these highly placed security officers was to control the activities of the German administration, liquidate spies, arrest persons working in German repressive agencies, Fascist organizations, etc. They were assigned groups of operative personnel

¹¹¹ Beria's report in *Teczka specjalna*, 225–228. For a broader view of Soviet operations against non-Communist Polish organizations see the collection *Wojna domowa czy nowa okupacja? Polska po roku 1944*, Wrocław 1998. See especially the article by A. Paczkowski “Aparat bezpieczeństwa wobec podziemia niepodległościowego w latach 1944–1948”, *Ibid.*, 83–101.

¹¹² L. Beria to Stalin and Molotov, 17 October 1944, in *Teczka specjalna*, 63–67.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 253 ff.

from the NKVD and NKGB and could also make use of Smersh officers, though it appears that they were not members of these groups from the beginning. All the deputies, whatever service they belonged to, also functioned as NKVD agents, and their power of arrest also corresponded to the NKVD.¹¹⁴

The system formed in January 1945 and modified in April for Germany was intended for wartime conditions, so that in June, in the aftermath of the war, a reorganization was carried out. New NKVD deputies were appointed to the army commands in wide regions of central and eastern Europe:

On German territory for troops under G. K. Zhukov, I. A. Serov was reappointed,

on the territory of Austria, Hungary and Czechoslovakia (I. S. Konyev), P. I. Myeshik,

in Poland for troops under K. Rokossovsky, N. N. Selivanovsky, in 1944-45 deputy chief of LKO headquarters, then NKVD deputy on the 4th Ukrainian Front and adviser to the Polish ministry of public security,

for the southern troops under F. S. Tolbuchin in Bulgaria and Rumania, A. M. Pavlov, until now commander of NKVD troops on the 3rd Ukrainian Front.¹¹⁵

Deputies of the NKVD were to "control and direct" all Soviet security agencies in the given territory, i.e. the NKVD, NKGB and Smersh. Their duties continued to include the liquidation of networks left behind by the departing enemy and the discovery and arrest of war criminals. They also directed the work of "Control and Infiltration Committees" which operated in the prison camps and arranged the repatriation of Soviet citizens, whether civilian or military. They had at their disposal NKVD troops in Germany (10 regiments),

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 254.

¹¹⁵ Beria to Stalin, 22 June 1945, in *Teczka specjalna*, 304 ff. Smersh had two representatives in this system: Myeshik and Selivanovsky. It remains an open question whether this was fortuitous, or reflected a plan to "occupy" the important territory separating Germany from the Soviet Union.

Austria, Hungary and Czechoslovakia (6 regiments), Poland (15 regiments), and Rumania and Bulgaria (4 regiments).¹¹⁶

In May 1945, in anticipation of a wave of repatriated Soviet citizens, Stalin ordered the Front commanders (Zhukov, Rokossovsky, Konyev, R. I. Malinkovsky, Tolbuchinov, J. I. Jeremenkov, A. V. Khrulev, Beria, Merkulov, Abakumov, and the chairman of the committee for repatriation F. I. Golikov) to establish a total of 95 camps, each with a capacity of 10,000, to which Soviet citizens were to be sent for repatriation. Civilians were investigated by commissions of the NKVD-NKGB, while military personnel were dealt with by Smersh.¹¹⁷

Smersh's duties continued to include gathering information about Soviet army officers suspected of collaboration with the Germans. The most prominent of them was A. A. Vlasov, commandant of the 2nd shock troops, who surrendered to the Germans in July 1942 south of Leningrad and at the end of the year was found at the head of the "Russian Committee", later renamed "Committee for the Liberation of the Peoples of Russia". Vlasov then began recruiting a "Russian Liberation Army". He was arrested on 12 May 1945 near Pilsen by a Smersh group supported by units of the artillery battalion of the 162nd brigade. He was taken to Dresden and Moscow, where he was tried on 1 August 1946 and executed.¹¹⁸

Smersh of course continued to carry out the same tasks it had pursued throughout the war, but as the end drew near, urgent efforts were made to identify and arrest all Soviet prisoners of war suspected of collaboration. Most of the Soviet generals were freed in April and May 1945 by allied units, mainly American, in southern and western Germany, where the Germans had sent most of the high Soviet officers. But they did not long remain free, as they were turned over to the Soviet authorities and subjected to thorough investigation by Smersh, which worked in cooperation with the Soviet government authorities in charge of repatriation. Thus they were able to operate

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 305.

¹¹⁷ M. PARISH, *The Lesser Terror*, 131.

¹¹⁸ S. OSTRJAKOV, *Voyennye chekisty*, 221. "Sudby generalskiye", *VIZH*, 1993, no. 6, 21.

throughout western and central Europe, visiting prison camps and persuading or forcing Soviet citizens to return.¹¹⁹

Available sources indicate that 80 Soviet generals were captured and imprisoned and that two remained on occupied territory. Five were able to escape, 23 died in prison, 12 defected. Only 37 returned to the USSR.¹²⁰

The first group of Soviet officers, including 29 generals arrived in Moscow from Paris on 26 April 1945. There were met by members of Smersh and taken to a secure location near Moscow where they were subjected to long, detailed interrogations. Their behavior was monitored day and night, and Smersh personnel eavesdropped on their conversations. In this state, 37 generals were investigated and "filtered".¹²¹ Practically all the military prisoners of war were treated the same way by Smersh agents at various levels.

Abakumov sent Stalin preliminary results on 31 August 1945. Generals P. G. Ponyedyelin, P. A. Artyemenko, J. A. Yegorov, J. S. Zybin, I. P. Krupennikov, M. A. Byeleshev, A. G. Samochin, and cavalry general Lazutin had collaborated and recommended that they be imprisoned. He added that no compromising material has so far surfaced concerning Generals K. F. Lukin, I. M. Lubovcev, N. F. Michailov, A. S. Zotov, P. P. Pavlov, I. I. Melnikov, K. L. Dobroserdov, I. M. Skugarev, and I. A. Kornilov, and therefore recommended their release with the proviso that they be kept under surveillance.¹²² The other generals were investigated further, with the exception of General Lukin, who had lost a leg and was left with a paralyzed arm. He had been charged by Minajev with criticizing Soviet collectivization, the justice system and the Party leadership during his imprisonment, which he strenuously denied. In view of the vagueness of the charges, Abakumov had him shifted to the list of victims.¹²³

¹¹⁹ See the report by Abakumov to Stalin, 27 May 1945, in "Sudby generalskye", *VIZH*, 1992, no. 10, 24.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 25.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 26.

Stalin rejected the recommendation that the generals be freed, so that the investigation continued until December 1945. Abakumov delivered his final report on 21 December, and Stalin accepted it. 25 of the generals were to be turned over to the personnel section of the defense ministry, which was to decide on their further classification. Eleven others were to be arrested and tried for treason for joining organizations established by the Germans and carrying on anti-Soviet activities.¹²⁴ After Stalin's death all were gradually rehabilitated, some posthumously. Recently released documentation shows that only about 15 percent of the captured generals collaborated with the Nazis.¹²⁵

This sort of action was perhaps exceptional in its scope, but it was not atypical, since it was part of the work assigned to Smersh. In the course of the war, 35 generals were unjustly accused and imprisoned or executed for treason, which included withdrawal. Since the Special Section played one of the key roles on this score, there is no doubt that they contributed to the weakening of the Soviet fighting capacity at the beginning of the war.¹²⁶

The released documentation demonstrate that the Special Sections and later Smersh manufactured evidence (*spravki*) at the order of one of the high party, state or military functionaries. One of those who made such requests was Malenkov, secretary of the central committee of the VKS_(b) and chief of its personnel department, responsible for selecting personnel for high posts in the Party army and nearly all other areas. Others included Beria and the defense ministers. For example, in July 1941, at Malenkov's request, the 3rd bureau of the defense commissariat (Special Section) provided

¹²⁴ Abakumov to J. Stalin, 21.12.1945. "Sudby generalskiye", *VIZH*, 1992, no. 10, 26–32. The report contains two appendices with detailed information about the generals in both categories. For their fate and that of others including for example Vlasov see the series "Sudby generalskiye" which appeared in the journal *VIZH* from 1992 to 1994. See also A. A. MASLOV, "Forgiven by Stalin. Soviet Generals who Returned from German Prisons in 1941–1945 and who were Rehabilitated", *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol 12, no 2, June 1999, 173–219.

¹²⁵ M. PARRISH, *The Lesser Terror*, 134.

¹²⁶ I. I. KUZNETSOV, *Stalin's Minister*, 155.

material on J. A. Shchandenko, the commandant of the Kiev Special Corps M. P. Kirponos, the commandant of the North Caucasian Corps I. S. Konyev, and others.¹²⁷

Especially murderous was the *spravka* requested by the defense minister S. K. Timoshenko in March 1941 on General G. M. Stern. The motive remains unknown; in any case, Stern was placed under constant surveillance by the 3rd bureau of the LKO. He was arrested during the war with other officers and executed without trial on 28 October 1941.¹²⁸

Similarly, Abakumov uncovered a plot at the end of 1941 in the Frunze military academy, evacuated to Tashkent. Seven instructors were arrested and accused of defeatism and endorsing the German view that the defeat of the Soviet Union was inevitable. In fact they had been discussing the reasons for the Soviet defeats in the previous months and possible remedies. It appears that mere consideration of so sensitive a problem in the presence of soldiers was unacceptable.¹²⁹

Though we have no detailed information, it appears that of the approximately 4.2 million Soviet civilians and soldiers repatriated and investigated as of 1 March 1946, 6.5 percent were left in prisons and camps of the NKVD, 58 percent were allowed to return to their homes, 19 percent were posted to military work battalions and 19 percent to army units. Officers were generally far more harshly treated than civilians or soldiers. Of the 50,400 officers freed from enemy prisons before 1 October 1944, 20,000 were posted to storm units with little chance of survival. For officers reposting to former units was practically excluded, and as a rule they ended as prisoners in the NKVD system. Without exception, repatriated individuals were viewed with grave suspicion.¹³⁰

Repression in the Soviet Union and its army was an endless process and continued after the war. While Abakumov still led

¹²⁷ See *VIZH*, 1994, no. 2, 6–12. Much similar documentation was published in *VIZH* from 1992 to 1994.

¹²⁸ *VIZH*, 1994, no. 3, 18–23.

¹²⁹ M. PARRISH, *The Lesser Terror*, 113.

¹³⁰ R. W. DAVIEW, *Soviet History in the Yeltsin Era*, Houndmills 1997, 167 ff.

Smersh, on 23 April 1946, Air Marshal A. A. Novikov, twice Hero of the USSR, was arrested on grounds that he was responsible for shortcomings in the air force. His case, however, was conducted by Abakumov in his new post as Minister of State Security (MGB), which he took up on 4 May 1946. Amid the postwar reorganization the commissariats were changed to the Council of Ministers and ministries and Smersh was dissolved, or rather its structure was subsumed once again into the ministry of defense under the MGB. But that is another story.

Smersh was doubtless a highly effective organization performing a whole series of functions. It was at once a counterespionage organization and an instrument of political repression. The information and spy networks which the Special Sections had inserted into even the least significant army units at the beginning of the war had a number of duties, but they made it extremely difficult for enemy intelligence services to persuade members of the Red Army to collaborate. This, in combination with further security measures and the generally closed system of the Soviet Union, meant that the German intelligence services faced enormous problems not only in recruiting agents in the Soviet Army but also in collecting necessary information.

The same networks also acted as an instrument of political control and repression, in that they were used to uncover anti-Soviet attitudes or expressions of discontent among members of the army. The Special Sections and Smersh thus assured the absolute loyalty of the Soviet armed forces to the Communist Party and to Stalin personally. Especially during the first months of the war they played an important role in maintaining fighting capacity. In the same way they were indispensable in preparing for the military offensive. On territories liberated and occupied by the Soviet Army Smersh was one of the triumvirate of security elements, and in the zone extending 150 kilometers behind the front lines they were the chief organization assuring the security of the rear. At the same time they used their information sources and counterintelligence skills to lead operations against "enemy and anti-Soviet forces" in the broadest sense of the

term. Thus they participated significantly in the liquidation of the non-Communist resistance, the nationalist movements and thus in the re-occupation of the western part of the Soviet Union and eventually also the states of eastern and central Europe.

Summary

The major means of oppression was the well-known NKVD, the Interior Ministry, respectively all the organizations that belonged to its organizational structure. During the whole existence of the USSR, counter-intelligence service (the Special Division, from 1943 the SMERS) was one of them. The sole organizational incorporation - the counter-intelligence being controlled by a different ministry than the Ministry of Defence – is a typical feature of perceiving security in a Soviet way.

Based on the archive materials and literature recently made public, though the important documents are still not accessible, the author outlined the Special Division/SMERS's basic organizational structure during the WW II. He tried to follow the reasons for the organizational changes between 1940-1945 when the counter-intelligence service was exempted from the subordination to the NKVD and then re-subordinated again. These changes have clearly taken place due to the war development and the power fight within the Stalinist elites.

Great attention is given the analysis of the large scale of SMERS's tasks during the WW II., that reveal SMERS's objectives and their actual realization. On the list of SMERS's tasks we would not only find counter-intelligence activities in the army and the military circles but at the same time it was to closely follow the political and moral state of the army and supervise the actual counter-intelligence operations against the enemy as well as support the outposted Soviet soldiers. Due to its possibilities SMERS took an active part in

operations against the Ukrainian and Polish undergrounds as well as the Baltic lands and all the countries controlled by the Soviet army. In the end of the war and shortly after, SMERS's major task was to "filter" repatriated Soviet soldiers returning from the German captivity.

It's clear that SMERS was an efficient organization dealing with many counter-intelligence operations as well as it was a means of political oppression.

Translation: Frederick L. Snider