

Did Oleg Gordievsky's Espionage Hasten the End of the Cold War?

Written by Arran Kennedy

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ARRAN KENNEDY, DEC 7 2022

Operating between 1974 and 1985, Oleg Gordievsky was the leading Soviet agent of the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS/MI6) during an acutely febrile period of the Cold War (Gordievsky, 1995; Macintyre, 2019). Built-up cynicism in regular diplomatic channels after years of rigid *détente* and an increasingly closed-off Politburo meant secret intelligence on Soviet thinking was critical for Western decision-makers. In this context, and thanks to his role in the political intelligence line – the main direction of KGB activity abroad (Mitrokhin, 2002, p.101) – at the KGB's London residency where he rose to the acting *rezident*, Gordievsky was vital in exposing Soviet paranoia, and therefore, informing the West's approach to the USSR. This essay argues that his revealing of Operation RYAN, an operation to detect a U.S. nuclear first strike, which the Soviets believed was imminent, and Soviet anxiety during NATO's Able Archer 83 (AA83) training exercise, led Margaret Thatcher to adopt a new approach of diplomatic engagement with the Soviets and convince Ronald Reagan's administration to do the same. This resulted in summits with Gorbachev, in which Gordievsky played a behind-the-scenes role that further accelerated the thaw in East-West relations and, in turn, the demise of the Soviet Union. Despite the 'tit-for-tat' expulsions following his exfiltration from Moscow in 1985, Gordievsky's benefit to diplomacy outweighed the minimal obstacle that those expulsions presented.

Omand (2010, p. 22-5) defines intelligence by its purpose: intelligence improves the quality of decision-making by reducing ignorance. Gordievsky's intelligence reduced the West's ignorance of the Soviet threat and the true extent of its paranoia over Reagan's 'Evil Empire' rhetoric. In remarks that explain much of the Cold War thinking, Herman (1996, p. 247) points out that "when ideology and threat provide the adrenalin, there is always a temptation to dramatize the enemy's strength". The intelligence, thus, seeks to reduce that temptation. In the early Cold War period, a lack of intelligence resulted in the dangerous myth of a 'bomber' and 'missile gap', and discussion of U.S. pre-emptive strikes to combat it was only quelled by advances in imagery intelligence (IMINT) (Andrew, 1998, p. 327). Gordievsky's human intelligence (HUMINT) in the 1980s had a similar effect. Western intelligence agencies believed the KGB, like the state it operated for, was a confident and formidable adversary, leaving its malign mark across the West. But Gordievsky's intelligence placed this threat in context, dispelling the 'ten-foot giant of myth' and shocking SIS agents with how few agents, confidential contacts and illegals were being run in Britain – and how unthreatening they were (Macintyre, 2019, p. 140).

There was a similar phenomenon the other way around. Lacking intelligence assessment, Soviet leaders selected raw materials reinforcing their misconceptions of the West: its intentions, strength, and the threat it posed (Cradcock, 2002, p. 286). By the 1980s, this lack of intelligence assessment, *inter alia*, bred a paranoia among the Soviet leadership that Western diplomats, when told of it, explained away as propaganda (Walden, 1999, pp. 233-5). With diplomatic channels 'frozen', secret intelligence (mainly from Gordievsky) explaining this paranoia became Thatcher's main source of insight (Moore, 2015, p. 233). Intelligence failure can occur when the normal level of 'background radiation' is not understood, and therefore, indicators of a worsening situation, and when the situation reaches a critical point, can be missed (Omand, 2010, pp. 235-6). Operation RYAN documents, smuggled out of the London *rezidentura* by Gordievsky and passed to SIS, revealed the situation was worsening.

RYAN was a joint KGB/GRU operation, the largest in peacetime, to discover plans and preparations for what the

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Soviets (erroneously) believed to be an impending U.S. first nuclear strike – an idea first proposed in 1981 by paranoid KGB Chairman and later General Secretary Yuri Andropov (Andrew and Gordievsky, 1993, pp. 111-40). Most KGB officers abroad viewed RYAN with scepticism – and the KGB Centre's detachment from reality dangerous – but were ordered nonetheless to provide evidence of indications (no matter how spurious) that supported Andropov's fears (Gordievsky, 1995, pp. 301-2). RYAN's existence revealed just how unstable the Cold War had become: the Centre, and in turn, the political leadership, were putting the cart before the horse by seeking out evidence – no matter how unrelated to nuclear warfare – to support a conclusion it had already made (Macintyre, 2019, p. 149).

For instance, in February 1983, the Centre claimed that a 'special degree of urgency' to discover an attack meant KGB residencies had to report indications, such as increases in the purchase and price of blood for blood transfusions post-nuclear exchange, higher-than-usual number of lights on and cars at government buildings, and information from clergyman and bankers allegedly involved in the first-strike conspiracy (Andrew and Gordievsky, 1993, pp. 116-9; p. 120). In Britain, blood donors are unpaid and there are regular donation campaigns; MoD officials may work later into the night during some periods; a clergyman's view on nuclear war does not reflect government policy. While seeking out RYAN indicators was time-consuming and thus prevented KGB officers from conducting harmful espionage – a 'silver lining' for MI5 (Andrew, 2010, pp. 721-22) – it was the automated nature of RYAN that proved worrisome.

The Soviet military doctrine was to strike first – as military textbooks and Pact planning documents reveal (Pry, 1999, pp. 10-14). To determine when to strike, RYAN had an automated component: each 'sighting,' alongside other data variables, was fed into a computer system which calculated the overall East-West "correlation of forces", in turn producing a ratio that indicated when the West would launch a surprise attack – so the Soviets could pre-emptively launch one first (ibid., pp. 18-19). Thus, if enough perfectly innocent 'sightings' are given a nefarious explanation, and this accumulates over time, the ratio could have instigated a Soviet nuclear strike. Details on RYAN were first treated with scepticism by SIS before it realised the level of paranoia RYAN indicated (Gordievsky, 1995, p. 146; p. 302). In short, Gordievsky revealed to the West how ignorant it was to the Soviets' ignorance of the West.

Thatcher was receptive to Gordievsky's intelligence on RYAN in particular and intelligence generally: she was a good consumer of intelligence, interested but aware of its limitations (Aldrich and Cormac, 2016, pp. 353-83). Undoubtedly, Gordievsky's RYAN intelligence – revealing deep-seated Soviet insecurity – convinced her to pivot to a 'new policy' of engagement, formulated at the infamous Chequers seminars (FCO, 1983). To achieve this, however, Thatcher knew that she needed Reagan on the side, recognising that Britain's influence peaked when working *through* U.S. administrations receptive, as Reagan's was, to British intelligence and analysis (Cradcock, 1997, p. 52). It was Gordievsky's intelligence on AA83 and Thatcher's advocacy of it that convinced Reagan – and changed the course of international relations.

In November 1983, NATO's training exercise AA83 simulated a war that escalated into a nuclear exchange, and therefore, the exercise practised such an eventuality, but the Centre – mirror-imaging its plans onto NATO – believed AA83 was a cover for a real attack (Jones, 2016). Prior, RYAN intelligence convinced NATO to alter AA83 to make it less realistic, like the participation of political leaders (Oberdorfer, 1998, p. 65). Despite this, during AA83 Gordievsky informed SIS of "flash" alerts from the Centre mistakenly reporting an alert at U.S. bases and implying this meant the West had begun preparations to strike the East (Andrew and Gordievsky, 1993, p. 137). In fact, U.S. military bases increased security after the recent Beirut bombings, not because of AA83 (Barrass, 2009, p. 299). Gordievsky's HUMINT was crucial at the time: signals intelligence (SIGINT) showed similar signs of Soviet military alert during AA83, but this intelligence on its own was met with scepticism in the British Joint Intelligence Committee, and the Assessments staff analyst who identified the signs had to 'push hard' to get it through (Phythian, 2017, p. 6). Thus, without Gordievsky's HUMINT – which, Robert Gates (1996, p. 270) notes, was the West's primary intelligence source on AA83 – Britain may not have been able to prove Soviet anxiety during the exercise, share this intelligence assessment with Reagan, and adjust the West's approach to and thinking about the USSR (Barrass, 2009, p. 397; Macintyre, 2019, p. 183). As Charles Powell, Thatcher's powerful foreign affairs adviser, said: 'Gordievsky's perceptive insights into the Soviet leadership's profound sense of insecurity was of real value to both Mrs. Thatcher and President Reagan' (Barrass, 2009, p. 397).

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Having previously dismissed Soviet alarm as propaganda, Reagan now turned to diplomacy, empowering his Secretary of State to open a dialogue with and calm the fears of the Soviets (Andrew, 1996, p. 476). Gates suggested this pivot was always the plan: the CIA's covert wars and the aggressive Pentagon build-up were always meant to make way for negotiations once the U.S. had achieved the upper hand against the Soviets (ibid., p. 478). This seems unlikely. From AA83 onwards, it was Gordievsky's intelligence and Thatcher's advocacy of it that led Reagan, over the heads of some advisers and analysts who remained sceptical of it, to adopt this new stance (Fischer, 2012). As Gordievsky's case officer and future SIS Chief John Scarlett put it, his intelligence "set off a train of thought that Cold War stability wasn't so stable. We were misjudging the mentality and psychology of the rather old Soviet leadership" (Moore, 2015, p. 117). That 'train of thought' was continually propelled by Gordievsky's *ongoing* insight – like KGB cables in 1984 still warning of 'the growing immediate threat of war' by the U.S., increasing reporting frequencies on that threat, and ordering a surge in espionage against the Defense Intelligence Agency for its role in a future strike (Andrew and Gordievsky, 1992, p. 2; 6-13).

Gordievsky's continuing supply of intelligence increased the influence of Britain in Washington, D.C. and Langley, Virginia. Following the *Spycatcher* affair and Kim Philby's treachery, SIS handling of Gordievsky for eleven years improved its relationship with the CIA, assuring the Agency that SIS could be trusted and was not compromised – a thorn in CIA-SIS relations (Corera, 2011, p. 270). CIA knew that SIS had something it lacked: insight into high-level Soviet thinking. CIA's senior Soviet analyst noted it failed to recruit a single agent with such 'trenchant information' (Goodman, 2008, p. 111). The U.S.'s reliance on IMINT did (and still does) breed complacency which failed to cultivate human sources (Clough, 2004, p. 605). Indeed, the CIA recognised just how important Gordievsky's continuous flow of intelligence was that it agreed to procure a camera for his potential use – a camera that SIS's own technicians refused to produce on cost grounds (Macintyre, 2019, pp. 203-4). Human agents like Gordievsky in the Cold War were particularly important for conveying what was not committed to paper or reflected in intercepts: either because it was so secret, or it involved something so obvious to the Soviets yet crucial in international relations – the Soviet worldview, assumptions, conventions – that the West needed to understand if it was to engage the Soviets (Barrass, 2009, p. 407). To translate this new understanding into change, Thatcher maximised the competitive advantage Gordievsky afforded her to lead a diplomatic rapprochement with the next generation of Soviet leaders through meetings and negotiations – and encourage Reagan to do the same.

Gordievsky benefitted diplomacy through his influential role in the 1984 visit of Gorbachev to Britain before Gorbachev became General Secretary. His intelligence on the KGB's preference for Gorbachev as the next Soviet leader undoubtedly played a role in Thatcher's identifying Gorbachev (Gordievsky, 1995, p. 346). To cast Gorbachev in a good light and encourage constructive discussions with Thatcher, the Centre demanded memoranda forecasting how his meetings would progress (ibid., p. 352). Gordievsky was in a unique position: he not only supplied SIS with Gorbachev's briefings but, crucially, inserted material from British intelligence on the line the British would take into Gorbachev's briefings – thereby choreographing the meeting to improve relations (ibid., p. 357). For Gorbachev's meeting with Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe, Gordievsky even inserted (with SIS's help) material from Howe's briefing straight into Gorbachev's memorandum (ibid.). Because of Gordievsky, the UK and Soviet sides were quite literally on the same (briefing) page.

Following the meetings, Thatcher (1984) infamously declared: "I like Mr. Gorbachev. We can do business together" and Gorbachev spoke of how the two leaders 'established a good understanding' (FCO, 1984). This relationship allowed Thatcher to become 'a conduit from Gorbachev to Reagan, selling him in Washington as a man to do business with, and operating as an agent of influence in both directions' (Cradcock, 1997, p. 201). High-level summits – less likely to have begun without Gordievsky's hidden hand in previously exposing RYAN and AA83 fears – were critical during the Cold War, Gates believes, in ensuring leaders "got the measure of each other...and somebody they could actually communicate with" (Barrass, 2009, p. 405). Gordievsky, thus, facilitated the establishment of a 'triangular relationship' with far-reaching consequences in which Thatcher played an outsize role: influencing Reagan to abandon intransigence in favour of dialogue with Gorbachev which, in turn, gave Gorbachev the ability to pursue his radical domestic reforms – *perestroika* and *glasnost* – that ultimately accelerated the USSR's collapse (Brown, 2020).

Armed with an appreciation of Soviet anxieties, Reagan was further aided by Gordievsky for his 1985 Geneva

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summit with Gorbachev. CIA Director Casey visited Gordievsky (after the latter's exfiltration) at MI6's Fort Monckton to gain his insight into Kremlin psychology before Casey himself briefed Reagan (Gordievsky, 1995, pp. 407-8). Casey informed Gordievsky that Reagan was considering sharing Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) technology with the USSR and was eager to know how Gorbachev would respond (Macintyre, 2019, pp. 313-14). To Casey's surprise, Gordievsky said Gorbachev would reject that offer: believing the U.S. would not share all the technology and viewing it as a ruse to lock the Soviets into large expenditure (ibid.). Gordievsky suggested scrapping SDI all together but, but when Casey insisted that Reagan would not drop his 'pet project', Gordievsky suggested the line that Reagan ultimately adopted in his Geneva meeting: no compromise on SDI, since it would ultimately force the Soviet leadership to implement economic reforms to technologically compete with the U.S. (ibid.). His meeting with Gordievsky, one of Casey's team said, "made a deep impression" on him (Barrass, 2009, p. 320). Casey was a powerful Director who shared and encouraged Reagan's unrelenting approach to the Soviets early in his presidency (Whipple, 2020, pp. 111-12) – and was now influencing him to adopt Gordievsky's line, which Reagan did. This forced Gorbachev, as Gordievsky predicted, to implement the domestic economic reforms that ultimately led to his, and the USSR's, downfall (Gordievsky, 1995, p. 408). Gordievsky's espionage was not, however, singularly a benefit to diplomacy: his exfiltration risked becoming an obstacle to the very diplomacy his espionage had aided.

Operation PIMLICO, the codename for Gordievsky's exfiltration, resulted in 'tit-for-tat' expulsions of diplomats and intelligence officers in 1985. Governments try to avoid such public expulsions for fear of retaliation (damaging their own espionage activities) and the risk to relations – the short-term dismantlement of a hostile state's espionage network notwithstanding (Andrew et al., 2020, p. 331). Britain originally proposed that the KGB, with little fanfare, gradually withdraw its officers identified by Gordievsky – but the Centre rejected the plan (Gordievsky, 1995, pp. 404-5). Thus, 25 KGB officers were declared *persona non grata*, which the Soviets responded to in kind (ibid., p. 406). Following the first wave, Howe recommended a further four expulsions, but Thatcher deemed this inadequate so, to the chagrin of Howe and the Foreign Office, a further six KGB officers were expelled, again reciprocated by Gorbachev (Moore, 2015, pp. 265-66).

This demonstrates the inherent tension between espionage and diplomacy: embassies, the hubs of diplomacy, become the centre of the intelligence game, for which diplomacy is collateral damage (Herman, 1996, p. 186). Prior to PIMLICO, the new Ambassador to Moscow, Bryan Cartledge, argued for Gordievsky's exfiltration to be delayed due to the immediate diplomatic ramifications if it went wrong, while SIS argued that to do so (putting Gordievsky at risk) would mean SIS "will never be able to hold its head up again" – damaging its credibility with future agents in the long-term (Macintyre, 2019, p. 268). Another illustration of this tension is the association with a defector: Gordievsky (1995, p. 422) recalls being embraced by Five Eyes political leaders but avoided by European politicians, who feared association with him would have Soviet diplomatic repercussions, even though his insight could advance their diplomacy with the Soviets. Britain fared proportionally worse in the expulsions by virtue of its smaller diplomatic presence – impacting genuine (non-intelligence) diplomats (Gordievsky, 1995, p. 406). Cartledge fumed that the embassy had lost all its Russian speakers – who could engage in diplomacy with and influence the Kremlin – because of the fallout from Gordievsky's espionage (Cartledge, 2007).

Yet, the evidence suggests these expulsions were 'priced-in' to diplomacy during the Cold War, and the 1985 expulsions were no different. Following Operation FOOT in 1971 – resulting in the expulsion of 105 KGB and GRU officers from London (Andrew, 2010, pp. 565-85) – the diplomatically-sensitive Four Power Agreement negotiations over Berlin, which occurred at the same time as the expulsions, concluded successfully, and relations stabilised by 1973 (Hughes, 2006, pp. 239-41). Likewise, the 1989 KGB expulsions did not fundamentally alter improved UK-USSR ties – albeit there was temporary damage (Howe, 1994, pp. 562-5). Similarly, following this round of expulsions in 1985, Thatcher made clear her desire that the expulsions should not come at the expense of improved ties, and Cartledge said "the Russians are realistic enough to expect us to take vigorous action" following Gordievsky's revelations but "the nature and strength of their reaction will depend on how far we can convince them that we nevertheless have not abandoned the larger objectives of a sustained dialogue" (Thompson and Pickard, 2014). In his retaliatory moves, Gorbachev refrained from expelling all the British businesspeople affiliated with the embassy that he could, which suggested a desire to maintain UK-Soviet trade links and the inflow of hard currency it provided (BBC, 1985). Later, speaking to the Diplomatic History Project, Cartledge (2007) asserted that relations returned to normal within three months due to Gorbachev's more pragmatic approach to foreign policy. Gordievsky's

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espionage prior to his exfiltration facilitated that approach and thus benefited diplomacy more than his espionage temporarily served as an obstacle to it in 1985.

In conclusion, this essay has evaluated a case where espionage played a considerable role in international relations and benefitted diplomacy. Few single sources of intelligence have a strategic impact but, through shaping the West's views of the Soviet Union and in turn its response to it via the intelligence he provided, Gordievsky did have a strategic impact (Omand, 2010, p. 35). He raised awareness of the worrisome extent of Soviet paranoia through his RYAN and AA83 revelations. This allowed Thatcher to alter the Reagan administration's approach to the Soviet Union which, consequently, led to engagement with Gorbachev, the Gorbachev-Reagan summit, and, albeit indirectly, the domestic reforms that led to the Soviet Union's collapse. Prior to Gordievsky, the West had basic misunderstandings about the USSR: how pervasive 'satisfying the Centre' was, or even which Soviet institutions dictated foreign policy (Gordievsky, 1995, p. 244; p. 454). One SIS officer told Hennessy (2010, ch. 1, para. 2) that Gordievsky's espionage was "against the backdrop" of both the West gaining a strategic advantage and the Soviet decline. This essay has sought to demonstrate that Gordievsky helped highlight and hasten those two concurrent trends.

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