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COLD WAR INTERNATIONAL HISTORY PROJECT

WORKING PAPER #73

The Soviet-Vietnamese Intelligence Relationship during the Vietnam War: Cooperation and Conflict

By Merle L. Pribbenow II, December 2014



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The Soviet-Vietnamese Intelligence Relationship during the Vietnam War: Cooperation and Conflict

Merle L. Pribbenow II

Introduction

Although the Vietnam War ended almost forty years ago, a number of aspects of the war remain clothed in mystery. One major unanswered question involves the role played by the Soviet Union's intelligence agencies, the KGB (the civilian Committee for State Security) and the GRU (the Soviet Army's Military Intelligence organization), in the Vietnam War. The Soviet intelligence services were justifiably famous for their intelligence capabilities and they certainly could have been extremely helpful to the Vietnamese Communist cause. However, despite rumors that the Soviets gave the Vietnamese advance warning of American air strikes obtained by Soviet Pacific Fleet electronic intelligence collection trawlers or from intercepted American military communications that the Soviets were able to decrypt by using cryptographic information provided to the KGB by the Walker family spy ring, there has never been any positive confirmation that the Soviets ever actually provided Soviet signals intelligence reports to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in North Vietnam or to the communist-led National Liberation Front (NLF) in South Vietnam. In addition, while there was clearly some intelligence cooperation between the Soviet and Vietnamese intelligence services, there was also conflict between the intelligence/security organizations of these two nations, whose goals and policies were not always in agreement.

Unlike the intelligence services of other communist nations, the Vietnamese intelligence services were entirely independent of the Soviet Union's intelligence and security services during their initial years of existence, right up through the end of the war against the French in 1954. In fact, the heads of the Vietnamese military and civilian intelligence services during the war against the French, including Trần Hiệu (head of the Viet Minh Ministry of Defense Intelligence Department [Cục Tình Báo]) and Lê Gian (head of the civilian Public Security Directorate [Nha Công An]), both received their intelligence training from British and American intelligence agents during the Second World War, and the first Viet Minh intelligence training

class was taught by a Japanese Colonel who had refused to return to Japan and had joined the Viet Minh at the end of World War II.¹

The Soviet Union was not particularly supportive of the Viet Minh during the earliest years of the First Indochina War and the Soviet Union did not even recognize the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (the Viet Minh government) until 30 January 1950.² Even after diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and the Viet Minh were established, the Soviet Union let the People's Republic of China handle contact with and direct support to the Vietnamese communist forces. In 1950, after Viet Minh forces cleared the area along the border with China, Communist Chinese advisors and "specialists" began to arrive to assist Viet Minh forces. Among the Chinese advisors were Chinese intelligence officers who were assigned to assist the Viet Minh intelligence services and to provide intelligence training to Vietnamese intelligence officers. There was still no official contact or relationship between Viet Minh and Soviet intelligence.³

The Soviet Union, however, probably did provide at least one piece of intelligence support to the Viet Minh shortly before the Dien Bien Phu Campaign began. According to General Vo Nguyen Giap, in September 1953 the Chinese delivered a copy of the new French strategic plan, called the Navarre Plan (named for the French Commander-in-Chief Henri Navarre), complete with an attached map, that a "friendly" intelligence agency had managed to obtain.⁴ Given the KGB's extensive spy network inside the French government, military, and intelligence services at that time and the fact that China's intelligence service was still so new and untested, at least against foreign targets, it is virtually certain that the Navarre Plan was

¹ Christopher Goscha, "The Creation of a Vietnamese Intelligence Service, 1946-1950," in *Exploring Intelligence Archives: Enquiries Into the Secret State*, ed. R. Gerald Hughes, Peter Jackson, and Len Scott (London: Routledge, 2008), 103-108; Christopher E. Goscha, *Historical Dictionary of the Indochina War (1945-1954)* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2011), 262, 455; "Nghĩa nặng tình sâu giữa hai nhà tình báo" [Deep Emotional Connection Between Two Intelligence Officers], *Quân đội nhân dân, Sự kiện & nhân chứng* [People's Army newspaper, Events and People supplement], 17 November 2006, accessed 28 March 2014 at <http://119.15.167.94/qdndsubsite/vi-yn/89/70/78/78/78/4951/Default.aspx>.

² Lư Van Lợi, *50 Years of Vietnamese Diplomacy (Volume I: 1954-1975)*, (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishing, 2000), 97.

³ Colonel Công Văn Hiếu and Lt. Colonel Kiều Đức Thắng, *Lịch sử Tình báo Công an nhân dân Việt Nam (1945-1954)* [History of Vietnamese People's Public Security Intelligence] (Hanoi: People's Public Security Publishing House, 1996), 94; "Phúc Vương: Nơi ghi dấu hoạt động Nha Liên lạc" [Phuc Vuong: Site of Liaison Directorate Operations], posted on Tuyen Quang government website and accessed 26 March 2014 at <http://tuyenquangtv.vn/tin-tuc/78/OAISE54388/Phuc-Vuong-Noi-ghi-dau-hoat-dong-cua-Nha-Lien-lac.html>.

⁴ Võ Nguyên Giáp and Hữu Mai, *Điện Biên Phủ: Điểm hẹn lịch sử* [Dien Bien Phu: A Historic Meeting Place] (Hanoi: People's Army of Vietnam Publishing House, 2001), 17.

actually acquired by Soviet intelligence and then given to the Chinese for passage to the Viet Minh High Command.⁵

Cooperation

Like the Soviet Union, during most of the Vietnam War the DRV had two separate security/intelligence services: the Ministry of Public Security's intelligence and security apparatus, and the Intelligence Department, also called the Research Department (Cục Nghiên cứu), of the Ministry of Defense. For approximately six-and-a-half years, from January 1951 to June 1957, the DRV had a third intelligence service called the "Liaison Directorate" (Nha Liên lạc), which was formed by merging the espionage components of the Ministry of Public Security and the Ministry of Defense. The Liaison Directorate was supposed to be the DRV's unified "strategic intelligence" service and all high-level human intelligence operations, including the soon-to-be famous *Time* magazine correspondent Pham Xuan An, were transferred to the control of the Liaison Directorate. The Directorate was separate from both the Ministry of Public Security and the Ministry of Defense and instead reported directly to the Party Central Committee and the Politburo. This experiment was apparently unsuccessful and in June 1957 the Liaison Directorate was transferred to the Ministry of Defense, where it became the Ministry's Intelligence, or Research, Department.⁶ Little is known about the Liaison Directorate. While there is one report that Chinese intelligence officers provided intelligence training to the Directorate during the early 1950s, no information is available about any contact between the Liaison Directorate and the Soviet intelligence services.⁷

Consistent with their organizational responsibilities, the KGB was responsible for liaison with and assistance to the DRV's civilian intelligence organization, the Ministry of Public Security, while the GRU was responsible for liaison with and assistance to the DRV's military intelligence agency, the Ministry of Defense's Intelligence Department.

⁵ Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 460.

⁶ "Đại tá Trần Hiệu, Thủ trưởng của Cơ quan Tình báo Chiến lược" [Colonel Tran Hieu, the First Commander of Our Strategic Intelligence Agency], article posted 8 March 2011 on the Hanoi City government website at <http://myduc.hanoi.gov.vn/tabid/329/Entry/36/Default.aspx>; Goscha, *Historical Dictionary of the Indochina War (1945-1954)*, 455-456.

⁷ "Phúc Vượng: Nơi ghi dấu hoạt động Nha Liên lạc."

KGB-Ministry of Public Security Cooperation

The first known contact between the Vietnamese intelligence services and Soviet intelligence did not occur until 1955, when the Vietnamese Ministry of Public Security asked the Soviet KGB for a small amount of electronic equipment for the establishment, on a trial basis, of a Public Security radio intercept (Signals Intelligence, or SIGINT) unit. The KGB approved the request and sent a team of “specialists” (advisors) to select the best radio intercept sites and to train Vietnamese Public Security radio intercept personnel. The experiment was considered a success, so in 1959 the Ministry of Public Security asked the KGB for further assistance in establishing a large “radio counter-espionage and radio intelligence” program. The KGB responded enthusiastically, providing funding, equipment, and training for the construction of what was called by the Vietnamese the “Vostok” (Phuong Đông, meaning “Orient”) project, which was completed in 1961. (“Vostok” was the name of the first Soviet manned spacecraft, launched in 1961, and the project was undoubtedly named in honor of this Soviet achievement.)⁸

The “Vostok” project involved three separate categories of operations: “radio counter-espionage,” “radio intelligence,” and secure communications. “Radio counter-espionage” referred to operations aimed at detecting and locating the source of “hostile” clandestine radio broadcasts in order to capture or neutralize enemy spies and commandos operating inside North Vietnam. “Radio counter-espionage” also included the monitoring and deciphering of messages being sent to and from “enemy” spies whom the North Vietnamese had captured and “doubled” (pressured into cooperating with the North Vietnamese while pretending to their foreign “bosses” that they were still operating freely). “Radio intelligence” meant the collection and decoding of the diplomatic or domestic communications of other countries, including the Republic of Vietnam (RVN, or South Vietnam), for the purpose of obtaining intelligence of value to the DRV’s war effort and to its diplomatic activities and foreign relations.

Regarding “radio counter-espionage,” post-war Vietnamese Public Security publications describe the service’s radio counter-espionage program during the war as having been a great success. In an article written for an internal Public Security publication, retired Public Security General Nguyen Huu Nhan, a former commander of the Public Security SIGINT unit, credited

⁸ Nguyễn Thanh, Lưu Vinh, and Trần Cao Kiêu, eds., *Những kỷ niệm sâu sắc về Bộ trưởng Trần Quốc Hoàn* [Profound Memories of Minister Tran Quoc Hoan] (Hanoi: Public Security Publishing House, 2004), 291; Bùi Anh Tuấn, ed., *Đồng chí Trần Quốc Hoàn với Công an Nhân dân Việt Nam* [Comrade Tran Quoc Hoan and Vietnam’s People’s Public Security] (Hanoi: People’s Public Security Publishing House, 2004), 156, 168.

the radio counter-espionage program with playing a major role in defeating the joint US-South Vietnamese program for inserting teams of “spies and commandos” into North Vietnam between 1961-1968, and in tracking down and capturing foreign “spies,” including at least one who was using a piece of “high-speed” communications equipment.⁹ This probably refers to a specialized clandestine radio transmitter that compressed radio messages before they were sent out so that the message could be transmitted in a very brief period of time—known as a “burst transmission.”¹⁰ The KGB, and its predecessor organizations, had a great deal of experience with combating teams of “spies and commandos” during the early post-World War II era and was capable of providing valuable advice and assistance in this area. When the Vietnam War heated up in 1965 following the initiation of American air attacks against North Vietnam and an increase in US-South Vietnamese efforts to infiltrate teams of RVN commandos into North Vietnam, the Ministry of Public Security asked the KGB and the Polish service to provide additional equipment, including mobile radio direction-finding vehicles, to help in its “radio counter-espionage” operations. The KGB and the Poles quickly provided the requested equipment, undoubtedly accompanied by technical specialists to provide instruction and training.¹¹

The “Vostok” project also involved KGB assistance to the Ministry of Public Security for “radio intelligence” (SIGINT) operations. Virtually nothing has been published about the details of the KGB’s assistance in this area but it can be assumed that, as was standard procedure for cooperation with other countries in this area, the KGB’s 8th Chief Directorate (and later the 16th Chief Directorate), the KGB organizations responsible for SIGINT operations, provided training, advice, and guidance to the Vietnamese. In these kinds of operations it would also be standard procedure for the country that received such assistance to share the “take” (the intelligence produced by the operation) with the KGB.¹²

Vietnamese Ministry of Public Security publications have revealed very little about the results of the Ministry’s SIGINT operations. However, there is some evidence that the Ministry’s

⁹ See Dale Andrade and Ken Conboy, *Spies and Commandos: How America Lost the Secret War in North Vietnam* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2000); Sedgwick Tourison, *Secret Army, Secret War: Washington’s Tragic Spy Operation in North Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995); Thomas L. Ahern, *The Way We Do Things: Black Entry Operations Into North Vietnam* (Washington DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2005).

¹⁰ Bùi Anh Tuấn, ed., *Đồng chí Trần Quốc Hoàn với Công an Nhân dân Việt Nam*, 157-158.

¹¹ Bùi Anh Tuấn, ed., *Đồng chí Trần Quốc Hoàn với Công an Nhân dân Việt Nam*, 162.

¹² Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield*, 351-352.

SIGINT activities produced some extraordinary successes. In one case, a Public Security newspaper published an interview with a retired Public Security General in which the general said that, in early 1975, Public Security had intercepted and successfully “deciphered” an encoded message from the Saigon embassy of a country allied with the US that provided definitive evidence that the US would not re-intervene militarily to save South Vietnam from collapse. This intercept was considered so important that it was immediately sent to the senior members of the Vietnamese Politburo and of the military’s High Command.¹³ Clearly the Ministry of Public Security would not have had the resources to be able to decipher such a message from a “US ally.” The Ministry would almost certainly have had to rely on Soviet assistance to decipher this message, which also means that the content of the message would have been shared with the KGB.

One “for internal use only” Vietnamese Public Security gives two additional examples of successes that were achieved by the Public Security’s SIGINT element:

In the area of radio intelligence, our professional technical force monitored many enemy communications networks, such as the entire radio communications network of the Saigon Government’s National Police, the National Police Special Branch’s Special Investigative units [biet doi suu tam],¹⁴ etc., and collected a great deal of information that enabled us to block many enemy plots, avoid losses and casualties, and protect and preserve the South Vietnamese revolution.

We also monitored the French Foreign Ministry’s communications network (net P6Z), and from this radio traffic we were able to collect a great deal of important information that would have been difficult for human intelligence sources to obtain and that enabled us to discover the plans of big powers and hostile nations regarding efforts to settle the war on the battlefield as well as to settle the war at the conference table.¹⁵

Vietnamese Public Security would have been able to intercept and decipher South Vietnamese National Police communications without Soviet assistance since it is known to have recruited a number of South Vietnamese police communications personnel. After the war ended, Public Security Minister Tran Quoc Hoan gave a speech to a Public Security conference in

¹³ *Cong An Nhan Dan* [People’s Public Security] newspaper, 15 August 2010, article titled “Remembering an Older Brother and Teacher Who was Truly Worthy of Our Respect,” accessed at <http://www.cand.com.vn/vi-VN/phongsu/2010/8/135414.cand>.

¹⁴ The Special Investigative Units were South Vietnamese Police Special Branch operational units involved in recruiting and running agents and informants targeted against covert Viet Cong (Vietnamese communist) agents and activities in South Vietnam.

¹⁵ Bùi Anh Tuấn, ed., *Đồng chí Trần Quốc Hoàn với Công an Nhân dân Việt Nam*, 472.

which he discussed two South Vietnamese police radio operators who had been recruited and run as espionage agents by Public Security intelligence.¹⁶ However, given the fact that France used modern cryptographic equipment for its diplomatic communications it simply would not have been possible for the Vietnamese to intercept and decipher these French communications on their own. The cryptographic system used by the French Foreign Ministry was relatively modern and would have been too sophisticated to have been broken by the fledgling North Vietnamese code-breakers. To break such a system the North Vietnamese would have had to have suborned a French Foreign Ministry code clerk/communicator or covertly penetrated a French diplomatic facility to steal the codes or to compromise the communications equipment (by the installation of an electronic “bug,” for example). It would have been virtually impossible for the Vietnamese to have done this without considerable Soviet/KGB assistance. As it happens, there is evidence that the Vietnamese may have indeed penetrated the French diplomatic facility in Hanoi and perhaps even recruited a French code clerk.

In 2009-2010, the Vietnamese official Public Security newspaper published several articles about a senior Public Security “counter-espionage” officer who had participated in a number of sensitive operations. One of the operations described was codenamed “B12,MM.” According to the articles, the goal of Operation B12,MM was to obtain “accurate, objective” information about Vietnam’s foreign “opponents” and other “big countries.” The B12,MM operation was described as a large and very sensitive operation that had to be conducted carefully and covertly lest it “affect our diplomatic relations.” Of particular interest is the following statement about the Public Security commander (who was known to have been fluent in French) of this operation:

“[H]e personally selected and successfully recruited as an agent a foreigner who was working inside the target. Under his guidance and direction, this agent accomplished his assigned mission, creating a break-through that allowed the successful implementation of the plan.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Ministry of Interior, *Bai noi chuyen cua Dong chi Bo truong tai Hoi nghi suu tra doi tuong chinh tri lan thu 3 (hop tu 23-9 den 1-10-1977) (Toi mat)* [Speech Given by the Minister at the Third Conference on Investigation of Political Targets (Conference held 23 September to 1 October 1977) (Top Secret)] (Hanoi: Ministry of Interior, 1979), 38.

¹⁷ “Những điệp vụ hoàn hảo” [Perfect Spy Operations], article published in *An Ninh Thế Giới Cuối Tuần* [World Security, Weekend Edition] newspaper, 10 January 2010 edition, accessed at <http://antgct.cand.com.vn/News/PrintView.aspx?ID=53439>.

The wording of this passage is consistent with the description of an operation designed to plant an electronic surveillance device of some kind. One of the Public Security articles also contained a photograph of some of the equipment used in the operation, including a fake automobile license plate, a piece of electronic equipment of unknown type, and a woman's wig, items that could easily have been used in an operation to covertly penetrate a foreign diplomatic installation. For example, the woman's wig could have been used to allow the recruited foreigner to bring a male technician disguised as a woman and pretending to be the recruited foreigner's "lover" into the diplomatic mission to plant an electronic listening device on a piece of French communications equipment. In view of this and of the statements in the articles that the B12,MM operation lasted for over ten years (from 1961 to 1973) and produced thousands of foreign-language "documents" that revealed the "plans and intentions" of the Americans and their allies, including valuable information related to the DRV's diplomatic efforts at the Paris Peace Conference, it is clear that B12,MM was an operation targeted at intercepting a Western country's diplomatic communications. The most logical conclusion, then, is that B12,MM was in fact the operation that allowed the Ministry of Public Security to intercept and read French diplomatic traffic.

Assuming that this is true, at that time Vietnam had neither the expertise nor the technical equipment to carry out such an operation without KGB assistance. In addition, the KGB is known to have had great interest and considerable experience and success in targeting French diplomatic communications. According to the KGB archivist Vasili Mitrokhin, during the Cold War the KGB had successfully recruited several French Foreign Ministry code-clerks, one of whom worked for the KGB for over thirty years, from 1945 through the 1980s. In addition, it is known that in 1975 the KGB carried out just such a "bugging" operation targeting French communications equipment installed in the French Embassy in Moscow.¹⁸ It is also clear that the KGB was also quite willing to conduct such an operation jointly with a non-Warsaw Pact intelligence service such as the Vietnamese Ministry of Public Security. There is evidence that the KGB, in fact, conducted precisely this kind of SIGINT operation in cooperation with the

¹⁸ Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield*, 460-477.

Cuban intelligence service, so there is no reason it would have been unwilling to conduct such a joint operation with the Vietnamese.¹⁹

The third element of the KGB's assistance in the "Vostok" Project was the provision of equipment and technical support to the Ministry of Public Security for the establishment of a massive secure communications network throughout North Vietnam, and indeed extending down into South Vietnam to support the war effort there. The equipment was used to communicate securely with Ministry of Public Security offices throughout North and South Vietnam and with covert Ministry of Public Security intelligence officers and agents operating in South Vietnam and in other countries. This KGB-provided secure communications equipment, along with Public Security communications personnel to operate the equipment, was also used to provide secure communications between Hanoi and the North Vietnamese delegation in Paris conducting peace talks with the United States and with other North Vietnamese diplomatic missions throughout the world.²⁰ According to a senior Public Security officer who was assigned to a Public Security office in South Vietnam during the Vietnam War, in 1972 specific warnings of the dates, times, and locations of planned American B-52 strikes were transmitted from Public Security Headquarters in Hanoi to Public Security offices in South Vietnam for dissemination to communist headquarters elements and communist military and civilian units in the projected target areas.²¹ The source of the intelligence on the upcoming B-52 strikes that was forwarded from Public Security Headquarters was not specified, but one possibility (although for a number of reasons, a very remote possibility) is that the warnings were provided by the KGB based on intercepted US military messages that the KGB was able to decode using the cryptographic materials provided by US Navy communications specialist John A. Walker.²²

In another example of KGB-Ministry of Public Security cooperation, the Ministry of Public Security shared intelligence derived from American intelligence officers captured during the Vietnam War and even allowed, on at least one occasion, the KGB to directly interrogate a

¹⁹ Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield*, 351-352; Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 96, 519n33.

²⁰ Bùi Anh Tuấn, ed., *Đông chí Trần Quốc Hoàn với Công an Nhân dân Việt Nam*, 161-162.

²¹ Nguyễn Thanh, Lưu Vinh, and Trần Cao Kiêu, eds., *Những kỷ niệm sâu sắc về Bộ trưởng Trần Quốc Hoàn*, 248.

²² John Prados, "The Navy's Biggest Betrayal," *Naval History Magazine*, June 2010. See also John Barron, *Breaking the Ring: The Bizarre Case of the Walker Family Spy Ring* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1987), and Robert Hanyok, *Spartans in Darkness: American SIGINT and the Indochina War, 1945-1957* (Ft. Meade, MD: Center for Cryptologic History, National Security Agency, 202), 393.

captured CIA officer and, reportedly, to try to recruit him.²³ The KGB is also known to have provided training in the Soviet Union for a number of Ministry of Public Security intelligence and security officers.²⁴

GRU-Vietnamese Military Intelligence Cooperation

The issue of GRU-Vietnamese military intelligence cooperation is, if anything, even murkier than the issue of KGB-Ministry of Public Security cooperation. Soviet GRU personnel were sent to North Vietnam to acquire information on and samples of American military equipment. During the war, the Soviet GRU special acquisitions group in North Vietnam succeeded in acquiring numerous samples of American military equipment, including the entire cockpit of a downed US Air Force F-111, which was shipped intact to the Soviet Union for study.²⁵

In addition, it is now known that Soviet military and technical specialists regularly provided detailed questions for use by the Vietnamese in the interrogation of captured American airmen on technical and tactical subjects, that the results of these interrogations were shared with the GRU and Soviet Air Defense (PVO) officers, and that on several occasions Soviet military officers personally participated in the interrogation of American prisoners of war (POWs).²⁶ In a formal analysis based on interviews of returned American POWs and interviews of retired Soviet officers who served in Vietnam, including several who said they had personally participated in interrogations of American POWs during the war, the Joint Commission Support Division (JCSJ) of the US Defense Prisoner and Missing Office (DPMO) officially confirmed this conclusion to the author.²⁷ Fragmentary information (pages from a Soviet officer's wartime

²³ Frank J. Rafalko, *MH/CHAOS: The CIA's Campaign Against the Radical New Left and the Black Panthers* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011), 147-148; Oleg Kalugin, *Spymaster: My Thirty-two Years in Intelligence and Espionage Against the West* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 221; United States Senate, *Report of the Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1993), 37.

²⁴ Nguyễn Thanh, Luu Vinh, and Trần Cao Kiều, eds., *Những kỷ niệm sâu sắc về Bộ trưởng Trần Quốc Hoàn*, 49; Xiaobing Li, *Voices From the Vietnam War: Stories From American, Asian and Russian Veterans* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 94.

²⁵ Task Force Russia Biweekly Report – 29 May-11 June 1993, accessed 17 July 2014 at http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/tfrussia/tfrhtml/tfr_biweekly22nd.html; Doug Loeffler, The Moscow Module, accessed 17 July 2014 at <http://f-111.net/downloads/Moscow-Module.pdf>.

²⁶ 30 April 1973 CIA information report titled “Exchange of intelligence Information by North Vietnam with Soviet Bloc Countries and Communist China Between 1958 and 1968,” document declassified for Senate Select Committee on POW/MIAs, document obtained from author George J. Veith.

²⁷ Joint Commission Support Division (JCSJ) official analysis sent to the author via e-mails dated 15 and 16 July 2014, in the author's possession. The JCSJ is responsible for supporting the work of the US-Russia Joint Commission, an organization established in 1992 to resolve questions about the fate of missing American and Russian military personnel.

notebook acquired during the 1990s from the former Soviet officer by an investigator from the US-Russia Joint Commission) reveals that the GRU obtained valuable and rather detailed technical and tactical information from the interrogation of American prisoners of war in North Vietnam.²⁸ While the Vietnamese have never officially acknowledged that Soviet officers participated in the interrogation of American POWs in Vietnam, post-war official Vietnamese publications do reveal that during the war North Vietnam established a special “Research Committee” to study American electronic warfare devices and to work out counter-measures. The members of this special committee included both North Vietnamese and Soviet electronic specialists. One Vietnamese publication states that on several occasions “members of the Committee,” not specifying whether these “Committee members” were Vietnamese or Soviet officers, personally interrogated American POWs to obtain needed technical information.²⁹ Russian government archival documents also reveal that at times the Soviets were dissatisfied with the level of Vietnamese cooperation in the area of granting the Soviets access to American POWs.³⁰

Post-war Vietnamese publications do contain documentation of GRU cooperation with Vietnamese armed forces in at least one area: the field of technical intelligence. In the spring of 1967, the North Vietnamese and Soviet Defense Ministries reached an agreement under which the Soviet Union would send electronics intelligence (ELINT) specialists and advanced ELINT equipment to Vietnam to study and attempt to counter new American electronic jamming equipment being used by US aircraft attacking North Vietnam. The Vietnamese Ministry of Defense also requested GRU help with breaking American military communications codes.³¹ A team of Soviet electronic warfare specialists were immediately dispatched to Vietnam along with

²⁸ See US Task Force Russia (TFR) document TFR 294-1, accessed on the Library of Congress POW/MIA Database website at <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/tfrquery.html> for excerpts from GRU officer’s notebook containing notes on the interrogation of American airmen shot down over Vietnam on 4 and 17 February 1967. See Jay Jensen, *Six Days in Hell* (Bountiful, UT: Horizon Publishers, 1978), 50, for statement by one of the airmen shot down in the 17 February (actually 18 February) 1967 incident that he was questioned by an interrogator who was “possibly Russian.”

²⁹ “Lifting the Curtain of Jamming,” *Nhân Dân* newspaper, 28 May 2005, accessed 28 May 2005 at <http://www.nhandan.com.vn/tinbai/?top=37&sub=50&article=30407>; Hoàng Đình Liên, Nguyễn Huy Bông, Lê Xuân Viên, and Lt. Colonel Phạm Văn Bạch, *Biên niên sự kiện: Lịch sử quân giới Việt Nam (1954-1975)* (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 1997), 263-264.

³⁰ Ilya Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), 71. See also 3 November 1972 CIA information report titled “Soviet Efforts to Gain Access to US POWs in North Vietnam,” document declassified for Senate Select Committee on POW/MIAs, document obtained from author George J. Veith.

³¹ Ministry of Defense. *Biên niên sự kiện BTM trong KCCM 1954-1975* [The General Staff During the Resistance War Against the United States, 1954-1975] (publisher and date of publication unknown), accessed at <http://www.vnmilitaryhistory.net/index.php/topic,5366.0.html>.

the equipment for an ELINT battalion. The Soviet specialists spent three months in Vietnam, setting up the equipment, detecting and analyzing American jamming signals, and presumably training Vietnamese personnel to operate the equipment. When the Soviets left they turned their equipment over to a newly-formed Vietnamese ELINT unit. In 1968 the Soviet Union sent a second shipment of electronic equipment that enabled the Vietnamese to expand its ELINT unit into a full ELINT battalion. This unit was called the 8th Jamming Reconnaissance [Trinh sát nhiễu] Battalion and was focused on detecting, studying, identifying, and exploiting American electronic jamming signals, especially from B-52 bombers. The information obtained by this unit played a key role in the Vietnamese battle against B-52 bombers during Operation Linebacker II, the American Christmas 1972 bombing campaign against North Vietnam.³²

With regard to the Vietnamese military's request for help in breaking American military communications codes, no evidence has been found that the Soviet Union provided any such assistance, nor has any mention been found, as yet, of the presence of Soviet advisors to the Vietnamese Military Intelligence Department's 75th Technical Reconnaissance Regiment, which was the Department's specialized Signals Intelligence (radio intercept) unit. According to a veteran of the 75th Reconnaissance Regiment quoted in a recent Vietnamese publication, early in the war (circa 1964-1965), the regiment had Chinese advisors. This veteran added that the Chinese advisors had provided advance information to the Vietnamese about US air strikes but the Chinese refused to tell the Vietnamese how they had obtained this information. However, this same publication does state that all of the radio intercept equipment used by 75th Technical Department's was modern equipment provided to Vietnam by the Soviet Union.³³

In addition to assisting the Vietnamese with technical equipment for their signals intelligence program, an article published by an official Russian government media outlet has recently confirmed long-held suspicions that during the Vietnam War the Soviet GRU provided

³² Hoàng Đình Liên, Nguyễn Huy Bông, Lê Xuân Viên, and Phạm Văn Bạch, *Biên niên sự kiện: Lịch sử Quân giới Việt Nam (1954-1975)* [History of Vietnam's Ordnance: Chronology of Events (1954-1975)] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House), 238-239; Hoàng Văn Chính and Nguyễn Thế Bảo, *Lịch sử Ngành cơ yếu Quân chủng Phòng không-không quân (1953-2008)* [History of the Cryptographic Branch of the Air Defense-Air Force Service (1953-2008)] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 2009), 120, 130, 133; "Những chiến công thầm lặng của đơn vị trinh sát nhiễu" [The Silent Achievements of the Jamming Reconnaissance Unit], article published in Đất Việt on-line newspaper 12 December 2012, accessed at <http://nguyentandung.org/chien-cong-tham-lang-cua-don-vi-trinh-sat-nhiEU.html>.

³³ Đỗ Thanh Huyền, Nguyễn Xuân Mai, Trần Phúc Thái, and Đặng Đức Tuệ. *ĐỐI MẶT VỚI B-52: HỒI ỨC HÀ NỘI (18/12/1972-29/12/1972)* [Face to Face with B-52s: Hanoi Memoirs (18 December 1972-29 December 1972)] (Ho Chi Minh City: Tre Publishing House, 2012), 50.

the Vietnamese with intelligence information collected by Soviet Navy electronic intelligence collection trawlers deployed in the South China Sea to monitor the activities of US aircraft carriers conducting strike missions against North Vietnam and off the coast of the island of Guam, where the trawlers monitored B-52s operating from Guam's Anderson Air Force Base. The Russian article states that the Russians trawlers provided information provided by visual observation of air operations from American aircraft carriers and from the US airbase on Guam but does not say whether or not the Russians also provided signals intelligence information acquired by the trawlers, even though the trawlers were described as having been covertly equipped with "the most modern radio equipment then available."³⁴

One other intriguing indication of GRU-Soviet military intelligence operation is the case of a French doctor working in Saigon who was arrested by the French DST (Direction de la Surveillance du Territoire—the French internal security service) in 1972. The doctor was caught in the act of passing intelligence reports to a Soviet GRU officer in Paris. The doctor admitted to his DST interrogators that after being initially recruited by Vietnamese communist intelligence agents in Saigon and reporting to them for some time, the doctor had then travelled to Moscow on two separate occasions to receive training and clandestine communications equipment from Soviet intelligence officers. The doctor admitted that he provided reports both to Vietnamese intelligence contacts in Saigon as well to Soviet intelligence in Moscow in what was apparently a joint GRU-Vietnamese military intelligence espionage operation.³⁵

Conflict

While Vietnamese and Soviet cooperated in a number of areas as outlined above, there were also areas of conflict that on occasion resulted in serious problems. The Vietnamese realized that Soviet intelligence officers, as well as those from other socialist countries, who worked in North Vietnam would try to conduct their own unilateral operations behind the backs of their Vietnamese "comrades." In a speech to a top-secret Public Security investigative conference in 1971, Minister of Public Security Trần Quốc Hoàn said:

"There are some of our [socialist] "brothers" who come to our country to conduct intelligence activities. We must immediately set up a case file, just as if it is a

³⁴ "Intelligence Officers with Fishing Nets," 25 January 2012 Voice of Russia article published on Voice of Russia's Vietnamese language website, accessed 24 April 2014 at <http://vietnamese.ruvr.ru/2012/01/25/64589238> .

³⁵ Merle L. Pribbenow, "The Most Famous Unknown Spies of the Vietnam War: HUMINT Operations in Vietnam," paper presented at the Intelligence in the Vietnam War Symposium, Texas Tech University, October 2006.

regular counter-espionage case, but the question in this case is whether we should let this case run for a long time or not, because if we let it become a long-term, protracted case, it will cause us political problems and usually it will only result in a waste of our resources. In this case we should skillfully and flexibly immediately cut off all contacts and connections that are not to our advantage. You need to look at how the Americans do it; they are very practical. One day they attack a problem one way, and the next they attack it in another. Otherwise, one can easily be put on the defensive...”³⁶

A KGB officer who served in Hanoi during the period 1966-1968 has admitted that he recruited both Vietnamese and Chinese agents to report on relations between North Vietnam and China, which certainly would have been considered to be a very sensitive subject by the Vietnamese.³⁷ KGB Archivist Vasili Mitrokhin confirmed that during this period the KGB was indeed unilaterally recruiting and running agents in Hanoi to obtain information on Vietnam’s internal situation and on Vietnamese communist military activities as well as on China and on Vietnam’s relations with China. The KGB files that Mitrokhin brought with him when he defected to the west indicate that, as of 1975, the KGB’s Hanoi station had a total of twenty-five fully recruited agents and sixty “confidential informants” to carry out this task. The Soviets had even apparently recruited a Vietnamese intelligence officer, although this officer refused to meet with Soviet intelligence inside Vietnam because of fears for his own security.³⁸ Given the stringent security controls imposed on all Vietnamese citizens by the North Vietnamese police state apparatus, North Vietnamese security would have inevitably learned of many of these activities and then taken action to, in the words of the Minister of Public Security quoted above, “cut off all contacts and connections that are not to our advantage.”

A subject of particular sensitivity that seems to have had a serious impact on Soviet-Vietnamese relations was the so-called “Anti-Party Affair.” Beginning in the summer of 1967 and extending into early 1968, Vietnamese security officers carried out a series of arrests of a number of senior Party, government, and military officials suspected of involvement in a plot

³⁶ Ministry of Public Security, *Một số vấn đề về đấu tranh chống phản cách mạng* [A Number of Issues Regarding the Struggle Against Counter-Revolutionaries] (Hanoi: Public Security Scientific Research Institute, 1975), page 366.

³⁷ Li, *Voices From the Vietnam War*, 97.

³⁸ Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way*, 266.

against the Vietnamese Party and government and of being “lackeys of a foreign power.”³⁹ The investigation of this case had begun in 1964 and the “foreign power” involved was clearly the Soviet Union, whose embassy in Hanoi had for several years prior to the arrests been reporting on its contacts with Vietnamese officials who opposed the Vietnamese Party’s “pro-Chinese” policies (clearly indicating the officials involved in the “Anti-Party Affair”).⁴⁰ This affair embarrassed the Soviet Embassy in Hanoi and complicated Soviet relations with the Vietnamese communist regime. Following the arrests, the Soviet Embassy reported that its contacts with Vietnamese officials and even the freedom of movement of its embassy officers had been greatly restricted by the Vietnamese.⁴¹ In addition, one Public Security history states that one individual who had “diplomatic status” and was described as the “ring-leader” of this plot was expelled from Vietnam following the arrests; the reference to “diplomatic status” is a clear indication that the individual described was a Soviet Embassy officer.⁴² Given the aggressive nature of Soviet intelligence operations and the high percentage of Soviet intelligence officers assigned to Soviet embassies abroad, it is virtually certain that at least some of the Soviet officials involved in contacts with those arrested in the Anti-Party affair were KGB and/or GRU intelligence officers. In fact, the individual with “diplomatic status” who was expelled from Vietnam may well have been a Soviet intelligence officer.

Long after the war a number of GRU intelligence reports from the Vietnam War period surfaced, causing a major problem for Vietnam as well as raising more questions about Soviet intelligence operations directed against the North Vietnamese regime. In 1992, a western historian conducting research in the archives of the former Soviet Communist Party Central Committee uncovered two GRU intelligence reports that had been submitted to the Central Committee in 1971 and 1972. These GRU reports contained explosive information about the numbers of American prisoners of war who were allegedly being held by the North Vietnamese.

³⁹ Trương Quốc Vượng and Nguyễn Duy Tương. *Lịch sử Cục bảo vệ an ninh Quân đội Nhân dân Việt Nam (1950-2000)* [History of the Army Security Department (1950-2000)] (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 2003), accessed at <http://www.lichsvn.info/forum/printthread.php?t=7498&pp=40>.

⁴⁰ Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War*, 66-68; Merle Pribbenow, “General Vo Nguyen Giap and the Mysterious Evolution of the Plan for the 1968 Tet Offensive,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3, no. 2 (November 2008): 1-33; Lien-Hang T. Nguyen. *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 88-97.

⁴¹ Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War*, 71.

⁴² Lê Ngọc Bôn, Nguyễn Trọng Khuê, Trần Văn Hưởng, and Nguyễn Hữu Diệu, *Những trang sử vẻ vang của lực lượng an ninh nhân dân Việt Nam anh hùng* [Glorious History of the Heroic Vietnamese People’s Security Forces] (Hanoi: People’s Public Security Publishing House, 2006), 34.

The documents were identified as being the texts of speeches given by senior North Vietnamese military and Party officials to closed meetings of the Vietnamese Communist Party Central Committee and Politburo.

The government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam immediately labeled the documents as fabrications, a judgment with which the US government tended to agree. Meanwhile the Russian government confirmed the authenticity of the GRU documents but refused to provide any information on the source of these documents.⁴³ The late Russian researcher Ilya Gaiduk unearthed a similar GRU report dated April 1967 that was sent to the Soviet Party's Central Committee, apparently from the same undisclosed very high-level Vietnamese source.⁴⁴ The source of the GRU reports has so far never been determined, nor has the reason that the GRU considered these reports to be so important and so reliable that it decided to forward them to the highest levels of the Soviet Communist Party.

Conclusion

It is clear from the above that there are still many unresolved questions and additional areas to be explored regarding the nature, significance, and impact of Soviet-Vietnamese intelligence cooperation during the Vietnam War and regarding conflicts between the intelligence and security services of the two countries. It is hoped that, with the passage of time, historians and researchers will be able to obtain greater access to both Russian and Vietnamese archives in order to shed light on these questions and add to our understanding of this important aspect of the history of the Cold War.

⁴³ Lewis M. Stern, *Imprisoned or Missing in Vietnam: Policies of the Vietnamese Government Concerning Captured and Unaccounted For United States Soldiers, 1969-1994* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1995), 100-101, 113-115; Stephen J. Morris, "The 1205 Document," *The National Interest*, September 1993.

⁴⁴ Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War*, 67.

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