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Nikita Khrushchev and the Compromise of Soviet Secret Intelligence Sources

Abstract: How securely did Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev handle secret intelligence? Former Soviet officials have claimed that he carelessly revealed intelligence and certainly in conversations with American, Italian, and Iranian diplomats and ministers Khrushchev put at risk Soviet sources by boasting about intelligence successes and disclosing information that could only have come from intelligence. While Soviet officials appear to have overestimated the security impact of Khrushchev’s revelations, he may have compromised a covert KGB mission in Iran and an important surveillance operation against the American embassy in Moscow.

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Nikita Khrushchev has long appeared one of the most reckless of Soviet leaders. Ebullient and full of restless energy, he was a risk taker, capable of audacious but poorly thought out initiatives in foreign and domestic policy, such as ultimatums to the West over Berlin, the emplacement of nuclear missiles in Cuba, and the Virgin Lands agricultural scheme in Kazakhstan and Siberia. These traits also manifested themselves in Khrushchev’s personal interactions. He relished speaking to ordinary Soviet citizens and Western visitors but conversations could veer unpredictably between playful joking and banter, boastful monologues, and angry bullying. When his Presidium colleagues removed him from power in October 1964, they highlighted his character flaws, accusing him of being “hasty, erratic” and “unpredictable, arbitrary, and unrestrained.”

What has not been explored in the English language literature on Khrushchev is whether he was similarly reckless in his handling of intelligence. Yet the Soviet Union possessed two of the largest intelligence agencies in the world, the Committee for State Security (KGB) and the military Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU), and a wealth of intelligence passed across Khrushchev’s desk every day. This intelligence needed to be closely held in order to protect KGB and GRU agents abroad and conceal breaks of foreign ciphers, but Russian sources have claimed that Khrushchev handled it poorly, carelessly exposing secrets to the West. A 1997 television documentary on the post–Cold War Russian signals intelligence agency, FAPSI, made by the series Soversheno Sekretno, and an official history of Russian foreign intelligence by Evgeny Primakov have given two separate examples of Khrushchev compromising Soviet intelligence operations in the early 1960s by talking too freely with U.S. President John Kennedy. A former Soviet ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Dobrynin, also alleged in his memoirs that an impetuous outburst by Khrushchev ruined a surveillance operation against the American embassy in Moscow. The only Western historian to have picked up on this aspect of Khrushchev’s leadership is Jonathan Haslam, who noted in his recent history of the KGB and GRU that Khrushchev “used to blurt out when chatting to foreign ambassadors that he and his men were reading intercepted information.”

This article will examine how securely Khrushchev handled secret intelligence by looking at eight occasions between 1957 and 1963 when he spoke about intelligence to American, Italian, Iranian, and British politicians, diplomats, and journalists. It will assess if these indiscretions by Khrushchev compromised Soviet foreign intelligence sources as Primakov, Dobrynin, and Soversheno Sekretno alleged. Official secrecy does somewhat limit research on this topic; Russian KGB and GRU files remain closed to researchers, as do many relevant documents of the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and National Security Agency (NSA). Nevertheless, by pulling together
American and British government documents, published Russian and Italian material, diplomats’ memoirs and contemporary newspaper reporting, it is possible to build up a picture of how Khrushchev talked to Westerners about intelligence and trace the responses of the U.S. government.

**SOURCES OF SOVIET INTELLIGENCE**

As Soviet leader, Khrushchev enjoyed a good supply of intelligence on the West. In the military field the KGB and GRU had several agents who could provide Moscow with sensitive North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) material. One of the most important was Robert Lee Johnson, an American army sergeant who acted as a night guard at a U.S. armed forces courier center near Orly Airport in France. Helped by the KGB, between 1962 and 1963 Johnson copied many of the top secret documents that passed through the center’s vault, including NATO and American defense plans. The KGB also succeeded in penetrating the West’s intelligence agencies with spies in the CIA, the NSA, the British Secret Intelligence Service, and the West German Bundesnachrichtendienst.

Where Soviet intelligence experienced more difficulty in the late 1950s/early 1960s was in recruiting agents with knowledge of high-level American and British diplomatic decisionmaking, although to some extent this deficit was compensated by sources in the Italian and French foreign ministries. A long-running Soviet agent in Rome, Giorgio Conforto (codenamed DARIO by the KGB), recruited several spies in the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Two of these, codenamed TOPO and INGA, were typists in the ministry while SUZA (believed to be Maria Collavo) and VENETISANKA were secretaries who worked at the Italian delegation to NATO and the Italian embassy in Paris, respectively. In 1956, SUZA moved closer to the center of power by becoming an assistant to Mario Lucioli, the diplomatic advisor of Italian President Giovanni Gronchi. In this position she had access to documents sent to the president’s office by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including the correspondence of Italian ambassadors.

The KGB and GRU also produced a considerable amount of signals intelligence. In 1960, the KGB alone decrypted 209,000 diplomatic telegrams from 51 different countries. It read the cables of the American, British, West German, French, Canadian, Japanese, and Iranian embassies in Moscow, and probably many others. KGB field officers helped their cryptanalyst colleagues by suborning cipher clerks and planting microphones in embassies. For example, in the 1950s the KGB residency in Rome obtained the codes of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The jewel in the crown was an extensive KGB surveillance operation against the American embassy in Moscow. Before American diplomats occupied a new chancery building in 1953, the Soviets secretly installed microphones in the walls of many of its key
offices, including those belonging to the ambassador, the deputy chief of mission, the political attaché, and the three service attachés. They also bugged the State Department and army code rooms and set a large metal grill in the ceiling of a nearby office, presumably to act as an antenna. By monitoring and analyzing acoustic and electromagnetic emissions from the embassy’s cipher machines a KGB unit led by Nikolai Andreev was able in 1959 to read encrypted American telegrams. Andreev and his team were awarded the Lenin Prize for this achievement. The KGB’s Eighth Main Directorate, which was responsible for signals intelligence, regularly sent Khrushchev reports on its intercepts of American embassy cables. At a time when the KGB had no high-level agents in the State Department or the White House, the embassy surveillance system gave the Soviets a valuable window into American foreign policymaking. Intelligence historian Christopher Andrew has suggested that at least until the early 1960s, the KGB’s “chief source of intelligence on American foreign policy was probably the penetration of the US embassy in Moscow.”

KHRUSHCHEV’S EARLY HANDLING OF FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE

Khrushchev took a keen interest in intelligence. He personally approved each Moscow embassy break in and the operation against the Orly vault. Every day he received a collection of paraphrased intelligence reports from the KGB, and he also saw some translated raw intelligence, such as copies of documents from Orly and transcripts from bugging the German ambassador in Moscow. The KGB did not analyze the intelligence for Khrushchev, and he was in effect his own intelligence analyst, with all the problems of interpretation this could cause. The three chairmen of the KGB during Khrushchev’s period in office, Ivan Serov (1954–58), Aleksandr Shelepin (1958–61), and Vladimir Semichastny (1961–67), were all his protégés. Semichastny was only 37 years old when Khrushchev appointed him head of the KGB, and neither he nor Shelepin had prior experience of intelligence or security work. They were not in a strong position to restrain Khrushchev’s use of intelligence.

At one level, Khrushchev understood the need to be security conscious when speaking about sensitive topics. He had after all risen through the ranks of the communist party hierarchy during the paranoid years of Stalin’s rule, when the slightest slip could lead to imprisonment or worse. When necessary, he could be controlled in his language. On state visits to Britain in 1956 and the United States in 1959, Khrushchev took care over what he said in his hotel rooms, knowing that they would likely be bugged. At a meeting in 1960 with Egyptian President Gamal Nasser at the Soviet legation’s residence on Long Island, Khrushchev avoided discussing certain issues because the building was bugged by the Americans. Yet, despite this security awareness, at other times Khrushchev revealed in conversation...
sensitive pieces of intelligence. This included domestic as well as foreign intelligence. In an interview in the 1990s Semichastny spoke about the information the KGB had collected for Khrushchev on other members of the Presidium and recalled that “two or three times in talks he [Khrushchev] very carelessly disclosed intelligence data, and this threatened the loss of the source of the information.”

In foreign affairs, Khrushchev appears to have first started taking risks with intelligence sources during a superpower confrontation over Syria in the autumn of 1957. A radical, pro-Soviet government had just come to power in Syria and the United States secretly encouraged Turkey and Iraq to overthrow it. With American help, the Turkish military prepared plans for an invasion of Syria and massed troops on the Syrian–Turkish border. But Soviet intelligence learned of the American activities from an agent in Turkey and obtained a copy of the Turkish invasion plan. Khrushchev responded by mounting a vigorous diplomatic campaign to defend Syria. He publicly denounced American plotting, backed a Syrian appeal to the United Nations, and held military exercises in the border regions near Turkey. As part of this campaign he made propaganda use of intelligence material. In early October, Khrushchev gave an interview to New York Times journalist James Reston and accused the United States of inciting the Turks to attack Syria. He said that he had evidence to support his claims. Reston reported in his article that “[t]ime and again Mr. Khrushchev emphasised the point that there were documents to prove his case.” The Soviet news agency TASS issued a statement on 18 October that set out the supposed Turkish invasion plan and described the make-up and disposition of the invasion force. Khrushchev assured Tom Driberg, the chairman of the British Labour Party who happened to be visiting Moscow, that the information in the TASS statement had come from documents of the Turkish general staff. The next day, the Washington Post reported that the Soviets had given Syrian and Egyptian diplomats at the United Nations copies of papers stolen from the Turkish Defence and Foreign Ministries that showed the invasion plan. The diplomats were told that these were the documents Khrushchev had referred to in his interview with Reston.

The Soviet campaign did have some deterrent effect. In late October, the United States advised Turkey against an invasion of Syria, and the Turks withdrew their military units from the border, although this was also partly due to Arab support for Syria. But Khrushchev’s propaganda use of intelligence in the Syrian Crisis was heavy-handed, for while it may have convinced some that his claims were genuine, it also put the British and Americans on their guard. The Foreign Office warned Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd on 14 October that it was “seriously concerned at Turkish security. There seems to be a steady leak to the Russians.”
Department agreed. Under Secretary of State Christian Herter complained that “it is obvious that any move we make in connection with Turkey is relayed pretty accurately to Moscow with great rapidity.” The British and Americans tightened up communications security between Turkey and Iraq, but their concerns persisted. In July 1958, Washington still feared that sensitive diplomatic information given to the Turkish government would “certainly leak back to the Russians.”

In subsequent Cold War crises over Iraq, Berlin, and Cuba Khrushchev was more restrained in using intelligence for propaganda purposes. Even when he had good intelligence, such as in the 1958 Middle East Crisis, he did not make such precise public allegations or proclaim that he had foreign documents proving his claims. Yet, while he became more circumspect during crises, on several other occasions Khrushchev spoke openly about intelligence to Westerners. He boasted about the achievements of Soviet intelligence or disclosed information that could only have come from intelligence. In doing so there was an obvious danger that he would expose a KGB or GRU source and induce Western states to take countermeasures, such as changing their ciphers, but Khrushchev appeared unconcerned or was oblivious to the risks. Some of these slips may have been accidental and a by-product of his remarkable garrulousness. Khrushchev was a compulsive and verbose communicator; his speeches and interviews could last for hours and the letters he dictated to Western leaders filled page after page. Amid all this verbiage it is perhaps unsurprising that some intelligence material spilled out.

More often though his comments were deliberate and purposeful, at least within the confines of the conversation he was having at the time. Khrushchev sought to unsettle, intimidate, or impress his Western interlocutors who were the victims of the KGB’s exploits. He wanted to show them the power and reach of Soviet intelligence. In 1959, for example, he warned the Iranian ambassador that “[o]ur spies furnish us with very accurate information everywhere. We are aware of all American plans in Iran.” Sometimes Khrushchev would taunt his listeners by offering to give them copies of their own documents, although he never did actually produce the documents. This kind of minatory boasting was very much in character since Khrushchev frequently bragged in speeches and conversations with Westerners about the capabilities of Soviet nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, especially after the launch of Sputnik in 1957.

EXPOSING INTELLIGENCE ON ITALY

Some of Khrushchev’s intelligence indiscretions were directed at the Italian ambassador to the Soviet Union, Luca Pietromarchi, and Italian ministers visiting Moscow. At Pietromarchi’s first audience with Khrushchev in
December 1958, the Soviet leader told him frankly that he had refused to receive the previous Italian ambassador when he left because “behind our backs he spoke badly of us. As a diplomatic expert you know that a secret is never kept for more than two or three months.” These comments made Pietromarchi suspect that there had been a leak of documents from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Soviets and, given the number of KGB agents in the ministry, this is plausible. More evidence of a leak came with a visit to the USSR in February 1960 by President Gronchi and the Italian foreign minister, Giuseppe Pella. As part of the schedule of events, Gronchi, Pella, and Pietromarchi had an informal Sunday afternoon get together with Khrushchev at a dacha outside Moscow, where he plied them with vodka and engaged in some banter. After twitting Pella for a while, Khrushchev declared that the Soviet ambassador in Rome had never received the same latitude in his instructions as Pietromarchi had. The quick-witted Pietromarchi immediately asked Khrushchev, “[H]ow do you know these instructions if they are secret?” Khrushchev equivocated and blustered, saying that no diplomatic secret lasts long and laughingly described how a diplomat might confide a secret to a friend who would pass it on to another friend and so on until the secret was out. But then he began to talk about cipher machines. Pietromarchi recorded in his diary that Khrushchev spoke of these “with contempt and gives the impression of being able to decipher most of the despatches of the embassies [in Moscow] if not all.”

When another Italian minister visited Moscow in June 1962, Khrushchev was equally indiscrete. The visitor this time was the Italian trade minister, Luigi Preti, who was launching an exhibition of Italian industry. At a reception on the evening of 7 June, Khrushchev gave an impromptu welcome speech to Preti and his delegation and publicly flaunted his knowledge of Italian diplomatic secrets. He told Preti to ask the Italian foreign minister what kind of pressures the United States had exerted on Italy when it was negotiating to sell oil tankers to the Soviet Union. In 1960-61, Italy had negotiated the sale of tankers to the USSR in the face of opposition from its NATO allies. Preti demurred but Khrushchev goaded him, saying he should “ask the [Italian] foreign minister to open his archive and you can check if I have said the truth or not. ... [O]ne day or another you will be able to read these things in the memoirs of your foreign minister.” In a private conversation later, Khrushchev pushed the point further, telling Preti to ask the foreign minister to show him intimidating telegrams received from the State Department about the sale of Soviet oil to Italy. When Preti questioned how he knew about these Khrushchev boasted, “[W]e know everything, telegrams are no secret for us.”

Khrushchev’s comments to Preti, Pietromarchi, Gronchi, and Pella were remarkably reckless and potentially put at risk the KGB’s signals intelligence
operations against the Western embassies in Moscow and its agents within the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, there is no current evidence that he compromised these sources through his actions. The Italians did inform the American embassy in Moscow about Khrushchev’s conversation with Preti in June 1962, but it is not known if this fed into NSA communications security assessments. Although the Italian security services had long-standing suspicions about Conforto, the KGB’s spies in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were able to evade discovery for the rest of the Cold War in spite of Khrushchev’s outbursts in 1960 and 1962. The existence of SUZA, VENETISANKA, TOPO, and INGA was only revealed in 1991 when a KGB officer, Vasili Mitrokhin, defected to Britain. Even then it took some time to work out the spies’ true identities.

EXPOSING INTELLIGENCE ON THE UNITED STATES

Italy was a minor player in the Cold War, so Khrushchev could perhaps afford to take risks in his handling of intelligence from Italian sources. What is surprising is that he was just as reckless when speaking to American diplomats and politicians. The most egregious example of this occurred in September 1959, when he visited the United States for the first time. As well as holding talks with President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Khrushchev traveled around the country accompanied by Henry Cabot Lodge, the American ambassador to the United Nations. On 19 September, while on a car tour of Los Angeles with Lodge, Khrushchev suddenly began boasting about the effectiveness of Soviet intelligence. According to Lodge’s later report, Khrushchev declared that through his intelligence services “he was extremely well informed about the United States.” He derided the CIA, calling it a “farce,” and described how Soviet intelligence used the “codebooks” of captured American agents in Europe and the Middle East to send the CIA false information and solicit money. Warming to his theme, Khrushchev “continued to boast about the extreme efficiency of his intelligence service and said that they knew everything.” He gave Lodge examples of Soviet intelligence successes, revealing that:

... the Soviet Union had known everything about the Turk preparation for military action against Syria about a year ago. The Soviet Union had found out not only the exact disposition of Turkish troops, but also the designations and plans for operation.

This was almost certainly a reference to the 1957 Syrian Crisis, although Khrushchev seemed to misremember the year. Lodge objected, saying that “nothing happened” over Syria but Khrushchev snapped back, “Of course nothing happened, because we exposed you.”
Another example Khrushchev provided Lodge was the American National Exhibition, which had been held in Moscow that summer to promote America’s technology and way of life. Khrushchev alleged that the Soviets had possessed “complete information as to the preparations for the American exhibition in Moscow and the arguments in the United States Government on this subject about a year ago.” He had made a similar claim before; in July he told a visiting group of American state governors that Soviet intelligence had copies of State Department documents about the exhibition. Most recklessly of all, Khrushchev bragged to Lodge about reading two diplomatic messages: a letter from the Iranian leader, Mohammad Reza Shah, to Eisenhower, sent before Khrushchev’s visit, and a letter from Eisenhower to Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru concerning Chinese–Indian border disputes. Khrushchev impudently offered to give Lodge a copy of Eisenhower’s letter to Nehru. There are two letters that match Khrushchev’s descriptions. The shah had written to Eisenhower on 16 August asking the president to make clear to Khrushchev when he came to the United States that the Americans were committed to defending Iran. Eisenhower also sent Nehru a private letter on 2 September expressing support for India over Chinese border incursions. The Soviet premier rounded off his showboating by telling Lodge that he read “also of American intelligence reports and circulars sent out by [CIA director] Mr. Allen Dulles, although he would much rather read good novels.”

It was an extraordinary performance. Unbidden, Khrushchev had exposed to Lodge a clutch of Soviet intelligence operations and identified specific documents in the hands of the KGB. The correspondence with Nehru and the shah was not copied by State Department telegram to the Moscow embassy, so the KGB must have acquired it by other means, but it was foolhardy for Khrushchev to boast of reading American diplomatic messages at a time when the KGB was intercepting and decrypting State Department traffic. To make matters worse, news of his outburst leaked to journalists and was reported in American newspapers, attracting national and international attention. At a press conference in early October, Nehru was asked about Khrushchev’s claims. The CIA launched an inquiry, although its final assessment has not been declassified, and Congress started to show an interest. However, Allen Dulles quickly headed off any idea of a congressional investigation that might embarrass the CIA. In a letter to Republican Congressman Edgar Hiestand in November he argued that Khrushchev’s comments were propaganda, part of a deliberate campaign to discredit the CIA, so a congressional investigation would only play into the hands of the Soviets. Dulles also reassured Hiestand about the security of U.S. ciphers, claiming that while some agents’ one time ciper pads might have been compromised, general American government communications
were “protected between sender and recipient by a variety of means, none of which were made suspect by Khrushchev’s remarks.” If Dulles’ letter to Hiestand accurately reflected the findings of the CIA inquiry and was not just an attempt to quieten Congress, then Khrushchev seemed to have gotten away with his fit of boasting in Los Angeles.

Eight months later though, another outburst by Khrushchev raised fresh questions about American communications security. This incident arose from Soviet diplomatic pressure on Iran. In July 1960, Khrushchev asked the shah for a pledge not to host foreign military bases on Iranian territory. The shah believed that he had to be conciliatory toward Moscow, but at the same time he wanted to closely coordinate his response with his American and British allies. The Iranian foreign minister, Abbas Aram, therefore privately met with the American ambassador, Edward Wailes, and the British chargé d’affaires, Guy Millard, three times in Tehran in July to discuss a draft reply from the shah to Khrushchev. Aram and the shah agreed to changes in the text recommended by Wailes and Millard and dropped certain points. Once the letter was finished to everyone’s satisfaction the Iranian chargé d’affaires, Tahmouress Adamiyat, presented it to Khrushchev in Yalta.

The Soviet leader’s response was not what the Iranians had been hoping for. Upon reading the letter Khrushchev petulantly said to Adamiyat that:

He knew that this was not the original reply which the Shah was going to send. Both the United States and the British Ambassadors had expressed their views on the draft, and he could tell the Chargé d’Affaires which passages had been altered by the Americans and which by the British.

These comments caused consternation in Tehran. The shah was convinced that there had been a leak to the Soviets and as only he and Aram had known about the letter on the Iranian side and no drafts had been telegraphed through Iranian channels, it must have come from the Americans or British. Eisenhower was informed on 30 August that “Khrushchev’s points were apparently sufficiently accurate that the Shah felt there had been a leak or code compromised.” The political under-secretary of the Iranian Foreign Ministry asked the American chargé d’affaires in Tehran if there was any indication that American codes were broken. But the Americans and British denied any liability on their part, arguing that Khrushchev was probably bluffing or that if there had been a leak, it had come from the Iranians. Wailes told the shah on 28 September that while he could not guarantee that American codes had not been compromised, the State Department did not have the slightest evidence that this had taken place. The shah accepted this reassurance, partly because he had discovered that other members of his administration had in fact been aware of the letter and
the consultations with the Americans and British. But he was probably on
the mark with his suspicions. After each of his meetings with Aram and
Millard in July Wailes had sent the State Department a telegram reporting
their discussion and giving details of the alterations made to the text of the
shah’s letter. Copies of these telegrams had been cabled to the American
embassy in Moscow where the KGB surveillance operation could have
intercepted and decrypted them and kept Khrushchev fully informed of what
the diplomats were contriving.

The Americans were also far more worried about the security of their
ciphers than they admitted to the shah. In April 1960, the NSA had advised
the State Department that its cipher equipment did not meet acceptable
security standards and should be replaced at the earliest possible date.
Research by the NSA had shown that surveillance of cipher machines’
acoustic and electromagnetic emissions could reveal the text of encrypted
messages, and there was concern that Warsaw Bloc states were targeting
American embassies in this way. Security officials from the State
Department’s Bureau of Security and Consular Affairs regularly swept
embassies for surveillance devices, but they were very hard to detect. A
Bureau official lamented that as a result “we are under constant
apprehension that the enemy (and friendly nations as well) may be
overhearing our conversations and reading our encrypted messages.”
These fears were justified, for it was exactly this method that Andreev’s KGB team
were using to read the telegrams of the Moscow embassy.

Then, on 28 September, the same day that Wailes reassured the shah
about American codes, the State Department ordered its embassies in
Moscow, Warsaw, Prague, Bucharest, and Sofia to henceforth encrypt by
hand with one time pads all outgoing telegrams classified as top secret or
secret. The department would manually encrypt its top secret and secret
cables to the embassies with one time pads as well. This was an unusual
and drastic step to take, especially for a post as important as Moscow. If
the cipher clerks had to encrypt telegrams by hand it would considerably
increase their workload and slow down diplomatic communications. One
time pads had the advantage of being theoretically 100% secure but they
were a much slower, more laborious method of encryption. The Moscow
embassy pointed out that it took sixteen hours to encipher just one
lengthy Soviet government statement with one time pads. The State
Department did not explain the reasons behind its order and at present
there is no evidence directly linking it to the shah’s questioning of
American codes, but the timing is very suggestive. Khrushchev’s comments
to Adamiyat would have confirmed the State Department’s worst fears
about the security of its cipher machines and could have precipitated this
emergency action.
The restrictions would have sharply cut the KGB’s take of traffic from the Moscow embassy, for unless the cipher clerks talked about messages, bugging could not reveal the contents of telegrams encrypted by hand. But the volume and importance of telegrams between Washington and Moscow meant that the ban could not be sustained indefinitely. In March 1961, the State Department partially relaxed the rules, allowing secret as well as confidential messages to be machine encrypted, although telegrams classified as top secret still had to be encoded with one time pads. To safeguard its communications on a more sustainable, long-term basis the State Department decided to create sound proofed, electromagnetically shielded secure rooms that could protect cipher machines in embassies and in late 1960 and 1961 it tested prototype secure rooms in the United States.

**ASSESSING THE CLAIMS OF PRIMAKOV, SOVERSHENNO SEKRETNNO, AND DOBRYNIN**

In the early 1960s there were also the three intelligence gaffes by Khrushchev described in the Russian sources. The first of these concerned KGB human intelligence. In his official history of Russian intelligence Primakov claimed that a secret KGB mission in Iran in 1961 had to be aborted because Khrushchev talked to Kennedy about the likely overthrow of the shah. The Soviet leadership had instructed the KGB to covertly establish links with Iranian nationalists and other anti-shah forces in Iran and find out their potential and plans for coming to power. Led by an officer given the pseudonym “Fadeev,” a KGB team entered Iran and succeed in making some contacts, including with Iranians involved with Central Treaty Organization military activities. Unfortunately, at summit talks in Vienna in June 1961, Khrushchev told Kennedy that the shah’s regime was doomed and about to fall. The KGB hurriedly pulled Fadeev’s group out of Iran for fear that it had been put at risk by Khrushchev’s comments.

A former KGB officer, Vladimir Kuzichkin, who defected to Britain in 1982, related a similar although more dramatic story in his memoirs, which were published before the official history. According to Kuzichkin, Fadeev’s real name was Ivan Fadeikin and he was sent to Iran in 1961 to organize the assassination of the shah. Khrushchev and other members of the Presidium had approved Fadeikin’s assassination plan, and at the Vienna summit the Soviet leader gloated to Kennedy that “Iran is a rotten fruit which will soon fall at the feet of the Soviet Union. Disturbances will soon begin in that country.” This version of events would help explain why the KGB was so concerned about Fadeev being exposed. However, Kuzichkin’s reliability can be questioned, as the rotten fruit comment does not appear in the American transcript of the Vienna meetings. But whatever Fadeev’s real mission, the American minutes do show Khrushchev predicting the fall of the
shah. While he insisted that the Soviet Union was not doing anything in Iran to promote a revolution, Khrushchev admonished Kennedy that the Iranian people “are so poor that the country has become a volcano and changes are bound to occur sooner or later. The Shah will certainly be overthrown.”

American officials could see from the summit discussion that Khrushchev was waiting expectantly for the shah to fall, although they did not suspect the involvement of Soviet intelligence. This suggests that, while Khrushchev was indiscreet when talking to Kennedy, the KGB overestimated the impact of his remarks on the Americans.

The same seems to be true of the incident reported in the Sovershенно Sekretnо television documentary. This program looked at Soviet/Russian signals intelligence and featured interviews with the leaders of FAPSІ and Andreev, who after his successful operation against the American embassy went on to become head of the KGB’s signals intelligence directorate. The documentary claimed that a chance remark by Khrushchev in the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis had led the United States to change its cipher systems and deprived the KGB of access to American traffic. During the crisis, signals intelligence kept the Soviet leadership continually informed of the substance of talks between Kennedy and the American military, but in a conversation with Kennedy, Khrushchev let slip something that made the Pentagon realize that the Soviets were reading the codes of the Strategic Air Command (SAC). The Americans took protective action. In the program, Andreev explained that “[w]e read [the] correspondence of the American embassy” and much other traffic but “Khrushchev really hit us” as he made “the Americans change all their failing systems.” Andreev recalled that Kennedy sent out a special directive ordering the replacement of many older cryptographic systems and said, “[T]hey really changed them. Cost them, it is quite expensive. Of course, it cost us dearly too since we lost the ability to read American correspondence.”

Looking back, Andreev was scathing of Khrushchev’s handling of signals intelligence, saying that the Soviet leader “caused very great damage to our service [and] in general to the interests of our whole country.”

One problem with this account is that Khrushchev never spoke to Kennedy by telephone during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Moreover, in all of his correspondence with the president between October 1962 and November 1963, he only once obliquely referred to SAC. In a letter to Kennedy on 28 October 1962, at the height of the crisis, Khrushchev warned that an American U-2 spy plane that had accidentally flown into Soviet airspace could have been mistaken for a bomber and pushed Moscow to “a fateful step.” All the more so, Khrushchev wrote, “since the U.S. Government and Pentagon long ago declared that you are maintaining a continuous nuclear bomber patrol.” Conceivably, the KGB feared that this line in the
letter had precipitated American countermeasures although it was publicly
known since 1961 that SAC flew continuous airborne patrols, so *prima facie*,
Khrushchev had not revealed any secret information.  

Nonetheless, it was true that during the Cuban Missile Crisis Kennedy
ordered a massive overhaul of American cipher systems. On 24 October the
president directed that urgent action be taken by the State Department,
Department of Defense, and CIA to improve American communications
worldwide.  
The National Security Council set up a subcommittee with the
aim of making U.S. government communications “as prompt, reliable and
secure as possible.” By May 1963, the U.S. government had supplied its
embassies in Latin America with new, online cipher machines that were much
closer and cryptographically more secure. Furthermore, in the autumn of
1962 the State Department installed in its Moscow embassy an acoustic and
electromagnetically shielded room to house the cipher machines. From
December 1962 onward all coding of State Department telegrams was carried
out within this enclosure, making it impossible for the KGB to exploit the
cipher machines’ compromising emissions anymore. These security
measures would explain some of the cut-off in signals intelligence experienced
by Andreev and the KGB.

Yet there is no evidence that the Americans improved their
communications security because of an indiscretion by Khrushchev during
the Cuban Missile Crisis. In fact, Kennedy issued his directive on
communications four days before he received Khrushchev’s letter referring to
the airborne alert. The president was motivated to take remedial action, not
because of immediate security concerns, but because he was frustrated at the
time it was taking in the crisis to communicate with American military units
and embassies in Latin America. Similarly, the installation of the secure
room in the Moscow embassy was part of a development program that had
been going on since at least 1960. This program may have been encouraged
by Khrushchev’s petulant comment to the Iranian chargé d’affaires in August
1960, but it was not a response to an intelligence gaffe by him in October
1962. The KGB and the *Soversheno Sekretno* documentary appear to have
misconstrued why the Americans tightened up their communications security
after the Cuban Missile Crisis and in this instance, unfairly blamed
Khrushchev for the loss of intelligence.

Although the secure room blocked surveillance of the embassy’s cipher
machines, the KGB still had its bugging system in the building and could
eavesdrop on American diplomats. According to Dobrynin, however,
another incident by Khrushchev helped lead to the discovery of the
microphones. The cause of the outburst this time was trade between the
Soviet Union and West Germany. The U.S. embassy in Moscow, led by
Ambassador Foy Kohler, had encouraged Washington to halt Western
exports of large-diameter steel pipe to the Soviet Union. In November 1962, NATO states agreed to an embargo and the following March the West German government blocked three German steel firms from selling 163,000 tons of pipe to the USSR. Khrushchev was outraged and on 27 July 1963 he raised the topic at a meeting with Kohler and Dobrynin. He directly accused Kohler of trying to block steel pipe sales to the Soviet Union. The minutes of the meeting show Khrushchev complaining that “at Kohler’s recommendation US had applied pressure on Germans and deprived them of orders for pipe.” Khrushchev may have said more than this; Newsweek also quoted him telling Kohler: “Don’t try to deny it. We didn’t learn that from our spies.” Kohler felt that Khrushchev had “talked as though he had some knowledge of embassy telegrams.” This does seem to have been the case; in his memoirs Dobrynin explained that at the meeting:

... Khrushchev inadvertently and with characteristic indiscretion and bluster made it clear to Ambassador Foy Kohler during a heated discussion that we had tapped his coded cables. He wanted to confront the ambassador with the fact that we knew he had personally opposed the delivery of steel tubing from the West for [a] natural gas pipeline. Thus alerted, American intelligence presumably acted, and our information from the U.S. Embassy in Moscow was much reduced.

Khrushchev was probably referring to telegrams he had seen earlier, before the secure room was installed in the embassy, but his comments rattled the Americans. Although the State Department was confident that the secure room adequately protected the embassy’s cipher machines, the president’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board began an investigation, looking at the department’s cryptographic systems, the handling of traffic in Moscow and evidence of technical penetration. An American official later recalled that:

The security people were appalled. They launched a massive, fruitless hunt for the leak. They went over U.S. codes and cable security, they combed the embassy for bugs, and went into a tremendous flap that lasted a long, long while.

Despite all its efforts, the investigation did not uncover the bugging system in the embassy. The breakthrough only came a few months later, in February 1964, when Yuriy Nosenko, a KGB officer with direct knowledge of the embassy surveillance operation, defected to the United States. The CIA suspected (wrongly) that Nosenko was a fake defector sent by the KGB to misdirect American counterintelligence, but Khrushchev’s outburst added credibility to his claims that the embassy was bugged. So, working on leads from Nosenko, in April, State Department security officers demolished an office in the embassy and discovered a microphone embedded in a
load-bearing wall. They then unraveled the whole complicated network of microphones and wiring, all leading to a buried cable that was run out through the embassy grounds. The security officers sliced through the cable, finally cutting off the KGB’s access to its embassy surveillance system. The Americans could now see how the Soviets had been getting their intelligence. They could also see how reckless Khrushchev had been. A State Department damage report on the bugging judged that Khrushchev “was doubtless guilty of a serious breach of security” when he complained to Kohler about steel piping. In truth, it was just the latest in a series of security breaches by Khrushchev.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, the preceding examples show a clear pattern of behavior. On at least eight separate occasions between 1957 and 1963, Khrushchev boasted about intelligence or revealed the results of intelligence to Western politicians, diplomats, and journalists. And these are only the known cases; given Khrushchev’s personality and general conduct there may well be incidents with other Western policymakers waiting to be discovered in the archives. At times Khrushchev could have been exaggerating or bluffing, just as he sometimes did when he boasted about Soviet rockets and nuclear weapons. Soviet intelligence certainly did not “know everything” as Khrushchev liked to claim. But many of his indiscretions can be linked to KGB operations and specific American, Indian, and Iranian messages or confidential discussions.

This reckless, cavalier approach to security was highly unusual. Other Soviet general secretaries in the Cold War were much more guarded about referring to intelligence and so were their American counterparts. Presidents Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan did accidentally compromise signals intelligence sources in 1969 and 1986 by publicly using intelligence material for propaganda purposes; Nixon wanted to prove that an American aircraft shot down by North Korea had been in international airspace, while Reagan was trying to justify air strikes against Libya. In these instances, Nixon and Reagan were heavy handed in their public exploitation of intelligence, just as Khrushchev was in the 1957 Syrian Crisis. But Khrushchev’s serial indiscretions between 1958 and 1963 were of a different nature. Rather than serving clear policy goals, they appeared to be just attempts to intimidate or impress Western diplomats and politicians or simple carelessness. From a security perspective, he was uniquely poor at handling intelligence.

This does not necessarily mean though that he compromised KGB and GRU sources. It is not always easy to identify the source of a leak and governments can be slow to react even when they are presented with strong evidence that their codes are broken or that they have been infiltrated by
spies. The Americans could not quite believe at first that Khrushchev would casually blurt out precious intelligence secrets. After Khrushchev’s outburst in Los Angeles in 1959, American officials played down the incident to a Los Angeles Times reporter, arguing, reasonably enough, that if the Soviets really had secret access to American information, Khrushchev would not be so naïve as to give away this advantage by warning the United States of the danger.125 Indeed, judging by the accounts in Primakov’s official history of Russian intelligence and the Sovvershemo Sekretno documentary, the KGB overestimated the American reaction to some of Khrushchev’s indiscretions. Similarly, Khrushchev’s bragging to Pietromarchi and Preti did not lead to the detection of SUZA and the KGB’s other agents in the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Still, it is clear that Khrushchev’s behavior attracted unwelcome attention to Soviet intelligence operations. He provoked at least two American security investigations, in 1959 and 1963, and his gratuitous remarks about the shah at the Vienna Summit forced the KGB to pull Fadeev and his team out of Iran, throwing away months of covert work. The most significant damage though was probably to the KGB’s surveillance operation against the American embassy in Moscow. Khrushchev’s comment to the Iranian chargé d’affairs in August 1960 would have reinforced existing American concerns about the security of State Department cipher machines and led it to partially revert to manual encryption at the Moscow embassy. Khrushchev’s complaint about steel piping in July 1963 stoked American fears of leaks from the embassy and made Nosenko’s later claim that it was bugged more credible. It was partly because of Khrushchev that the bugging system was discovered in 1964, depriving the KGB of a valuable source of American diplomatic intelligence. For the KGB then Khrushchev was a security liability. This raises the interesting question of how well the intelligence producer–consumer relationship can function when the consumer handles the intelligence product so carelessly. How can an intelligence service deal with a national leader like Khrushchev who repeatedly and willfully puts at risk its valuable but fragile sources? It is perhaps no coincidence that Shelepin and Semichastny, the former and current chiefs of the KGB, were part of the Presidium conspiracy in October 1964 to remove Khrushchev from office.126

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