

THE SOVIET RATIONALE OF FOREGOING DISINFORMATION IN THE CASE OF THE BERLIN TUNNEL

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The tensions of the Cold War were largely the product of uncertainty. In Europe, the Americans and the British could no longer collect radio communications as they had in the past, for the Soviets had switched from “longwave,” easy to intercept frequencies, to “shortwave” frequencies that operated only within line-of-sight.¹ Along the Iron Curtain there was little opportunity to listen in on radio transmissions over the airwaves, but there *was* ground wire in place that the Americans and British recognized and chose to exploit with the Berlin Tunnel. 1,476 feet long, the tunnel stretched across the East-West Berlin boundary to tap underground wiring carrying messages throughout the Eastern Bloc and even to Moscow.² The Russian Committee on State Security (KGB) knew about the tunnel months before construction had even begun, thanks to the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) turncoat George Blake.³ Despite a prime opportunity to exercise the central pillar of Russian intelligence and political strategy, active measures, the Russians chose to leave the potential counter-intelligence exploit of the Berlin Tunnel unused because they weighed their asset, George Blake, so highly. Though some authors and former KGB officers will argue that disinformation was, in fact, used in the Berlin Tunnel, the reality is that there is nothing more than a hunch to suggest this. The lack of evidence alone cannot put the disinformation theory to rest, but an examination of Soviet motivations just might. Given the nuances of the Russian context, including the recent coming apart of the Cambridge Five and the KGB not knowing that the National Security Agency (NSA) had broken Russian teleprint encryptions, it was far more rational to do everything they could to retain Blake.

¹ National Security Agency and Central Security Service, *Operation REGAL: The Berlin Tunnel* (Fort Meade, Maryland: 1988) 1.

² Central Intelligence Agency, “A Look Back: The Berlin Tunnel Exposed,” accessed 30 November, 2018. <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/the-berlin-tunnel-exposed.html>

³ George Blake, *No Other Choice*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 182.

Blake's long road to becoming a Soviet spy began when he and his family fled from the Netherlands during WWII and he was recruited by SIS shortly after he arrived in England.⁴ During his clandestine service in Korea, Blake was captured by the North Koreans. Through both his growing disillusion with the aimlessness of his intelligence service and exposure to Communist propaganda in the POW camp, Blake was ideologically driven toward the Communist cause.⁵ Before returning home to Berlin after the war, Blake made contact with a KGB officer and arranged to supply the Soviets with any and all intelligence he could access.⁶ Blake reintegrated with SIS back in England where he was assigned to a new technical intelligence department called "Section Y," where Blake documented all information that crossed his desk.⁷ When plans to build the Berlin Tunnel were presented in a meeting, Blake had been there in charge of the minutes, and cleverly retained a carbon copy of his notes for his KGB handlers.⁸ Blake's information tipped the KGB to the operation before it even began.

The KGB knew about the Berlin Tunnel since the day Blake provided information on it, January 18, 1954, but took no actions to deny the exploit until April 22, 1956, over fifteen months later.⁹ The inaction on behalf of the Soviets has been interpreted as strange by many and has led some CIA, KGB, and academics alike to the conclusion that a large portion of the information that SIS and the CIA received from the tunnel was nothing more than disinformation.¹⁰ The KGB

⁴ Ibid, 26, 88; Blake was adamant he did what he did for purely ideological reasons and that these are the most dangerous and valuable sort of agents. It is likely that the KGB saw particular value in Blake as agent for this reason among many other contextual reasons.

⁵ Ibid, 137-139.

⁶ Ibid, 143-145.

⁷ Roger Hermiston, *The Greatest Traitor: The Secret Lives of Agent George Blake*, (Islington, England: Aurum Press, 2013) 148, 158.

⁸ Ibid, 163-164.

⁹ Hermiston, *The Greatest Traitor*, 164; Central Intelligence Agency. *Recapitulation of the Intelligence Derived*, Appendix B of *Clandestine Services History: The Berlin Tunnel Operation 1952-1956* (Langley: undated), 1.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/1968-06-24.pdf>

¹⁰ David E. Murphy, Sergei A. Kondrashev, and George Bailey, *Battleground Berlin: CIA vs. KGB in the Cold War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 207-208; Murphy notes a number of authors including Morchetti (CIA), Nechiporenko (KGB), and Tissier. The reason why I do not go into their sources further is because they are dated and ill-informed. Explain why these individuals thought what they did is far more important than what they thought in particular which Murphy, Kondrashev, and Bailey clearly show to be flawed.

defines disinformation as “the secret channeling towards an adversary of false information... designed to mislead him and prompt him to take decision and measures which fit in with the plan and intentions of the [KGB].”¹¹ In a 1998 interview, former Head of KGB Foreign Counter Intelligence, Oleg Kalugin, described disinformation as “the heart and soul of Soviet intelligence.”¹² Other former Soviet Bloc intelligence officers have attested that “the resources and personnel devoted to these [disinformation] operations... confirm the importance of these activities in Moscow’s view.”¹³ There is plenty reason to think that the Soviets ought to have seen the Berlin Tunnel as an opportunity for disinformation. Blake himself suggested the possibility for disinformation in a tongue-in-cheek manner, saying, “Indeed it might [have been] possible to make use of [the Berlin Tunnel] to the Soviet advantage.”¹⁴

Despite the clear opportunity for disinformation, the KGB seemed to show restraint, out of concern for Blake’s safety. Blake explains that his safety was “considered of paramount importance [by the KGB].”¹⁵ Joseph Evans, a former CIA officer who was closely involved with the tunnel, states that, “no analyses of the tunnel product and no data from independent sources have uncovered signs of disinformation in this material. Independent sources, on the contrary have validated items which analysts of the tunnel traffic initially unearthed.”¹⁶ NSA’s review of suspected disinformation operations relating to the tunnel independently yielded similar findings. Intelligence officials concluded, “It was highly unlikely that the Soviets and East Germans had the time, funds, and inclination to undertake

¹¹ Vasili Mitrokhin. *KGB Lexicon: The Soviet Intelligence Officers Handbook*, ed. Jeff Kingston, (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2002), 30.

<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/usma/detail.action?docID=1111747>

¹² Oleg Kalugin, interview by CCN Cold War Production Team, *Inside the KGB*, CNN, January 1998.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20070206020316/http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/episodes/21/interviews/kalugin/>

¹³ Richard H. Shultz and Roy Godson, *Dezinformatsia: Active Measures in Soviet Strategy*, (Washington DC: Pergamon-Brassey’s, 1984), 174.

¹⁴ Blake, *No Other Choice*, 25.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 25.

¹⁶ Joseph C. Evans, “Berlin Tunnel Intelligence: A Bumbling KGB,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 9 (1996): 48.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/08850609608435304?needAccess=true>

such an immense effort [of using the Berlin Tunnel for disinformation].”¹⁷

Not only is there no evidence that the Soviets actually used active measures through the Berlin Tunnel, but there is plenty of reason to suggest it would not have been rational for them to do so. The Soviets took no actions to intervene either directly, by denying the cable exploitation, or indirectly, by instating a disinformation operation, the reason behind that the decision to do neither was measured against the value of George Blake as an asset. Sergei Krondrashev, Blake’s case officer at the time, plainly states that “the communication lines being tapped by... [the Berlin Tunnel] were not used for disinformation. To do so would have involved too many people and would have risked Blake’s security.”¹⁸ The value that the Soviets assigned to Blake relative to the possible damages that the Berlin Tunnel could have caused were based on two important factors: the context of Soviet espionage at the time and that the Soviets believed only their unencrypted traffic was vulnerable to exploitation.

Blake was recruited as a Soviet spy in fall, 1951, coincidentally around the same time that the now famous Cambridge Five Soviet spy ring was coming apart.¹⁹ The group had been recruited from Cambridge University in the 1930s by KGB to spy for the Soviets, made up of five members, hence its name.²⁰ In 1951, one its members, Carincross, had confessed to spying, while two others, Burgess and Maclean, had recently fled to Moscow, leaving Philby and Blunt under heavy suspicions.²¹ By the time Blake returned to England in April 1953 to begin spying for the KGB, the USSR’s greatest spy ring was no more.²² The KGB were short on quality agents and therefore placed the longevity of Blake’s role with them as a top priority. The KGB hoped to run Blake as an agent for many years as they had the Cambridge Five, so when Blake brought them information on the Berlin Tunnel in January 1954, less than a year after he had begun spying, it would have

¹⁷ National Security Agency and Central Security Service, *Operation REGAL: The Berlin Tunnel* (Fort Meade: 1988), 22.

https://www.nsa.gov/Portals/70/documents/news-features/declassified-documents/cryptologic-histories/operation_regal.pdf

¹⁸ Murphy, Kondrashev, and Bailey, *Battleground Berlin*, 218.

¹⁹ Blake, *No Other Choice*, 142; Andrew and Mitrokhin, 154-161.

²⁰ Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB*, (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 57-58.

²¹ *Ibid*, 154-161.

²² Blake, *No Other Choice*, 153.

been rash to put him at risk. The Soviets had established the Cambridge Five in the 1930s and by the end of their nearly twenty-year investment, former KGB General Oleg Kalugin recalls them as “one of the most spectacular spy rings of the century.”²³ It was from this long-term perspective and the massive success that the Cambridge Five had brought that the Soviets framed Blake’s prospects as an agent. It would have been exceptionally short sighted to risk exposing their new agent with a long career ahead of him to unearth the Berlin Tunnel or even use disinformation through the tunnel as it may have alerted SIS or the CIA that something was amiss.

The KGB decided to sit on the Berlin Tunnel intelligence that Blake had given them. Pitovranov, the KGB chief of the area did not know about the tunnel until over a year after Blake provided the initial intelligence.²⁴ Many top KGB officers were not even aware of the Berlin Tunnel until after it was uncovered in 1956, under conditions that would not draw suspicion.²⁵ The KGB allowed the tunnel to operate for nearly a year until heavy rains caused legitimate faults in the tapped section of their lines to expose it, all the while the Soviets had lost massive amounts of intelligence to SIS and CIA during its operation.²⁶ Value, not quantity, was the primary metric the KGB used to assess the suspected damages, but this is where they may have made a grave miscalculation.

The KGB had assumed that their encrypted communication traffic had not been broke by the Americans, but this was not the case. The NSA had already discovered how to break landline encryptions in 1951, unbeknownst to the Soviets.²⁷ If KGB assumptions had been correct and encrypted traffic actually had been safe, then American exploits would have been limited to plaintext telephone conversations, which NSA Center for Cytological History (CCH) Director, David Hatch, admits would have “yielded only routine – but sometimes interesting – information.”²⁸ The NSA’s investigations revealed that “while George Blake knew about the tunnel and the fact that it was

²³ Oleg Kalugin, *Spymaster: My Thirty-Two Years in Intelligence and Espionage against the West*, (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 137.

²⁴ Murphy, Kondrashev, and Bailey, *Battleground Berlin*, 236.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ CIA, *Clandestine Service History*, 23; NSA and CSS, *Operation REGAL*, 23.

²⁷ NSA and CSS, *Operation REGAL*, 2.

²⁸ David Hatch, “Berlin Tunnel Part II: The Rivals,” *Cryptologic Almanac*, NSA (February, 1998), 2. https://www.nsa.gov/Portals/70/documents/news-features/declassified-documents/crypto-almanac-50th/Tunnel_2.pdf

tapping telephone lines, he apparently had not been informed of the flaw on Soviet teleprinters that allowed analysts to exploit encrypted messages... [and secure] high quality intelligence.”²⁹ Given that the KGB believed only routine information would have been exposed, it was only logical that they decided not to risk using disinformation. This small loss of not particularly valuable information would certainly be worth ensuring Blake’s safety—but unfortunately for the KGB their assessment was wrong, and their gamble did not pay off... or did it?

While it can be clearly shown how the Soviets arrived rationally their conclusion not to use disinformation or expose the tunnel, it is much more difficult to say whether their assessment was a blunder or not. Co-authors Murphy, Kondrashev, and Bailey bring up an interesting piece of evidence that is difficult to deliberate. They claim the so-called ‘technical breakthrough’ that would have allowed the Americans to read Soviet encrypted traffic exhibits “some misunderstanding” because such a break through “played no role in processing telegraphic circuits in Washington headquarters.”³⁰ The source that these authors base this claim upon is their interview with Frank Rowlett, who was Technical Director in the Office of Operations for the NSA at the time.³¹ Given that there is no record of this interview, is impossible to corroborate this and stack it against the sources that contradict him. What is most interesting about this contradiction is that both are endorsed by the NSA, one by Rowlett and another by the official historical document of the NSA. The historical NSA document references, in part, David Martin, author of *Wilderness of Mirrors* who interviewed Carl Nelson of the CIA’s Office of Communications at the time.³² With access to neither interview, the result is a stalemate that will have be resolved with more extensive research in the future.

Perhaps it is only fitting that certain aspects of the Berlin Tunnel’s intelligence history remain unresolved, after all, that is the nature of the field. There are times that, due the clandestine nature of many operations, details will be muddled, confused, or contradictory—

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Murphy, Kondrashev, and Bailey, *Battleground Berlin*, 206.

³¹ “Frank B. Rowlett,” *Cryptologic Hall of Honor*. National Security Agency. Accessed 13 December 2018. <https://www.nsa.gov/about/cryptologic-heritage/historical-figures-publications/hall-of-honor/Article/1623037/frank-b-rowlett/> ; Technically he worked for the Armed Forces Security Agency which was the predecessor to the NSA, but I have kept naming conventions the same for clarity sake.

³² David C. Martin, *Wilderness of Mirrors*, (Connecticut: Lyons Press, 2003), 76.

truth can be elusive and sometimes even only be revealed as new information surfaces. Despite what remains unresolved, there is a great deal that has yielded useful conclusions. The KGB's decision to not use the Berlin Tunnel for disinformation is not a puzzling choice, but a very rational one. The Soviet espionage scene was in the process of rebuilding given the disintegration of the Cambridge Five's dynasty.

Blake represented a new hope for the KGB as he would ideally become an increasingly valuable agent over the course of a decade or more as the Cambridge Five had been. Blake's value to the KGB mandated his protection. When the KGB weighed the lost opportunity by forgoing disinformation through the Berlin Tunnel and allowing the Tunnel to operate for the time being, it was with the assumption that only unencrypted cable traffic was vulnerable. Though there is not definitive evidence whether encrypted traffic was vulnerable or not, Blake had no knowledge of it being so, which led the KGB to proceed with this assumption. It was just rational calculus, a trade of "routine information" for the promise of an agent who had only just begun providing his services to the USSR. With the huge burden of future KGB intelligence prospects on the Blake as an agent, it is easy to see how the comparatively marginal gains of disinformation in this case were never worth the risk.