



**Essay competition winner:
Julia Tattersall**

**Summary of Mark Harrison's:
*Contracting for counterintelligence:
The KGB and Soviet informers of the
1960s and 1970s.***

Cage working paper (no. 408)

Mass surveillance was often employed by communist regimes to empower the state over society. A large aspect of this was human intelligence – a powerful weapon in preventing action against authority. Comprised of a network of informers, each operating undercover, human intelligence was designed to spy on potential threats to society. Any precursors to the disruption of political order would be reported to the KGB. In this way, the state was able to pre-empt adversary action against the regime.

Whilst the collaboration and assignments of individual informers were kept secret, the existence of the network was not unknown. Although not the primary objective, widespread suspicion was of benefit to the KGB. Fear of mistakenly sharing hostile thoughts with an informer led to less hostile discourse in general. However, a low-trust society was not the intended outcome of KGB surveillance. The system relied on trust, which facilitated the process of collecting information. In fact, an informer's principal mission was to befriend members of society with the intent of later breaking their trust in order to supply knowledge to the KGB.

Throughout his essay, Harrison attempts to shed light on the specifics of this underground network, focusing on the recruitment process and the subsequent relationship between informer and handler. Drawing from a dataset of 21 personal narratives found in the archive of the KGB of Soviet Lithuania, Harrison is able to build a picture of the informers' realities.

Within the dataset, Harrison naturally found trends in the agents' characteristics. Besides the inevitable preference for sociability, hostile political records were also deemed desirable, with two-thirds admitting to a corrupt past, which often referred to participation in non-communist activity. There were more extreme examples too, like that of agent 'Neman', who had previously collaborated with Germany during Occupation.

KGB databases from the 1970s termed such propensities as negative, but the narratives show that these were in fact highly sought after. A record of political misconduct favoured both parties. For the state, a history of hostility meant connections to the political underworld, which would undoubtedly prove an advantage. For the agents, 'Neman' included, KGB collaboration was a means of redemption: an opportunity to cancel out one's past.

Whilst some citizens offered their services to the KGB, the majority were not volunteers. Instead the identification of candidates was strategic, with the KGB first determining a need and then searching for a suitable

citizen to meet it. This investigation process could take months, with recruitment reserved only for those who succeeded the lengthy character evaluation.

The contract of recruitment featured a binding agreement of cooperation with the security police signed by the newly hired informer. It symbolised the written half of a two-sided commitment, with the handler's half being verbally implied. The agent's codename was incorporated into the contract, but there was neither mention of specific tasks nor duration of employment. The incompleteness of the agreement placed the informer in a position of ignorance, putting even more pressure on the search and due diligence required before recruitment. The KGB needed a subject that was committed enough to carry out tasks that were not specified in the initial agreement.

Consent was another concern, with the KGB itself acknowledging that recruitment was sometimes coerced. Whilst consent allows the candidate to refuse the contract with no adverse consequences, coercion involves an explicit threat to impose costs on those who fail to comply. The line dividing these becomes blurred when retribution is expected but never voiced. Evidence shows that there was no specific penalty for refusal, yet as many candidates had compromised records it is unsurprising that they felt obliged to comply. With this kept in mind, consented recruitment by the KGB's standards was high. However, the prolonged scrutiny of candidates that took place prior to recruitment equally explained the low incidence of coercion. The covert stage of preliminary investigation allowed for the selection of recruits who were already aligned with the KGB's ideologies or who could be aligned with little pressure. Certainly, this was the case with 'Neman'.

Yet Harrison discovered that regardless of the manner of recruitment, shirking was often a problem. When observing the performance of its agents, the KGB would pay close attention to the quality of the informer's cooperation, considering both the willingness of the agent on recruitment and the willingness of his subsequent performance. ►

The former referred to the motives behind recruitment – whether it was wholehearted or forced. The latter referred to the agent’s compliance with instructions of a task and his results thereafter. For unproductive informers, intervention was required. Due to the costs involved with searching for recruits, the KGB was strongly incentivised to persist with inadequate agents and invest in their abilities. The handlers had two instruments at their disposal: trust and re-education.

On one hand, poor performance was perhaps the result of the informer’s qualities not being fully matched to the task at hand. In this instance, the handler would employ either *privitie* or *vospitanie*. *Privitie* referred to training the agent in the tradecraft of working undercover, whilst *vospitanie* referred to moral and political re-education, aiming to reform the agent’s character and ideological attitudes. Among the 21 narratives, Harrison found that given the necessary *privitie*, many agents still did not perform to a satisfactory level. ‘Nevskii’ is an example of this, whereby his hard work was offset by his somewhat repellent attitude. Evidently, the only barrier to his success was his persona, which could be overcome through re-education in *vospitanie* in order to design an outward self that would attract the targets of the KGB.

On the other hand, it was perhaps the trust in the agent–handler relationship that was the problem. Non-compliance to tasks was considered a breach of trust that needed to be repaired. Often, the informer was inhibited from full cooperation by some hidden moral or political reservation. This was the case for ‘Ruta’, an agent who emerged from his depression only after trusting the KGB with his most inner thoughts. Once he had rebuilt the relationship with his handler, he was no longer lonely and was entrusted with more responsibility as an agent. Here, trust was the key that unlocked the informer’s ability to perform his role. Yet the cause for non-compliance was not always on the part of the agent. Sometimes it was the KGB’s fault. One handler trusted his agent, ‘Stanislav’, too much, leading him to withhold information about his colleague’s criminal activities. The remedy for such was tighter discipline. However, the opposite could have equally been problematic, whereby not enough trust was causing the agent to become demotivated. Hence, although the trust was two-sided, the two sides were not equal. The informer’s trust in the handler had to be unconditional, whilst the handler had to strike a balance – neither too much, nor too little – making use of surveillance in order to ‘trust, but verify’.

Handler intervention was often met with a promise to protect the informer through affirmation of status

– a powerful incentive in a secretive, low-trust society obsessed with personal record and rank. For exceptional service, the agents were compensated with tangible rewards that signalled gratitude and acknowledgement. In turn agent morale improved, increasing motivation and effort.

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To conclude, having drawn from 21 agent narratives, Harrison is able to piece together a better understanding of the KGB regime of Soviet Lithuania. His essay reveals the rigour involved in the evaluation

of candidates that took place prior to recruitment and the post-contract intervention that was used to improve agent performance. The necessity of these lengthy processes could largely be blamed on the incompleteness of the recruitment contract, as it placed the premium on loyalty. In fact, Harrison found that the recruitment process lacked a few things, including the handler’s written commitment to the agreement and the freedom of refusal exempt from any threat. Following recruitment, agent analysis was key to ensure performance was satisfactory. In the case of non-compliance or poor service, the handling officer needed to either invest time in re-educating the agent or in strengthening the trust in their relationship. Re-education typically involved the training and character development needed to successfully operate as an undercover agent. Trust, however, was at the crux of the relationship between informer and handling officer, and therefore needed to be monitored closely. Whilst an agent’s trust needed to be unconditional, handlers were advised to ‘trust, but verify’. No agent was so trusted that his work would not be checked. Rather, a balance had to be found in order to motivate the agents and encourage productivity.

In essence, trust and deception were two sides of the informer’s coin. The KGB used deception in the initial stages of recruitment, investigating potential candidates from under cover. Once hired, the agents were then taught the same skills to spy on fellow citizens, whom they would later go on to betray. ◀

About the author

Julia Tattersall is a fourth year undergraduate student in French and Economics at the University of Warwick. She is an executive member of two societies at Warwick: UN Women UK Warwick and Warwick Women’s Careers Society.