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US POWs and Russian Archives

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For over a year now Pentagon investigators have been seeking access to a secret document from the KGB archives that sheds light on the American prisoner of war and missing in action (POW-MIA) issue. But, as usual when dealing with Russian archival questions, the Americans have thus far run up against a stone wall. It all began in January 1998 with the discovery of a reference to a "sensational document" among the personal papers of General Dmitri Volkogonov, now held in the archival collection of the Library of Congress. Volkogonov, the well-known historian and the author of biographies of Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin, served as Russian co-chairman of the Joint US-Russian Committee on POWs, established in March 1992 for the purpose of determining the fate of thousands of American servicemen who disappeared during the Korean and Vietnamese wars and various Cold War episodes. (Following Volkogonov's death from cancer in December 1995, General Vladimir Zolotarev took over as Russian co-chair of the committee.)

Having spent most of his career as a high-ranking political officer in the Soviet army and later as director of the Institute of Military History, Volkogonov had privileged access to secret documents well before the Russians began to open up their archives. Thus, in writing his biography of Stalin, which appeared in Russian in 1989, Volkogonov used many Stalin files unavailable to others.⁽¹⁾ In 1991, after renouncing his previous communist views, Volkogonov joined Boris Yel'tsin's administration, becoming head of a presidential commission for the transfer of CPSU and KGB records to the public domain, while continuing to write books. In the words of Russian archive expert Patricia

Kennedy Grimsted: "Volkogonov became the virtual court historian for the Yel'tsin administration."(2)

Despite official decrees providing for public (and hence equal) access to Russian archival documents, the system of special privileges for persons like Volkogonov continued. Often the privileges depended on money. The Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), for example, received large payments from American publishers like Crown Books and Random House for documents from their archives. The catch, however, was that the SVR reserved the right to select what documents were released, thus ensuring that its historical interpretation of events would prevail.(3)

As for Volkogonov, it seems clear that he never had complete access to all KGB archives, or to the highly classified Presidential Archives, but that did not prevent him from emerging as the official Kremlin spokesman on controversial Cold War issues. Thus, for example, when Alger Hiss wrote to him in 1992 asking for materials on his case that might clear his name, Volkogonov claimed that "a thorough search of the archives had confirmed that Alger Hiss was never an agent of the intelligence services of the Soviet Union."(4) Later, however, when faced with a public furor, he had to qualify his statement, admitting that he did not review all the relevant documents.

The POW-MIA issue was another "hot potato" that was thrown Volkogonov's way. As Grimsted observes, the Yel'tsin administration made callous use of the intense American interest in this problem by appealing to the US Congress for more foreign aid in exchange for promising to find missing Americans.(5) Despite all the media attention, and considerable expenditures by the US government for the costly commission, there have been few revelations from the Russian archives. As might be expected, the American side was not allowed to search the archives, but rather was fed documents piecemeal by the Russians.

Russian officials repeatedly denied Soviet involvement with American POWs in Korea and Vietnam. Yet, from other sources, such as interviews with veterans of Soviet military

intelligence and the discovery by the joint commission of files in the Soviet military archives at Podolsk, it has become clear that the Soviets carried out extensive interrogations of American prisoners during the Korean War. Their main goal apparently was to learn more about American military aviation from American pilots and crews. A key issue has been how many of these POWs were shipped to the former Soviet Union for questioning, with some experts speaking of a thousand or more and others estimating that only 25 or 30 Americans ended up there.(6)

Publicly Volkogonov maintained that he could find no evidence that American prisoners from either the Korean or Vietnam wars ended up in the Soviet Union. Apparently he was not telling the full story. Researchers from the joint commission came across the following statement by Volkogonov in an autobiographical sketch, dated August 23-26, 1994, that was among his personal papers handed over to the Library of Congress:

We helped the Americans clear up the fate of many of their countrymen in Korea and Vietnam during the Cold War. I did everything that was in my power. I consider this a matter of honor. I am not certain that we have fully clarified everything. I know that quite a few documents were destroyed. However, one document, probably sensational, is still in storage. I have a copy of it. Its content is as follows: At the end of the 1960s the KGB ... was given the task of "delivering informed Americans to the USSR for intelligence gathering purposes." When I found this sensational paper in the "special file," I immediately went to Ye.M. Primakov (director of foreign intelligence). He called his people. They brought a copy of this plan, with the signature, it seems, of Semichastny (I will explain). For a long time they looked for traces indicating that the plan had been carried out. As I expected, they "did not find" these traces. They said the task had not been accomplished. What really happened? The regime was such that the wildest possibilities could be suggested. It remained a secret, which I was unable to penetrate. I also did not report this to the much-esteemed ambassador, Mr. Toon. I am speaking about this now, in the hopes that these notes will make it into my book, *Reflections*.(7)

This episode is repeated almost verbatim in Volkogonov's memoirs, published posthumously in Russian in 1998.⁽⁸⁾ But there are differences. The book version omits quotation marks around Volkogonov's statement that they "did not find" any traces of the plan. Yet the quotations are important because they convey Volkogonov's skepticism about Primakov's efforts. Also, the book does not include Volkogonov's last two sentences, about his not informing Ambassador Toon (the American chairman of the joint commission) and his hope that this episode will appear in his memoirs. Clearly his Russian publishers did not want it to appear that Volkogonov had deliberately kept secrets from the Americans with whom he was working.

Not surprisingly, the discovery of these comments by Volkogonov among his papers and their subsequent appearance in his published book created a stir in Washington. After researchers for the joint commission searched the Volkogonov archives and found no copy of the document he referred to, officials in Moscow were approached. Yuri Kobaladze, head of the press office in the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (now first deputy director of ITAR-TASS), insisted that all documents relating to US POWs had already been handed over to the Americans and that "if this document really exists, then it is not in the SVR archives."⁽⁹⁾

Prime Minister Yevgeni Primakov, when asked in November 1998 about the document by US Vice President Al Gore, promised to cooperate in finding evidence as to whether there was a plan to seize American prisoners of war from Vietnam. It is doubtful, however, that anything will come of his promise. Mr. Primakov, whose ties to the KGB date back to the 1960s, is schooled in the tradition of deep secrecy that characterizes the entire intelligence establishment in Russia. Now, with the Communists who dominate the Duma increasingly vocal in their anti-Americanism, Primakov is even less likely to hand over any top-secret documents to the US.

But this will not prevent Primakov and SVR officials from exploiting the POW issue for their own interests. Rather than to put the matter to rest by either denying the existence of a plan to debrief American POWs in the Soviet Union or coming up with a document

that shows there was such a plan, the Russians would prefer to keep the Americans dangling. Such a strategy give the Russians a lot of leverage when they are negotiating with US government officials on a wide range of issues.

Was this Volkogonov's intention as well? If we consider how Volkogonov handled the controversy over Alger Hiss and also how gingerly he stepped around the POW-MIA issue in the past, we may not necessarily take the comments he made in his memoirs at face value. If his comments were true, then what became of the copy of a "sensational document" he said he had in his possession? In early November 1998 American members of the Joint Commission on POWs interviewed former KGB Chairman Vladimir Semichastny about the document to which Volkogonov referred. Semichastny claimed that no such document, signed by him, existed. He allowed, however, that the KGB might have discussed, "in a planning document," the use of captive Americans for intelligence-gathering purposes.(10)

Given that the fate of over 2,000 American veterans of the Vietnam War is still unknown, the US government has no choice but to pursue any leads that come its way, including Volkogonov's mysterious document. After all, in view of the fact that the Soviets brought substantial numbers of US Korean War POWs to their country, it seems fairly certain that at least some American POWs from Vietnam ended up in the Soviet Union as well. (11) Jan Sejna, a former Czech intelligence officer, testified to the US Congress in 1996 that he supervised the transfer of around 200 American POWs from Vietnam to the Soviet Union from 1961 to 1968.(12)

Nonetheless, it is unlikely that the Russians will reveal their secrets on the POW-MIA issue anytime in the near future. For all their talk of openness and their claims to be declassifying documents, the archives of the security and intelligence services remain completely closed. Indeed, presidential decrees of 1995 and 1996 have reaffirmed the right of these agencies to control their own archives and thus keep their documents under wrap. The SVR is not above selling the odd file for profit -- as long as it paints Soviet foreign intelligence in a favorable light -- but this agency will not give its secrets

away for free, especially to the US government. With former SVR chief Primakov now a strong contender for the Russian presidency, it is unlikely that the situation will change anytime soon.

Notes:

(1) Published in English as *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy*, translated by Harold Shukman (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991).

(2) Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, "Archives of Russia Seven Years After: 'Purveyors of Sensations' or 'Shadows Cast to the Past'?" Cold War International History Project, Working Paper #20, Part I, September 1998, p. 22.

(3) Amy Knight, *Spies Without Cloaks: The KGB's Successors* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 207-208.

(4) *Ibid.*, p. 209.

(5) Grimsted, "Archives of Russia," p. 186.

(6) Laurence Jolidon, "Soviet Interrogation of U.S. POWs in the Korean War," *Cold War International History Bulletin*, 6-7 (Winter 1995/1996), pp. 123-125.

(7) Volkogonov Papers, "*Eshche nemnogo o sebe*," reel no. 8, container no. 12, Manuscript Division, The Library of Congress.

(8) Dmitri Volkogonov, *Etiudy o vremeni: iz zabytogo, nezamechenogo, nenapechatanogo* (Moscow: Novosti, 1998), p. 50.

(9) *Informatsionnoe agentstvo ekho mosky*, 0915 GMT, 18 November 1998; FBIS-SOV-98-322.

(10) *The Washington Times*, 23-29 November 1998, p. 17.

(11) "The Transfer of U.S. Korean War POWs to the Soviet Union," Working Paper, Joint Commission Support Branch, Research and Analysis Division, DPMO, Washington DC, 26 August 1993.

(12) *The Washington Times*, 9 November 1998.

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