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# Letters to the Editor

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## PERSPECTIVE

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### Letters to the Editor

Re: "US POWs and Russian Archives," by Amy Knight (Perspective, Vol. IX, No. 3, January-February 1999)

According to a long tradition in the Soviet Union, the handling of POWs was a responsibility of military intelligence, and the political intelligence services were not directly involved in these matters on a regular basis. During WWII SMERSH officials processed all the cases of "spies," but German military personnel was usually met by officers of military intelligence. It seems probable that in special cases officials from political intelligence could review interrogation reports after the first intensive stage of "processing" a POW and even without direct reference to certain personal names.

So it is not reasonable to look for these materials in the KGB or SVR archives, and Kobaladze, strangely enough, was probably not lying when he told the American side that they have nothing on American POWs. The obvious place to look for these documents would be the archives of military intelligence (GRU) that accumulated documents generated from interrogations.

Once we decide not to pursue the search in the KGB-related archives, the picture becomes rather clear. Then some facts mentioned in Ms. Knight's article fit in the puzzle. She recalls testimony by the former Czech general Jan Sejna; he was not in political but in military intelligence and that could explain his knowledge and his involvement in the processing of American POWs. Ms. Knight also mentions the case of Alger Hiss and Volkogonov's inaccurate handling of the matter. As I recall the main witness against Alger Hiss was Whittaker Chambers, who testified that he had some dealings with Hiss during the thirties when Chambers still had been an agent of the

Soviet intelligence apparatus. Chambers' control in the US was Alexandr Ulianovsky (alias Walter, alias Ulrich) who was working for Soviet military intelligence.

If we assume that working contacts between Chambers and Alger Hiss were sponsored by Soviet military intelligence, then again any documents on this matter would be kept in military archives, not in the KGB.

These clues, though not conclusive, indicate that essential facts about American POWs might be found in the GRU archives. We also could guess the reasons for Volkogonov's reluctance where such issues were concerned. Volkogonov served in the Soviet army all his adult life. His loyalty to the army was stronger than his loyalty to the Communist Party (he probably had no warm feeling toward the KGB).

According to the Volkogonov diary quoted in Knight's article, he regretted not informing his American counterpart, Ambassador M. Toon, about the only document found in the former KGB archives. Volkogonov probably did not know that scholars from the Moscow archival community recommended that Ambassador Toon's staff should look for POW documents not in the KGB archives but in the GRU archives. They based their recommendation on the reasons I have given here. This recommendation remained unheard. Reasons unknown.

Alexander Gribanov, archivist  
The Andrei Sakharov Archives  
Brandeis University

**Amy Knight responds:**

I agree with Alexander Gribanov that Soviet military intelligence, known by the Russian acronym GRU, had formal responsibility for the initial handling of POWs. But the delineation of intelligence functions between the KGB and the GRU was not always clear-cut, mainly because the distinction between what intelligence was political (and

thus under the purview of the KGB) and what was military (GRU) was blurred. Often their responsibilities overlapped, and in many situations the KGB, as the more powerful and influential organization, took precedence. The issue of POWs is a case in point. There is considerable evidence that the KGB involved itself with POWs when it chose to do so. (To cite one example, former KGB spy Oleg Kalugin relates in his book, *The First Directorate*, how a KGB official named Oleg Nechiporenko flew over to Hanoi to interrogate American POWs in the early 1970s.)

If it really was the case that some American POWs were transferred from Vietnam to the USSR at the end of the 1960s, it is inconceivable that the KGB would not have had a key role in this process, because it clearly had important political implications. Volkogonov made reference to a document about such a transfer signed by KGB chief Semichastnyi, and he went to the KGB Foreign Intelligence Archives to request information about it. Are we to assume that Volkogonov, a career military-political officer, was ignorant of who handled such POW matters, or that he was deliberately deceiving those for whom his memoirs were intended?

Clearly, if researchers had access to the GRU archives (which are completely closed to the public), they would find out a great deal more about the POW-MIA issue. But the KGB archives, also tightly sealed, doubtless have their own treasure-trove of documents on the subject.

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