



Spreading the Word: The KGB's Image-Building Under Gorbachev

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**SPREADING THE WORD:
THE KGB'S IMAGE-BUILDING
UNDER GORBACHEV**

by

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•PUBLIC POLICY•

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INTRODUCTION

The KGB, under many different sets of initials, evokes frightening memories of the Soviet period of Russian history. A garrison state within a state, it provided the terror that glued the Soviet Union into a unitary force for evil. Few bucked the system, and dissent was limited, for the most part, to whispers over dinner or under the sheets. Millions were herded into the communist version of concentration camps, or transported to Siberia, or simply executed for crimes no more serious than having the wrong economic or ideological pedigree.

The KGB, by its brutal behavior, came to be identified throughout the world with the Soviet system of government. When the system, with surprising speed, began to disintegrate in the late 1980s under the twin pressures of Gorbachevian reform and internal rot, suddenly exposed, it was natural to assume that the KGB would also disintegrate. But, in a remarkable display of political legerdemain, far from vanishing into the discredited past, it changed its spots and initials and transformed itself into a modern secret service, replete with a press office and a public relations strategy. The KGB exploited its knowledge of the world beyond the Soviet empire to freshen its image, in part, so that it could survive to do its work in another way on another day.

At the beginning of this new, post-communist phase, the KGB was awkward and halting, like an infant learning to walk; but soon, with care and caution, it began disclosing the darkest secrets of its past (where, for example, victims were buried in Moscow), holding news conferences, which actually on occasion produced "news," and volunteering its leaders to participate in talk shows.

The stunning effect was to reshape the image of the KGB. Within a brief period of time, from Mikhail Gorbachev's accession to power in 1985 to his unceremonial dismissal from power in 1991, the KGB used many gimmicks from Madison Avenue to change its brooding, Frankenstein image into a modern bureaucracy responsible for the internal security of the new Russian state, stumbling toward a form of democracy.

It is this story that Jeff Trimble, assistant managing editor of *U.S. News & World Report*, tells so well in this paper. Trimble lived and worked in Russia during much of this time of essentially bloodless transformation. First as a

graduate student at the Pushkin Russian Language Institute in Moscow during the 1979-80 academic year, later as Moscow correspondent for *U.S. News & World Report* from 1986 to 1991, Trimble observed the changes not just in the old KGB but in the old Soviet Union and, in this paper, based on his own research, he explains their significance. At a time in American life when we seem to be largely indifferent to the rest of the world, we are indebted to Trimble for his reminder that the past is not too far removed from the present.

The question lurking between the lines is whether the changes in image are in fact changes in substance as well. Answers, tentative though they be, come from two quarters. The pessimists say that the leopard cannot change its spots; the optimists say that the leopard, if not yet a lamb, has already changed, just as Russia has changed, and the days of dark totalitarianism cannot be reconstructed, even if a communist were to be elected after a free and open campaign.

Journalists at this point retreat behind the reliable cliché that only time will tell. So do other sensible observers of the kaleidoscopic events in Russia.

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by Jeff Trimble

Autumn 1990 was the beginning of the end of the Gorbachev era.

Until then, in one confrontation after another, Communist Party General Secretary and then President Mikhail Gorbachev had defeated conservative Kremlin opposition against seemingly long odds. His winning strategy was as simple as it was daring, by Soviet standards: he stayed a step ahead of the conservatives, keeping them off balance, unready to respond to his rush toward political, social and economic liberalization.

This changed in September, 1990. An unexpected, at first inexplicable caution crept into Gorbachev's comments about a radical economic reform plan then under consideration, the so-called "500-days" or "Shatalin" plan (named for its chief architect, economist Stanislav Shatalin). Earlier Gorbachev had voiced only fulsome praise for the revitalization plan. Suddenly, without explanation, Gorbachev slackened his pace.

At this time, in early September, I received an unexpected phone call from my "handler," one of the officials in the USSR Foreign Ministry Information Directorate who monitored the work of American correspondents.¹

"I have something for you," said my contact. "Send your driver by to pick it up — I think you'll be surprised."

Stunned would better describe my reaction when I opened the plain white envelope and pulled out a card embossed with the sword-and-shield emblem of the Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti — the KGB.²

"Dear Mr. J. Trimble," it began, "The USSR State Security Committee invites you to the official presentation of its Center for Public Relations of the USSR KGB, which will take place on September 11, 1990 at 11 a.m. at the address Moscow, Dzerzhinsky Street 2, entrance number 1A.

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"You will be able to take part in a press conference devoted to the development of public contacts and reinforcement of glasnost in the work of the State Security Committee, and also to acquaint yourself with an exhibit devoted to the work of the organs of the USSR KGB."³

On the appointed day I found myself greeted, along with other Western and Soviet reporters, at the KGB entrance by uniformed guards who scrutinized my credentials and invitation before admitting me to a wood-paneled hallway. A plain-clothes agent herded us up a staircase into an elevator whose control panel featured just two buttons: one for the first floor, the second for the third, the level of the public-relations center. There would be no "accidental" side trips by curious reporters to other floors of the super-secret KGB headquarters.

"Alexander Karbainov, head of the KGB's new Center for Public Relations, appeared confident the KGB can only help its image by accepting the glasnost model of controlled, verbal flagellation," wrote Gretchen Trimble, who covered the press conference for *U.S. News*.⁴

"He deflected with unflappable composure aggressive questions from bold journalists," wrote Trimble. "The only signs of permanent Western infiltration were the confiscated spy devices on display in a small exhibition room. Guides with pointers explained the photo montage of captured spies and traitors and the nifty gadgets of their trade, including camouflaged radio transmitters, pens that concealed tiny cameras and ampules of poison, and artificial rocks that open like clams to serve as post boxes for secret messages."

After the short tour and distribution of press kits (including a handout with direct phone numbers for Karbainov and the center's other officials), the reporters and their KGB hosts adjourned to the center's well-stocked bar to polish off sandwiches, soft drinks and strong coffee.

The session left an impression jarringly at odds with the building's usual image as a warren of torture cells and basement killing chambers. For decades the KGB had evoked fear in the Soviet citizenry and revulsion in the outside world. But

the Lubyanka the press had just been shown was a new one, part of a cautious but planned campaign to reshape the image of the KGB.

For years the initials KGB were only whispered in Soviet society. The very name of the agency was shrouded in euphemism, referred to by common people as “the organs” or “Children’s World (Detski Mir)”, a reference to the children’s department store next to Lubyanka. KGB employees were social lepers, who led privileged lives but were shunned by a justifiably wary populace. There was little public curiosity about the work of the organization; rather there was a wide spread desire on the part of Soviet citizens to keep the KGB as far out of sight, touch, and mind as possible. For a common person, any contact was like daring to touch a spider’s web.

Then came Mikhail Gorbachev.

The political evolution of Gorbachev (whose rise to power had been facilitated by the KGB⁵) forced the KGB to launch an attempt to change public perceptions of the agency.

Gorbachev embarked on perestroika in 1986 with the hope of enlisting public support for the revitalization of the Soviet state and system. What happened instead was the unleashing of forces which led to the destruction of the Soviet state.

It is unclear whether the KGB foresaw the chaos Gorbachev’s reforms ultimately would bring, but the organization was firmly on the record from the start as backing his effort to reshape Soviet society. The first member of Gorbachev’s new leadership to use the word “reform” in a major speech to describe what was needed to get the system going was Viktor Chebrikov, head of the KGB and the keynote speaker at the November, 1985, commemoration of the Bolshevik Revolution.⁶ At that time the very word “reform” was loaded, because it implied that something was wrong with the Soviet system, a concept that was anathema to Brezhnev-era Communists.

“Chekists,” said Chebrikov in his speech, had always “actively participated in the resolution of a multitude of serious economic and social problems,” and were ready to do so again under Gorbachev.

Interviewed in 1990, Filipp Bobkov, the KGB’s long-time number two whose career as a Chekist began in 1947, said that the KGB “was ready” for perestroika when Gorbachev appeared on the political scene.⁷

“In 1985 the KGB understood clearly that the Soviet Union could not develop further

without perestroika, that we couldn’t get by without it,” said Bobkov. “So in the organs — I’ll be so bold as to speak for all of us — Gorbachev’s policy met with understanding and support.”

In these days, Leninist ideology was still the glue holding the leadership together. Lenin, whom Gorbachev considered the patron saint of his reforms, had justified a form of glasnost as a useful instrument in his day.

“We must transform — and we shall transform — the press,” wrote Lenin, “from being a simple apparatus for the reporting of political news . . . into an instrument of economic reeducation of the masses, into an instrument for acquainting the masses with the need to work in a new way. The introduction of glasnost in this sphere will of itself be an enormous reform and will facilitate the enlistment of the broad masses in self-dependent participation in the resolution of the problems that concern primarily the masses.”⁸

Gorbachev’s initial approach to glasnost echoed Lenin’s: glasnost did not imply freedom of information for its own sake, but rather provided the freedom to print that which facilitated the controlled cure of Soviet society.

By way of confirmation of this belief, in 1987 Gorbachev wrote that the media should be “used” more fully in the effort to achieve “greater responsibility, for stronger discipline at work, for observance of socialist law and order, and against violations of the socialist principles and ethical standards of the Soviet way of life.”⁹

Outsiders might assume that opening its doors to outside scrutiny would be a difficult psychological step for the KGB. After all, from its inception the fundamental nature of the KGB, and of the Bolsheviks who hewed the Soviet state, was conspiratorial and closed. Felix Dzerzhinsky, the agency’s first leader, had spent 20 years as a revolutionary, mostly in the underground trying to keep a step ahead of the czarist secret police. He had slipped through a number of false identities, spent years in prison and exile, and had disciplined himself to secrecy and stealth.¹⁰ The system he created, with Lenin’s staunch support, drew techniques from the dark experience of Russia’s secret police dating back to the Oprichnina, Ivan the Terrible’s dreaded personal police.

But while secretive, the KGB was not media-shy, nor was it ignorant about media operations. The KGB has acquired intimate knowledge of how the media function, gleaned through decades of monitoring, and often controlling, information organs in Soviet society.

Lenin viewed the press as a dangerous weapon, and from the first days of Communist rule insisted that it be closely supervised by state security organs. As a revolutionary Lenin demanded freedom of expression, but once in power he viewed it as dangerous to his goals.

"Of course," he wrote, "political freedoms could not be allowed to the enemies of socialism."¹¹ Within two months of the revolution in 1917, he set up a Revolutionary Tribunal for the Press, empowered to punish "enemies of the people." Those enemies turned out to include almost anyone who wrote or printed materials, of which the Bolsheviks disapproved.¹²

Censorship was formalized on June 6, 1922, when the government approved the Main Department for the Affairs of Literature and Publishing, which became known by its Russian-language acronym Glavlit.¹³ From the beginning this organization worked closely with, and indeed under, organs of state security.¹⁴

The system of media control evolved under Stalin. The Communist Party Central Committee — with advice from the KGB — reserved the right to appoint chief editors and managers of every newspaper, magazine, publishing house, radio and television station and movie-making studio. This procedure lasted until 1989, well into the Gorbachev era.

A logical corollary evolved along with the KGB's sweeping monitoring of the media: the Chekisti had no trouble controlling the press. While suppressing unwanted information deemed harmful to the state, the KGB easily floated its own.

Since Dzerzhinsky's time, the KGB has commissioned thousands of books, articles and films to polish its image and to stimulate popular "vigilance" against enemies of the state (and state security), both at home and abroad. In just three years, 1984-87, over 250 books were published in a competition to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the security police.¹⁵

A typical pro-KGB tome was *Chekisti*, a book published in 1982.¹⁶ It sticks with the tried Soviet literary formula of opening with an insipid but politically correct quote from the current leader, in this case Leonid Brezhnev. Brezhnev heaped praise on the Chekists for "decisively cutting short activities of those who are engaged in anti-State, harmful actions, those who infringe on the rights of the Soviet people and the interests of Soviet society." The leader concluded his introduction with the assertion that "Soviet Chekists are always on guard, so that we can move even more success-

fully forward, so that no one ever can prevent our building a shining future-Communism." The book consists of anecdotal tales of selfless KGB heroism from the 1920s Civil War period, World War II, and the struggle to snuff out domestic dissent in the 1970s, which was a CIA plot (in the view of these authors) to undermine the Soviet state. In its historical overview the book neatly sidesteps Stalin and the grisly role played by the KGB in supporting the Communist leadership.

Other image-building books indirectly emphasized the importance of the KGB by stressing the need to counter plots by external enemies, such as the CIA and other Western intelligence agencies. *CIA Target: The USSR*, one such book, promises in its introduction to cite "authentic examples to show how the CIA uses covert action, ideological subversion and, notably, lies of a 'Soviet threat' and Soviet support of 'international terrorism' to pursue its psychological warfare against the USSR."¹⁷ The book also justifies the KGB's crackdown on human rights by outlining "how the CIA exploits 'dissidents' Siniavsky, Sakharov, Solzhenitsyn and others for its own sinister ends."

The same control of the media that gave the KGB the ability to craft its image also enabled it to quash any negative publicity. There was no need for the sort of "damage-control" response to negative press reports that is the bread and butter of press offices in Western governments, including intelligence services, because there were no negative reports to refute. Pre-glasnost, the KGB was attacked only in *samizdat* underground publications of extremely limited circulation, or by foreign information sources such as Radio Liberty or the Voice of America, whose credibility was mixed among Soviet media consumers.

One other key difference between Soviet and Western societies eased the KGB's public-relations task: the KGB, wrapped in secrecy and protected by the all-powerful Communist Party leadership, didn't have to curry favor with the public and legislative branch of government in order to secure support, both moral and material, for its work. The KGB's budget never was a subject of public debate or controversy, for the simple reason that the KGB answered directly, and only, to the Communist Party hierarchy, not to the people and government of the country.

"You can't really discuss the budget of the KGB in a comparative way with those of Western intelligence agencies," explains Christopher Andrew, the noted British intelligence analyst.

“What the KGB needed, it got.”¹⁸

It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of the KGB’s image-making efforts in the pre-glasnost era. Opinion polling was rare, and about the KGB, non-existent. It would be difficult to imagine that the KGB’s public relations actions really bolstered its standing among the Soviet people, whose prevailing attitude toward the organs was to think about them as little as possible.

But even if its efforts attracted little attention or had only slight influence, this was far better than the alternative: an unedited airing of the agency’s horrific past as the executioner — literally — of Lenin’s and Stalin’s enemies and in later years as the heavy-handed ideological and social watchdog of Soviet society.

Glasnost, as initially defined by Gorbachev, was not intended to give a green light to investigative journalism. It represented a continuation, with some modification, of a philosophy of managed information. The KGB, already on record as a supporter of “reform,” began crafting a measured response to this tame version of glasnost.

In mid-1987, when even the most-daring media outlets were only just beginning to probe the limits of glasnost, the KGB made its first concrete move toward creating a new image. After the Khrushchev era, in which some revelations of Stalin’s repressions came to light, the Brezhnev administration had largely ignored Stalin. Under Gorbachev, efforts began to condemn the brutality of Stalin’s rule.

To the surprise of many, the KGB, rather than declare war on Gorbachev in order to thwart the truth about its role in the repressions, joined in the glasnost campaign. Several of its top officials were placed on a special Politburo commission, set up under Alexander Yakovlev, a chief Gorbachev adviser, to investigate Stalinist repression. This high-visibility role — an exercise certain to reveal the central role of the secret police as Stalin’s executioner — foreshadowed a key element in the KGB’s subsequent media strategy.

In November, 1987 the KGB submitted a proposal to the Politburo that was truly remarkable for its time: a formal plan to improve the KGB’s public image by publicizing its activities in the media.¹⁹ This proposal came within days of the 70th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, marked by a major Gorbachev speech in which for the first time the Soviet leader publicly criticized — albeit tentatively — the Stalin period.

The Politburo promptly passed a resolution extending glasnost to the work of the KGB.²⁰ This move was all the more bold when placed in historical context. The leadership then was still well-stocked with members of the Brezhnev-era old guard. They adopted this resolution just a month after Boris Yeltsin committed political suicide (temporarily, as it turned out) in a plenum of the Central Committee, when he vented bitter frustration over resistance to reform by these same entrenched old-timers.

With this move toward glasnost the KGB demonstrated a capacity for change and evolution that caught many critics by surprise. The KGB, it turned out, was a creature still capable of reshaping itself and its mission as it had done throughout Soviet history.

“As in the past, when the political police brooked challenges to its power and authority that were brought on by the introduction of reforms within the Soviet system,” historian Amy Knight wrote in 1988, “the KGB has accommodated itself to the new circumstances remarkably well and has managed to retain much of its political authority, professionalism, and public stature.”²¹

Starting in early 1988 the KGB announced a series of reforms in the organization. It reduced stringent security in border zones. It began developing a new legal statute, formalizing hundreds of secret rules and directives that had governed its past work. It abolished its dreaded Fifth Directorate, which had been responsible for combatting ideological “crimes.” It cut the staff of the directorate overseeing military counterintelligence. In July 1989 a commission for “ideological and political support for operational and administration work” was set up to search for effective new methods to promote the organization.²²

The KGB began a cautious, two-pronged approach to public and media contacts, designed to get out the agency’s message while buffering Lubyanka from open coverage by increasingly aggressive domestic and foreign reporters. It began publishing its own information bulletin in 1988, and in 1989 began contributing two regular features — written by its own staffers, not by outside journalists — to the newspaper *Argumenti i Fakti* (Arguments and Facts). The first, published under the rubric “The KGB Informs and Comments,” detailed its struggles against terrorists, spies, drug smugglers and other no-goodniks. The second, “The KGB Talks About the KGB,” answered — usually vaguely, but wittily — questions from readers and report-

ers about the organization's internal workings.

The choice of *Argumenti i Fakti* for the columns showed a shrewd sophistication on the part of the KGB. The publication's popularity was skyrocketing at that time, because it dealt frankly with formerly off-limits issues. Weekly circulation topped 25 million. The KGB's unedited message was reaching a huge, eager audience.

The second technique was to arrange "public meetings" in which KGB representatives answered questions from an audience. The resulting discussion was published in the press. Such meetings typically took place at factories, where blue-collar workers — patriotic, conservative people in most societies, including the USSR — asked questions about the KGB's struggle against foreign efforts to undermine the USSR, or other friendly subjects on which Lubyanka's representatives were only too happy to comment. Initially, these meetings never even hinted at questions about Stalin's repressions or other awkward topics for the KGB. Journalists were admitted only to report the event; they were not allowed to ask questions. Accounts of these meetings invariably were favorable to the KGB, leaving an impression of an organization staffed by intelligent, capable professionals, eager to serve the people of the USSR.

However, these forays into glasnost did little to change public attitudes about the KGB, possibly because the KGB did not hurry to implement its mandate. The most likely reason was bureaucratic inertia, the cancer that ran through the entire Soviet system.

It proved a costly mistake. For while Lubyanka methodically executed its campaign of Gorbachevian glasnost, conditions in the media began to change with lightning speed.

In mid-1988, when independent publications started springing up across the USSR and old-line media outlets began pushing the established limits of free expression, all three traditional pillars of Soviet power — the Communist Party, military and KGB — came under increasingly harsh assault in the media; and the KGB found itself pinned down by a withering barrage of criticism.

Media reports detailed KGB abuse of psychiatry and the penal system, its brutal violations of religious and other human rights, and of course Stalin's crimes, including mass killings by the NKVD. These attacks went far beyond the tame criticisms that had appeared in 1986 and 1987 under Gorbachev's lap dog version of glasnost.

There were initial signs of panic, but ultimately the KGB yielded to the building momentum of glasnost. Not even the KGB could stuff the media genie back into the bottle.

In July, 1989, *Ogonyok*, a respected weekly newsmagazine, directly criticized the KGB top brass, including the late Yuri Andropov, who ran the KGB before becoming Soviet leader. A former colonel described how his KGB colleagues advanced up the career ladder under Andropov in the 1970s by persecuting innocent people and charging them as political criminals.²³ At the nationally televised 1989 Soviet Congress of People's Deputies, parliamentarian and former Olympic weightlifter Yuri Vlasov denounced the KGB as "a real underground empire that has not yet yielded its secrets," charging that the KGB was continuing its illegal activities.²⁴

Clearly the KGB risked being overwhelmed by the glasnost wave. It responded by extending its media campaign. KGB officials began appearing on television talk-shows to answer viewers' questions about their work. While more open than the "public-meeting" approach used earlier, this step still included some filtering. Questions were screened before being passed on to the KGB guest, leaving ample opportunity to set aside queries deemed too controversial to handle.

KGB officials also began to appear on news and other in-depth discussion programs, no longer to talk just about the KGB, but to comment on international affairs or topical domestic concerns such as organized crime. Graduation to this format was an important step for the KGB. No longer did it see the need to devote all its image-making efforts to self-justification; now it was presenting itself and its officers as just another part of the perestroika team, working closely with Gorbachev to reform the country.

Most of these appearances dovetailed neatly with the KGB's urgent effort to find its niche in the new and evolving Soviet society. In 1989 Gorbachev began expanding the KGB's powers to police his reform drive. He formally sanctioned the KGB to combat organized crime, traditionally a duty of the Interior Ministry. But the police, notoriously corrupt and inefficient, had been unable to keep up with the surge in illegal activities that accompanied the early stages of economic and social liberalization. The KGB stepped into the breach and publicized this new assignment as one way to offset negative reporting about its past.

The KGB's coming-out picked up speed. Publications from across the political spectrum began writing about it and members were praised

for volunteering to bring in the harvest, rooting out bureaucratic corruption and anti-terrorist triumphs against aircraft hijackers and other violent criminals.

The KGB even exhibited a sense of humor. It named its new newsletter, which it started in 1990, *Sovershenno Ne Sekretno* (Top Non-Secret), a tongue-in-cheek dig at *Sovershenno Sekretno* (Top Secret), a popular monthly tabloid that offered a titillating blend of detective yarns and sensational features, including some about the KGB.

To commemorate the 70th anniversary of the KGB, the Soviet postal service issued a series of five stamps on November 20, 1990, featuring portraits of famous Soviet spies. Kim Philby, the British turncoat, was among those honored.

Still, even as efforts by the KGB to plant a positive image expanded, media attacks reached a fevered pitch by mid-1990. In response, the KGB returned to the strategy it had used in 1987: damage control. Faced with emerging negative reports, the KGB began to divulge selective but nevertheless negative information about itself. The aim was to distance the KGB from its predecessors with a display of openness. For no matter how much positive news it pumped out about itself, the KGB never could hope to gloss over its past. Its evil past was simply too tightly woven into Soviet history.

Millions of people — author Alexander Solzhenitsyn and historian Roy Medvedev insist as many as 20 million people — had died at the hands of the KGB and its predecessors, in forced famines, executions and forced-labor camps. This was not ancient history.

One of the most striking examples of this new KGB openness was its assistance to Moscow journalist Alexander Milchakov in his efforts to unearth — literally — secret burial places of Stalin's victims in the Soviet capital. Milchakov, a determined man, had tried without success from 1986 to 1988 to convince the KGB to give him access to its archives from the Stalin era.

In 1989, Milchakov suddenly was admitted to the archives, where he found a macabre treasure trove of information about where the NKVD had buried its victims in the Soviet capital. His moving, lurid reports in the daily newspaper *Vechernyaya Moskva* captivated readers and produced a flood of mail, some from former KGB officials who broke decades of silence to offer additional leads about the killings.²⁵ Helped by KGB archivists, Milchakov began publishing a weekly column of photographs and short biographies of the executed, a

haunting gallery of the doomed. More letters arrived, some from relatives who had seen a loved one among the photos for the first time in decades. And Milchakov praised the KGB for its assistance in virtually every story he wrote on the killings.

Increasingly frank attacks on the KGB appeared in such publications as *Sobesednik*, *Moscow News*, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* and *Ogonyok*. Most were written by journalists. "The existence in our country of a structure such as the KGB presents an objective threat to many (if not all in the long term) democratic reforms and discredits the very concept of democracy," thundered a two-page article in *Moscow News* in April, 1991.²⁶

Other attacks came from retired KGB officers, and even from current staff members. Oleg Kalugin, a maverick ex-KGB general, started this trend in 1989 when he published an article criticizing Soviet intelligence — the KGB's First Directorate — for interfering with the making of foreign policy.²⁷ A year later, he created a sensation when he appeared before a June, 1990, meeting of reform-minded Communists to denounce both the Party and the KGB. Mikhail Lyubimov, another ex-intelligence officer and friend of Kalugin, also began writing anti-KGB articles. Valentin Korolov, another retired KGB officer, warned in 1990 that the KGB had enough power to stage a coup and seize power.²⁸

Lt. Col. Vladimir Morozov, an active KGB officer, criticized the draft law on state security and called for radical reorganization of the KGB so that it would be free from Communist Party control.²⁹

The KGB did not make a concerted effort to prevent publication of these articles, nor — with the exception of Kalugin — did it lash out at particular stories or authors. While it is doubtful that under expanding glasnost the KGB actually could have prevented these articles from appearing, its low-key response nevertheless was another manifestation of its new open image. By tolerating criticism, the KGB again emphasized its "support" for free expression in changing Soviet society.

Most of its image-building effort was directed to the home front, but the KGB did not forget the West.

Foreign reporters became a fixture at KGB press conferences, interviewing KGB personnel and observing first-hand the agency's operations. I visited a KGB border-guard unit in Blagoveshchensk, on the Amur River along the Sino-Soviet border, just before Gorbachev's 1989

trip to China. Later I interviewed KGB officers who were fighting drug smuggling and organized crime. Other correspondents toured the KGB's teaching academy on the south side of Moscow, and they accompanied KGB anti-terrorist units on training missions and operations against smugglers.

Top KGB officials began giving interviews to Western reporters in which they encouraged international cooperation on terrorism, drug smuggling, nuclear proliferation and other security matters.

The relative ease with which the KGB opened its doors to Westerners is understandable, because the agency has vast experience with image-making in the West, far more than it does at home. Before the Gorbachev period, the KGB didn't see a need to devote much attention to its image at home. But in the West, where glasnost is the journalistic norm, the KGB had long since mastered valuable lessons and techniques to get across an idea or plant a message.

Usually the messages were not about the KGB; they concerned policies that the Soviet leadership wanted to spread in the West. The KGB's First Chief Directorate (foreign intelligence) included an entire department known as Service A, which conducted "disinformation," the dissemination of messages favorable to the USSR and against Western interests.³⁰ An army of disinformation agents had for decades steeped itself in techniques to understand and manipulate Western media to Soviet ends.^{31 32} Among their notable successes: the crafting in 1982 and 1983 of an image in the West of Yuri Andropov, who became Communist Party General Secretary after Leonid Brezhnev died in November 1982, as an urbane, progressive new type of Soviet leader. Stories appeared that Andropov, among other things, enjoyed Scotch and Western music (Glenn Miller was among his favorites) and had privately worked to mitigate harsh treatment of dissident artists during Brezhnev's rule.

In fact, the austere Communist had headed the KGB from 1967-83, a time of repression unseen since Stalin.³³ Earlier he had risen through Party ranks during the late 1930s, at the height of Stalin's purges, almost certainly by informing on his superiors in order to eliminate them. He had run GULAG prison camps as a Communist Party boss during World War II, and as ambassador to Hungary in 1956 had played a key role in Moscow's brutal suppression of the Hungarian uprising that year.

Perhaps the ultimate testimony to the success of the KGB's image-building campaign for Andropov — which also boosted the image of the KGB, which he had headed — came from none other than then-Vice President George Bush, who told an interviewer in December, 1982: "My view of Andropov is that some people make this KGB thing sound horrendous. Maybe I speak defensively as a former head of CIA. But leave out the operational side of the KGB . . . the naughty things they do . . ."³⁴

A leader in the KGB's PR effort at home and abroad was Vladimir Kryuchkov, who headed the organization from 1988 until the failed coup in August 1991, which he helped organize and direct. Vilified in the wake of the coup, Kryuchkov has been dismissed by many as an anachronistic crank, a man hopelessly out of touch with the realities of a changing Russia. Christopher Andrew, the respected British academic who has written extensively on Kryuchkov's 14-year tenure as head of the KGB's foreign intelligence (1974-88), paints him as a paranoid stick-in-the-mud, convinced that a wide-ranging Western conspiracy existed which was trying to undermine the Soviet state.³⁵

But while his speeches revealed deep suspicion toward the West, Kryuchkov proved himself during the KGB's image-building campaign to be a quick-witted, often affable man.

"KGB Chairman Kryuchkov, who is particularly adept at public relations, has played a prominent role in the campaign, conveying in a relaxed, confident manner the image of a man who can be trusted," wrote Amy Knight.³⁶

A characteristic appearance was a televised call-in show, "Who's Who," in August, 1990, almost exactly a year before the coup attempt.³⁷ He appeared in the 6:30 p.m. broadcast along with reform economist Stanislav Shatalin. Both men were members of the newly created Presidential Council, an advisory body to Gorbachev. Kryuchkov was introduced in a five-minute video, which described him as coming from a working-class family (a valued social pedigree among Soviet leaders) and as an accomplished lawyer and diplomat who had worked closely with Yuri Andropov. After the clip, Kryuchkov unflinchingly fended off hostile viewer questions about the KGB while displaying a sense of humor and humility. Asked to justify leadership privileges, Kryuchkov paused and answered affably that he was not aware that he had any privileges. He said he enjoyed the theater and reading but rarely had time for hobbies because of the demanding nature of his work.

In other appearances, Kryuchkov claimed that the exile of Andrei Sakharov to Gorki had been a mistake of an earlier era; he welcomed creation of a committee in the Supreme Soviet to oversee KGB work and spoke in favor of cooperation between the KGB and Western intelligence agencies.

Kryuchkov was relaxed with foreign reporters, even in the unpredictable setting of parliament sessions when correspondents would ambush him for brief comments on current issues. By comparison, Viktor Chebrikov, Kryuchkov's predecessor as KGB chief, literally ran away from foreign reporters to avoid questions on several occasions during official Kremlin functions.

When Kryuchkov welcomed a delegation from the Associated Press to his office in September, 1990, he sat down, looked somberly at the group, and deadpanned: "You're all under arrest." After a nervous pause, the visitors laughed at the joke and visited amiably with Kryuchkov for the remainder of the session.³⁸

Kryuchkov turned in a virtuoso performance on Christmas Day, 1990, when he called a press conference at the Congress of People's Deputies to explain speeches he had made earlier that month accusing the West of trying to undermine the Soviet state, a message far out of tune with Gorbachev's new-thinking foreign-policy line. After clearing up the "misunderstanding" by professing total support for Gorbachev, Kryuchkov cheerfully answered journalists' questions for an hour.

At one point in the session, Mikhail Sokolov, a young reporter at the weekly *Sobesednik* who had written a number of vitriolic anti-KGB exposes, hotly accused the KGB of bugging the newspaper's office and tailing its reporters in an effort to learn their sources. Kryuchkov smiled, shot Sokolov a penetrating glance and said: "What makes you think you're worth all that trouble?"

After the press conference, Kryuchkov stayed for a few minutes to chat with reporters and, incredible as it may seem, to sign autographs for Russians who had watched his performance.

Yet while the KGB deserves high marks for effort, it cannot be said that its Gorbachev-era image-building drive always went smoothly — or that in the end it made a great difference in the organization's fate.

The Center for Public Relations, a cut above the KGB's earlier all-but-invisible press relations, left much to be desired from a journalist's point of view. It did not hold a

candle, for instance, to the superb press organization set up in the Foreign Ministry in the late 1980s under the glib Gennadi Gerasimov, perhaps perestroika's best-known pitchman.

For the most part, interviews with KGB officials could only be requested in writing. Karbainov generally required that the request include a list of specific questions which reporters intended to ask, a practice frowned upon in Western journalistic tradition. The letter had to be submitted through the KGB's Public Reception office, which was in a building apart from Lubyanka on Kuznetsky Most Street. Answers and interviews sometimes took weeks to arrange, often far too late to meet story deadlines.

The appointment of Karbainov, a KGB Major General, to head the Center for Public Relations also was somewhat puzzling. He was a pleasant man, but had no prior experience in public relations or in dealing with foreigners. His background was, from a Western point of view, distinctly unattractive: he readily admitted to having worked in Krasnoyarsk, in Siberia, in the local KGB Fifth Directorate office, the odious KGB section charged with suppressing dissent and religion.

Karbainov's office was crudely equipped. It has just several phone lines, a single secretary who generally refused to take messages, and no voice mail or answering machine. Phones sometimes went unanswered for days on end. There was no fax, no computers, not even a telex.

Karbainov often seemed to be far out of the information loop of the KGB hierarchy, unsure how to handle many of the tough questions he was forced to field. He admitted to knowing Kryuchkov only slightly, and, unlike Gerasimov at the Foreign Ministry, was rarely seen at his boss's side during public appearances.

Asked about the Soviet past and the KGB role, Karbainov usually answered that the agency was simply enforcing the laws at that time.

"What can one say about the trials of the 1960s and 1970s concerning dissidents?" Karbainov said to an interviewer in 1989, before the Center had officially opened but when he already was the KGB's de facto spokesman. "These were criminal processes conducted in accordance with legislation in force at that time. It is obvious now that some of these processes were marked by subjectivism. Such were the times."³⁹

The problem with this answer is that most of those same laws still were on the books, hardly a comforting thought to those who were speaking out against the system under glasnost.

Some of the Center's self-promotion efforts were downright silly. The crowning of Katya Maiorova as the first Miss KGB in October, 1990, probably takes the prize in this category. Katya, an attractive 24-year-old secretary in the Moscow KGB's press office, was pictured on the front page of *Krasnaya Zvezda* (Red Star, the Army newspaper), strapping on a tight-fitting bullet-proof vest.⁴⁰ News stories praised her as a black belt in karate and a crack shot. The Miss KGB event evoked a mixture of derision and revulsion, coming as it did amid the flood of horrifying revelations about the KGB's past that was taking place at the same time.

There are indications that, from the point of view of national security, the KGB's glasnost campaign went too far in detailing the agency's current operations and capabilities. The KGB identified most of its top officials in press accounts. Their published interviews often were surprisingly outspoken and, for Western intelligence agencies, undoubtedly provided useful information. The head of the KGB's super-secret Eighth Chief Directorate (responsible for electronic intelligence gathering), Lt. Gen. Nikolai Andreyev, gave an extensive interview to *Pravda* in September, 1990, which revealed that the political revolutions in Eastern Europe had endangered Soviet intelligence listening posts and enciphering equipment in the region.⁴¹ Lt. Gen. Leonid Shebarshin, head of KGB foreign operations before the coup, admitted in another interview that 15 KGB officers had defected to the West since 1975.⁴²

A most-revealing indicator of the minimal impact of this campaign is its effect on public opinion. The verdict is mixed: In an opinion poll conducted in March, 1990, by *Moscow News*, only 32 percent of those questioned expressed confidence in the KGB, as compared with 38 percent just three months earlier.⁴³ While not high, this compared to a 35 percent approval rating for the Army, and a lowly 16 percent positive rating for the Communist Party.

In these numbers the KGB could find some comfort. First, given that this poll was conducted at the high-water mark of the anti-KGB glasnost storm, it could argue that the erosion of support would have been far greater without the public-relations effort. Then, in light of the KGB's sinister past, approval from more than one third of the citizenry really isn't bad — particularly when compared to the Army's low ranking. Until glasnost began uncovering its misdeeds, the Soviet military generally had been held in much higher public esteem, due in large part to its

heroic victory in World War II over invading Nazi forces. Given this traditional patriotic support, its 1990 standing below the KGB was remarkable.

The bungled coup in August, 1991, was an unmitigated public-relations disaster for the KGB. Karbainov and his staff plainly were caught completely off guard by the action. Reporters who managed to get through to him on the phone were given a terse "no comment" to all questions.

The coup already had crumbled by the time the KGB found its official voice. In a statement released August 22, the KGB's executive board declared flatly that "KGB staff have nothing to do with the illegal actions of the group of adventurers."⁴⁴ Yet clearly the KGB had been involved; Kryuchkov had played a leading planning role in the fiasco.

August 22 was the KGB's darkest hour: a crowd celebrating the defeat of the coup surged into Lubyanka Square and spent most of the evening dislodging the massive statue of Dzerzhinsky. Demonstrators daubed swastikas on the memorial plaque to Andropov on the side of the Lubyanka building.

Kryuchkov was sent to jail, soon to be joined by three other KGB generals accused of participating in the plot. The KGB's Collegium, its executive council, was disbanded, and all the agency's deputy chairmen and first deputy chairmen were removed from their posts. Gorbachev, back from detention in the Crimea, initially appointed Shebarshin, the intelligence chief, to take over the KGB, but quickly changed his mind when the scale of KGB involvement in the coup began to emerge. Gorbachev then appointed Vadim Bakatin to head the agency. A former Interior Minister with a reputation as a reformer, Bakatin had stuck by Gorbachev during the coup.

KGB veterans grumbled about the appointment of an outsider, particularly because Bakatin arrived at Lubyanka with a mandate from Gorbachev to clean house — hardly a comforting prospect for long-time staffers.

But Bakatin gave the KGB an immediate injection of what it badly needed: a fresh image. It was the beginning of a new phase in the KGB's history, and in its approach to public relations.

Bakatin's first public actions as KGB chief were aimed directly at public opinion, both at home and abroad. His first act was to announce release of additional files pertaining to Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved thousands of Jews during World War II before disappearing into Soviet custody in 1945.⁴⁵

Action in the Wallenberg case, a major cause for Western human-rights and Jewish activist groups, was an ideal way to leave the West with an early positive impression of the post-coup KGB. Bakatin also promised to open KGB historical archives by the end of 1991.

Bakatin then announced that he wanted the KGB to concentrate on four activities only: espionage, counter-espionage, protection of key state facilities and combatting serious crimes, such as terrorism, drugs and illegal currency operations. There would be no more ideological or physical control over the lives of the Soviet people, he pledged.

Karbainov re-emerged in late August to continue the post-coup image-mending operation in a number of interviews. In one, he said that during the Lubyanka anti-KGB demonstration that "people shouted 'Fascists! Fascists!'. It is easy to understand them: They think the KGB was behind all of the events. However, by far not the entire KGB supported the plotters."⁴⁶

Unsurprisingly, the efforts of Bakatin and Karbainov had little effect on the Soviet citizenry, which remained chary of the KGB. In a poll conducted in September, 1991 (published in October), just eight percent of those questioned said they trusted the KGB. Thirty-nine percent said they did not trust the KGB, and 18 percent said they did not fully trust the KGB. Tellingly, 25 percent of those questioned refused to give an answer, which the pollsters attributed to lingering worry that the KGB might one day become powerful again and punish those who had spoken against it.⁴⁷

Most of the Western media, on the other hand, swallowed the KGB's quick-fix image makeover, which fit neatly with the tumultuous events that shook Soviet society after the coup. A sample of Western headlines indicates the prevailing sentiment expressed toward the KGB: "New Security Chiefs Viewed as Reformists" (*The Washington Post*, Aug. 24, 1991); "New Security Chiefs Pledge to Revamp Agencies and Give Up Political Role: No More Informers" (*The New York Times*, Aug. 31, 1991); "Soviet Spies to Lose Journalist Covers: New Chief Bars Use of Media in Foreign Countries" (*The Boston Globe*, Oct. 3, 1991); "Ex-KGB to Cut Foreign Agents 50%" (*The New York Times*, Nov. 10, 1991); and "Closing Down the KGB" (cover story in the *New York Times Magazine*, Nov. 24, 1991).

By the end of the year each of these stories had been proven utterly incorrect. Bakatin was gone, as Boris Yeltsin seized the KGB and other Soviet assets in Russia, hasten-

ing the demise of the Soviet Union. Rechristened first as the Russian Ministry of Security, the KGB began making a place for itself in the post-Soviet world.

The archives were not opened.⁴⁸ Only cosmetic changes were introduced in the KGB structure.⁴⁹ Informers were not dismissed.⁵⁰ The number of agents abroad was not cut.⁵¹ The KGB has been renamed and reconfigured since the collapse of the Soviet Union, but it has not "closed down."

The French traveller, the Marquis de Custine, came to believe that in volatile, 19th-century Russia, truth was a danger. His words, written in 1839, carry a message that is relevant today: "Up to now, I believed that man could no more do without truth for the spirit than air and sun for the body; my journey to Russia disabuses me. Here to lie is to protect the social order; to speak the truth is to destroy the state."⁵²

Did the KGB read de Custine? Conservatives in Russia argue passionately today for the need to defend the "gosudarstvo," the great Russian state, from destruction by pro-Western reformers. The military is weak and the reborn Communist Party merely a shadow of its Soviet self. While weakened, the state security organs are the only remaining stable leg of the old Soviet power structure. Support from the KGB's various successors, therefore, could easily play a crucial role in deciding any future power struggle between reformers and conservatives.

It cannot be said on which side the KGB would place itself in such a power struggle, and so it is unclear what it will deem to be "the truth" about which de Custine warned. But what the KGB's past proves beyond any doubt is that it will be ready to play to its own maximum advantage whatever political, economic and social realities come to pass in the new Russia. The KGB, history tells us, will be ready to define the truth on its own terms — those that are in its best interests.

1. This account, and much of the anecdotal information in the paper, comes from my notes and reporting as Moscow bureau chief for *U.S. News & World Report* magazine, 8/86-6/91.
2. For clarity and simplicity, the name "KGB" is used in this paper (except where noted in discussion of its history) to refer to the state security organs throughout Soviet history, and those formed after the August, 1991 coup attempt and the collapse of the USSR. In the Soviet period, these included the Vechecka, founded under Felix Dzerzhinsky just two months after the Russian revolution to combat "counterrevolution and sabotage"; the GPU, OGPU, NKVD, NKGB, and MBG. See Amy W. Knight. *The KGB: Police and Politics in the Soviet Union*. Revised edition. Boston: Unwin Hyman, Inc., 1990, p. 323.
3. A word-for-word translation from the original invitation, which was in Russian.
4. These quotes are from Gretchen Trimble's notes and report in *U.S. News & World Report*, "The KGB Goes Public," 9/24/90, p. 17.
5. For a detailed account of the KGB's backing for Gorbachev in his rise to power, see Jeremy R. Azrael, "The KGB in Kremlin Politics," Rand/UCLA Center for the Study of Soviet International Behavior, 1989, pp. 32-37.
6. Azrael, p. 33.
7. Andrei Karaulov, interview with Filipp Bobkov headlined "The KGB Understood Well that the Country Needed Perestroika" in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 12/28/90, p. 5.
8. Vladimir Lenin, "Polnoye Sobraniye Sochinenyy (Complete Works)", vol. 36, 1962, p. 129.
9. Mikhail S. Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for our Country and the World*, New York: Harper & Row, 1987, p. 79.
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11. Peter Deriabin and T.H. Bagley, *KGB: Masters of the Soviet Union*, New York: Hippocrene Books, 1990, p. 270.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 270.
13. Alexander Merkushev, "The Russian and Soviet Press: A Long Journey From Suppression to Freedom via Suppression and Glasnost," Cambridge: Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, 1991 discussion paper, p. 3.
14. Deriabin and Bagley, p. 271.
15. Knight, p. 316.
16. A.V. Nazarov, V.A. Rzhankov, *Chekisti* (in Russian), Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1982.
17. Nikolai Yakovlev, *CIA Target: The USSR*, second updated edition, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1984, introduction.
18. Christopher Andrew, professor of history, Cambridge University (U.K.), and the visiting Michael Kaneb Professor in the Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, 1992. From a seminar lecture, 2/4/92, entitled "Decline of the KGB: New File Evidence."
19. Amy W. Knight, "The Future of the KGB," Problems of Communism, November-December 1990. Knight quotes from *Izvestia TsK KPSS* (Moscow), Nov. 1989, pp. 22-26.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Knight, *Police and Politics in the Soviet Union*, p. 316.
22. Olga Kryshtanovskaya, Alexander Rahr, "Is the KGB Really Changing?", *Moscow News*, no. 16, 1991, p. 8.
23. Ya. Karpovich, "Stidno Molchat'", *Ogonyok*, July 29, 1989.
24. Quoted by Knight in *Police and Politics in the Soviet Union*, p. 316.
25. Alexander Milchakov, "Po Sledam Rasstrel'nikh Spiskov," *Vechernyaya Moskva*, Jan. 16, 1991, is an excellent example of his work.

26. Yevgeniya Albats, "A Time Bomb," *Moscow News*, no. 16, 1991, p. 8.
27. Oleg Kalugin, "Intelligence and International Politics," *Mezhdunarodnaya Zhizin'*, May 1989, pp. 61-71.
28. Valentin Korolov, "Secrets of the Secret Service," *Ogonyok*, Oct. 20, 1990, pp. 28-31.
29. Lt. Col. Vladimir Morozov, letter to the editor, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, Aug. 11, 1990.
30. Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB: The Inside Story*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990, appendix C4.
31. Much of my material on disinformation, which will figure prominently in future writings on the KGB, was provided by KGB sources who, for reasons of their safety, cannot be identified at this time.
32. For a thorough summation of disinformation, see Richard H. Shultz and Roy Godson, *Dezinformatsia*, Washington: Pergamon, Brassey's, 1984.
33. Arnold Beichman and Mikhail Bernstam, *Andropov: New Challenge to the West*, New York: Stein and Day, 1983, pp. 12-14.
34. Interview in the *Christian Science Monitor*, 12/20/83, quoted in Beichman and Bernstam.
35. Christopher Andrew seminar, Harvard University, April 2, 1992.
36. Amy W. Knight, *Police and Politics in the Soviet Union*, p. 318.
37. "Kto est' Kto" (Who's Who), Soviet Central Television, August 10, 1990.
38. This account is from a Russian participant in the meeting, who prefers to remain anonymous. See note 32.
39. Yu. Shabanov, "Security Officers Relate: Behind the Wall of Secrecy" *Moskovskaya Pravda*, Sept. 20, 1989, translated in FBIS-SOV, Oct. 3, 1989.
40. Photo feature in *Krasnaya Zvezda*, Oct. 11, 1990, p.1. David Remnick wrote a humorous feature on Maiorova in the *Washington Post*, Oct. 31, 1990.
41. *Pravda*, Sept. 16, 1990, p. 3.
42. TASS interview, reported in FBIS-SOV, Oct. 29, 1990.
43. "Crisis of Confidence," *Moscow News*, no. 21, 1990, p. 9.
44. "KGB Repents Over the Coup," *Pravda*, Aug. 23, 1991, p. 2.
45. Reported fully in "Dust Concealed All Traces," *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, Sept. 28, 1991, p. 5.
46. Interview in "Argumenti i Fakti," no. 34, Aug. 1991, p. 5.
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50. Paul Quinn-Judge, "Spooked," *The New Republic*, March 16, 1992.
51. Interview with Oleg Gordievsky, KGB defector, conducted in Cambridge, Mass., March 15, 1992, and from a lecture by him at the Russian Research Center, March 16, 1992.
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