



When Intelligence Made a Difference

<<< EARLY 20TH CENTURY >>>

The Trust

James M. Roth

"Never let the truth get in the way of a good story."

— often attributed to Mark Twain

The story of the Trust, a 1920s Soviet intelligence operation credited with consolidating the Bolshevik's early hold on power, reads like a spy novel. The elements of a thriller are there: risk, betrayal, pursuit of power, double agents, love affairs, political intrigue, murder, and layer upon layer of deception. Among the colorful cast of characters, even Sidney Reilly, the British "Ace of Spies," makes a fateful appearance – and disappearance.

With a reputation as a masterpiece in deception, the Trust operation offers an almost perfect espionage tale. Maybe too perfect. For no two accounts of the operation are the same, and any intelligence officer who ever worked the Soviet target might view some details with skepticism. Access to Russian security archives has been limited and selective. Western narratives often draw on works published by Russian or Soviet historians in semi-novelistic form that blend fact and fiction, sacrificing accuracy in favor of distortions for narrative effect, or embellishments that glorify Soviet leaders and operational achievements.¹ And many key details are based on "revelations" from a controversial Soviet defector, who might not really have been a defector. All of which is to say that any discussion of the operation should be prefaced with a question: What can we really trust about the Trust?

But disputes over details have become a central part of the story, contributing to its aura of intrigue. And perhaps it is appropriate that a classic tale of Soviet trickery remains mired in mystery a century

later. So let's get on with the story of the Trust, offering those details that are most broadly accepted, and pointing out a few that might have made even Lenin blush.

THE SETTING

By 1921, the Red Army had emerged victorious from the civil war that began soon after the Bolsheviks seized power in the October Revolution of 1917. The defeat of the White Russian forces – including monarchists, socialists and liberals – had prompted the emigration of more than a million anti-communists, largely to European capitals. Foreign troops that intervened in support of the White forces had withdrawn. The Bolsheviks had regained control over most of the core Russian territories, but the country was in a state of economic ruin and turmoil.

In a temporary retreat from full socialism to revive the economy, Lenin rolled out the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921, a combination of state control and free market elements. He recognized the risks to the Bolsheviks by introducing limited capitalism, and called for increased vigilance against enemies, both domestic and foreign. These included foreign powers, White Russian émigrés, and monarchist elements within the Soviet bureaucracy. Lenin's warning, directed at the Red Army in a 23 December 1921 speech to the Ninth Congress of the Soviets, also implied a central role for the Cheka, the brutal secret police force. The Cheka, replaced by the GPU in 1922, was expected to counter émigré organizations and internal political opponents.²

With many of their leaders and much of their military structure still intact, the White forces remained a threat to the Bolshevik regime, with or without foreign government support. Lenin considered the Russian émigré community well-prepared to resume the struggle against Soviet power.³

Soviet leaders focused primarily on the danger posed by two groups in Russian exile communities across Europe. The first was a loose collection of monarchist cells based in France, Germany and the

1. Richard Spence, "Russia's *Operatsiia Trest*: A Reappraisal," *Global Intelligence Monthly*, April 1999, p. 19. <https://archive.org/details/1999-operatsiia-trest>.

2. CIA, "The Trust," CIA-RDP90G01353R001700020002-4, March 1969, pp. 1-2. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp90g01353r001700020002-4>.

3. Richard G. Robbins, "Was Vladimir Dzhunkovskii the Father of 'The Trust'? A Quest for the Plausible," *Journal of Modern Russian History and Historiography*, January 2008, p. 115. <https://brill.com/view/journals/jmrh/1/1/jmrh.1.issue-1.xml>

Balkans.⁴ Prominent leaders among them included Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolayevich, the grandson of Tsar Nikolai I. Living in virtual isolation outside Paris and broadly unpopular in the exile community, the Grand Duke led the Supreme Monarchist Council, which sought to restore the monarchy.⁵



White Russian military leader, General Pyotr Nikolayevich Wrangel, "The Black Baron."
(Wikipedia)

The most influential White Russian military leader was General Pyotr Nikolayevich Wrangel, "The Black Baron," who had commanded anti-Bolshevik forces during the civil war. Headquartered near Belgrade, Wrangel maintained a patient wait-and-see policy in terms of liberating Russia from Bolshevism. His aim was to keep the émigrés together as a national group, while opposing the use of terrorist or subversive tactics

against the Soviet government. His deputy, General Aleksandr Kutepov, believed Wrangel was too cautious, and that the Bolshevik regime's downfall could be provoked only by force and terrorism. He would eventually adopt an independent course, moving to Paris in 1924 and forming his own secret combat unit trained in espionage and sabotage.⁶

The second group targeted by Soviet leaders was the People's Union for the Defense of Motherland and Freedom, in Poland. The People's Union was led by Boris Savinkov, a prominent Paris-based Russian revolutionary who fought against the Tsarist regime before becoming a relentless anti-Bolshevik after the October Revolution.⁷

Against this backdrop, the Cheka set the wheels in motion to launch a ruthless campaign to destroy Russian émigré groups abroad.⁸

4. Robbins, p. 115.

5. CIA, pp. 8-9.

6. Ibid, pp. 9-10.

7. Robbins, p. 115.

8. CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, "Book review of *The Secret Road to World War Two: Soviet Versus Western Intelligence, 1921-1939* by Paul W. Blackstock," *Studies in Intelligence*, Spring 1970, p. 2. <https://>

PLANTING THE SEEDS OF THE TRUST

In late 1921 or early 1922, the Cheka's counterintelligence unit began developing an elaborate deception and provocation operation against counterrevolutionary émigré groups using fake, Soviet-controlled organizations to create a "legend" of organized resistance to Bolshevik rule. Central to this plan was the Monarchist Association of Central Russia (MOTsR), portrayed as a secret domestic resistance network that had penetrated the Soviet government in preparation for overthrowing the Bolsheviks and restoring the Russian monarchy.⁹ A key point of dispute in historical accounts of the operation is whether the MOTsR already existed as a legitimate resistance movement and was hijacked by the Cheka, or was created as an outright hoax by the Soviets. In any case, the Soviets leveraged the MOTsR to launch the Trust legend in a broad counterintelligence campaign that spawned a series of sub-operations, each with its own legend or cover, targeting different émigré factions. The objective was to lure these factions into a united front secretly controlled by Soviet agents,¹⁰ in time exposing the opposition's plans and intentions.

The front company for the MOTsR was called the "Moscow Municipal Credit Association," providing a fitting business cover at a time when new enterprises were surfacing in Russia under NEP auspices. Business terms were to be used as code in communications with émigrés abroad: the MOTsR would be referred to as a "Trust" (Trest), communists as "competitors," and the MOTsR central committee as "the board management of the Trust."¹¹

To carry out such a monumental deception, the Soviets needed an agent with strong anti-communist credentials who could develop access to prominent émigré monarchists, gain their confidence, and disseminate the MOTsR legend as a resistance group poised to liberate Russia. Alexandr Yakushev, an aristocratic monarchist who had earned a reputation as a competent senior administrator in the Tsarist regime,¹² fit the bill perfectly.

www.cia.gov/resources/csi/studies-in-intelligence/archives/vol-14-no-1/book-review-of-the-secret-road-to-world-war-two-soviet-versus-western-intelligence-1921-1939-by-paul-w-blackstock/

9. Robbins, p. 115-116.

10. Spence, p. 20.

11. CIA, p. 7.

12. Ryszard Wraga, "'The Trust,' The History of a Soviet Provocation Operation," *Vozrozhdenie*, volume 7, January-February 1950, translated by CIA: CIA-RDP78-03362A002200040004-7, p. 1. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp78-03362a002200040004-7>

Despite Yakushev's open disdain for the Bolsheviks, Trotsky had assigned him to a senior position in the Soviet Commissariat of Transport in the early 1920s. By late 1921, Yakushev had been transferred to the Commissariat of Foreign Trade, enabling him to travel abroad.¹³ Accounts vary on how Yakushev was recruited by the Cheka, but most agree that he was coerced into accepting his role as a GPU agent and the MOTsR's front man.¹⁴ Yakushev would present himself to monarchists abroad as the MOTsR's "foreign minister."¹⁵ The putative chairman of the MOTsR was Andrei Zayonchkovski, a former Tsarist army general; well-known to the émigrés, Zayonchkovski was forced to accept this role under a GPU threat to execute his daughter, but played no active operational role.¹⁶ The roster of alleged conspirators with monarchist credentials would grow with time, providing the Trust legend an element of credibility.

With the key players, cover elements and strategy in place by late 1922, the Trust was ready to launch.

THE TRUST GOES LIVE



In late 1922, Yakushev was sent on his first mission abroad to initiate contact with upper echelons of Grand Duke Nikolai's Monarchist Council and other

prominent Russian émigré organizations.¹⁷ In preparation, he met with GPU counterintelligence chief Artur Artuzov, who managed the Trust operation.¹⁸ Artuzov coached Yakushev to emphasize several points in his meetings with monarchists abroad. According to Artuzov's fiction, Russia was undergoing a rebirth: communism had lost respect, and secret anti-Bolshevik forces were gradually securing control of the system from the ground up. Russia's liberation could succeed only if carried out by these domestic forces, including Yakushev's organization, the MOTsR – the Trust. Any premature intervention instigated by émigrés with the support of foreign powers would only unite the Russian people around the Bolsheviks. Above all, monarchist groups abroad should forgo direct action within Russia, especially terrorist acts.¹⁹

Artuzov further counseled Yakushev to advise monarchists that the Trust considered Grand Duke Nikolai to be the only man suitable to lead post-communist Russia. Yakushev was directed to lay the groundwork for an eventual direct meeting with Nikolai to earn prestige among émigré groups.²⁰

In November 1922, Yakushev set out on a visit to Germany, ostensibly as an official Soviet trade representative to the Königsberg Fair. He met first with Monarchist Council representatives, dutifully following the script as crafted by Artuzov. Yakushev emphasized that all intelligence collection within Russia would be carried out by the Trust, with information passed along to anti-Bolshevik forces through him, in his role as the movement's "foreign minister." He urged the Council to discourage foreign powers from conducting hostile acts within Russia. Demonstrating charm and a command presence, Yakushev apparently convinced the Council members of his sincerity.²¹

Yakushev faced pointed questions from a far more skeptical audience when he met a few days later with three representatives of General Wrangel's White Russian forces. (Suspicious from the start, the ever-cautious Wrangel himself would never meet directly with representatives of the Trust.)²² Asked by General E. E. Klimovich, Wrangel's intelligence chief, how such extensive anti-communist activity could take place in a society teeming with GPU agents, Yakushev responded that Klimovich was not well-informed about rapidly evolving conditions in Russia. The meet-

13. Ibid, p. 2.

14. Stephen A. Harris, "The Trust: The Classic Example of Soviet Manipulation," Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, September 1985, p. 26. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA161389>

15. Robbins, p. 116.

16. Wraga, p. 7.

17. CIA, p. 11.

18. Image of Artur Artuzov from Wikipedia

19. Wraga, p. 9.

20. CIA, p. 11.

21. Ibid, pp. 11-12.

22. Harris, p. 29.

ing ended with mixed results. Klimovich remained dubious of Yakushev's story and the Trust's authenticity. N. Chebyshev, Wrangel's political advisor, found Yakushev's account too well-rehearsed and contrived for someone who had supposedly lived under Soviet rule for years; he considered Yakushev a GPU stooge. Of Wrangel's three representatives at the meeting, only Vasiliy Shulgin, a prominent Russian journalist, was convinced of Yakushev's sincerity and the legitimacy of the Trust.²³ Shulgin would pay dearly for his naivete much later in the operation.

Yakushev's efforts began to pay off at a second meeting with Grand Duke Nikolai's Monarchist Council, when it was agreed that the Council would appoint representatives to several European capitals to liaise with the Trust.²⁴

Yakushev returned from Germany confident that he could manipulate the monarchist leaders he'd met, and that Russia's fate was firmly in the hands of the Bolsheviks.²⁵

By 1923, the Trust began developing duplicitous relationships with foreign intelligence services, including the Poles, English, Estonians and Finns. Trust communications with émigré liaison representatives in Europe were managed through two primary channels: diplomatic couriers, and controlled Russian border points, called "windows," through which Trust agents could move. One such diplomatic courier was Roman Birk, a GPU asset serving as press attaché at the Estonian embassy in Moscow. In time, Birk managed a steady stream of messages between the Trust and émigrés in Tallinn.²⁶

Soon, fabricated intelligence scripted by the GPU's "Disinformation Bureau" was being disseminated routinely to foreign governments, containing sufficient accurate details to provide an air of authenticity. The common point of emphasis in these transmissions was that Russia was undergoing positive change, and that foreign states should refrain from aggressive action against the Bolsheviks.²⁷

Yakushev traveled to Paris in August 1923 to meet for the first time with Grand Duke Nikolai. At the direction of Artuzov, he was accompanied by General N. M. Potapov, who had taken leave from the Red Army's General Staff at the GPU's request to support the Trust operation. Potapov was known to the Grand Duke from Tsarist times, and his status as a former

senior military officer acting ostensibly as a Trust emissary gave the MOTsR significant credibility.²⁸

In a productive three-hour meeting, Yakushev followed the usual Trust script, mirroring many of the Grand Duke Nikolai's own views and goals. Nikolai's vow of cooperation with the Trust lent Yakushev considerable stature, which he soon leveraged in establishing a "working agreement" with General Kutepov's group in Paris.²⁹

Having demonstrated the ability to deceive monarchists and White Army factions abroad through the Trust, the GPU was now emboldened to expand its reach, using the same methods but a different cover legend. Thus, Syndicate-2, an operation closely related to the Trust, was launched.

BORIS SAVINKOV AND THE SYNDICATE-2 OPERATION

Boris Savinkov, a charismatic Paris-based Russian revolutionary, was an inevitable target in the GPU's campaign to neutralize anti-Bolshevik émigré groups. Long notorious for organizing the spectacular assassinations of senior Russian officials during the Tsarist era, Savinkov had joined Kerenskiy's Provisional Government after the fall of the Romanov dynasty, before resuming relentless counterrevolutionary activities against the Bolsheviks following their takeover.³⁰ He eventually fled Russia and founded the People's Union for the Defense of Motherland and Freedom, an underground movement that conducted terrorist operations in Russia. Though he received little tangible foreign support, he maintained relationships with the Polish, British and French intelligence services.³¹

By 1923, the GPU had gained the upper hand in countering Savinkov's cells domestically, and set about planning an operation to eliminate Savinkov. Given Savinkov's anti-Tsarist history, the Soviets could not use the Trust's pro-monarchist MOTsR legend. Using the code name Syndicate-2, the GPU instead employed another fictional organization, the ostensibly anti-communist Liberal Democrat (LD) group, under the leadership of Artuzov and other GPU officials.³² Through its emissaries, the GPU fed

23. CIA, p. 12.

24. Ibid, p. 12.

25. Ibid, p. 13.

26. Ibid, pp. 13-14, 66.

27. Ibid, p. 14.

28. Ibid, p. 14.

29. Ibid, pp. 14-15.

30. Harris, pp. 13-14.

31. CIA, pp. 16-17.

32. Ibid, pp. 17-18.

to Savinkov a proposal to link the LD movement with Savinkov's own People's Union, seeking his return to Russia to lead an uprising toppling the Soviet regime.³³

Savinkov had formed a close relationship with British spy Sidney Reilly after the two first met in Russia in 1918, taking advantage of the latter's links with Western intelligence services. Reilly warned Savinkov against returning to Russia. Despite this and his own suspicions of the LD, Savinkov departed Paris for Russia in August 1924.³⁴ He was arrested almost immediately after crossing the border. His death sentence in a show trial was commuted to ten years in prison after he renounced his opposition to the Soviet rule and advised other émigrés to do the same.³⁵ Savinkov died in May 1925, when he either jumped or was pushed from his cell window at Lubyanka prison.³⁶

By the time of Savinkov's death, Artuzov and the Trust were already focused on another objective: the capture of Sidney Reilly.

SIDNEY REILLY³⁷



Sidney Reilly (born Sigmund Rosenblum, possibly in Odessa) became legendary for his work on behalf of British intelligence during World War I. In April 1918, the British government had directed his return to Russia, where he organized a network of agents and saboteurs, while hatching a plan to topple the

Bolshevik government. When Reilly's coup plot was thwarted by the Cheka, he was sentenced to death by the Soviets, but managed to escape Russia. Upon his return to England, he was awarded the Master Cross and became known as Britain's "master spy."³⁸ The failed coup attempt solidified Reilly's status as an enemy of the Soviet state.

Reilly's remaining years were spent supporting Savinkov and raising funds for anti-Bolshevik activities. In July 1924, Reilly traveled from New York to Paris to see Savinkov. According to some accounts, he used the visit to urge Savinkov, in vain, not to travel to Russia.³⁹

In January 1925, Reilly received a letter, sent via a British intelligence officer in Estonia, from Maria Shults, the niece of White General Kutepov and a prominent member of his anti-Bolshevik combat unit. Convinced of the Trust's legitimacy and the strength of communist opposition domestically, Shults enthusiastically informed Reilly in her letter of significant business opportunities in Russia.⁴⁰ Accounts vary as to whether Reilly was compelled more by the prospects of business deals with pragmatic communists or visions of instigating another revolution, but the groundwork for Reilly's return was in place.⁴¹ (Shults and her third husband, Georgi Radkovich, had by then become unwitting agents of the Trust. The Trust's manipulation of the couple is a story in itself, but one we won't get into here.)

Influenced by Shults's letter, Reilly and Kutepov agreed during a subsequent meeting in Paris to travel to Helsinki together in September 1925 to discuss Trust-related matters with N. N. Bunakov, Kutepov's representative there. When word reached Yakushev through Trust channels of this development, he visited Bunakov to coordinate Reilly's reception by his fictitious organization. Skeptical of the Trust, Bunakov initially resisted Yakushev's overture. But Yakushev persuaded Bunakov of the Trust's bona fides and power when he followed through on a promise to ferret Bunakov's brother out of Russia for a reunion in Helsinki in August 1925.⁴²

In late September 1925, Reilly and Kutepov arrived in Helsinki, where they met with Bunakov, Shults, her husband Radkovich, and Yakushev. Informed that there was little risk in a short visit to Russia, Reilly accepted Yakushev's proposal that

33. Harris, p. 39.

34. Ibid, pp. 14, 39.

35. Robbins, p. 118.

36. Ibid, p. 31.

37. Photo from Wikipedia.

38. Harris, pp. 11, 46-49.

39. Ibid, pp. 50-51.

40. CIA, pp. 23-26.

41. Spence, pp. 23-24.

42. CIA, p. 26.

he travel to Moscow and Leningrad to meet with the Trust's political council, with plans to return to Finland two days later. The next evening, Reilly crossed the Russian border through a Trust-arranged "window," manned by a GPU guard.⁴³

The British master spy was never again seen in the West. His capture and execution in Russia are the subject of multiple contradictory accounts and much speculation. Perhaps in an effort to keep the Trust operation alive, the Soviets did not propagandize Reilly's arrest, as they had with Savinkov's. Instead, the first news of his apparent demise would come more than a year-and-a-half later, from a controversial Soviet defector.

VASILIIY SHULGIN

With the death of Savinkov and disappearance of Reilly, the Trust was discredited among Russian émigrés and Western intelligence services. In late 1925, the Trust leadership unveiled a last-ditch operation to restore a degree of credibility. This time the target was Yugoslavia-based Vasiliy Shulgin. (Recall that Shulgin had been convinced of the Trust's legitimacy during Yakushev's late 1922 introductory meeting with him and two other representatives of White Russian forces' General Wrangel.) An avowed monarchist and prominent émigré journalist who had been a conservative member of the Duma before the October Revolution, Shulgin was invited by Trust emissaries to visit Russia to search for his son, missing since 1920 in Crimea. Ignoring warnings from Wrangel, Shulgin accepted and passed through a "window" across the Russian border on the night of 23 December 1925.⁴⁴

Shulgin's travels in Russia were cleverly orchestrated by the Trust to demonstrate the growing strength of the fabricated underground movement. Yakushev met with Shulgin in Moscow, fatefully introducing him to an ostensible co-conspirator, a man he called "Otto." Shulgin was then put in the care of Maria Shults and her husband. In time, Shulgin became convinced that the Trust had become formidable, with a rebirth of Russia underway. It is unclear whether the Trust made a legitimate effort to locate his missing son, but when no trace of him was uncovered by early 1926, Shulgin gave up and announced plans to return to Yugoslavia. When Yakushev proposed that he write a book recounting his observations of the changing

Soviet Union, Shulgin expressed concern that it would inadvertently compromise the Trust movement. Yakushev countered by suggesting that he forward the book to emissaries of the Trust for editing before publication.⁴⁵

In early 1927, Shulgin's account, vetted by members of the Trust, was published in his book, *Three Capitals* (*Tri Stolitsiy*). His story generally followed the false narrative perpetuated by the Trust: Russia was undergoing a revival and, with Bolshevism on the way out, there was little need for outside interference.⁴⁶

Soon after releasing his book, Shulgin found himself having to recant by publishing a postscript conceding that he had been duped by the GPU.⁴⁷ These circumstances were prompted by the apparent defection of the man Yakushev had introduced to Shulgin in Moscow as "Otto," which exposed the Trust once and for all as a hoax.

EDUARD OPPERPUT

The Trust came to a sensational and perhaps fitting conclusion when "Otto," GPU agent Eduard Ottovich Opperput, fled to Finland on 13 April 1927 with Maria Shults, presenting himself to the Finnish army as a defector. One of the operation's central and most controversial figures, Opperput (AKA Upeninsh, Staunitz, etc.) had served as the MOTsR's financial head and occupied Maria Shults, with whom he was having an affair, during her travels to Moscow.⁴⁸

In the months following his defection, Opperput disclosed publicly that Soviet intelligence had controlled the Trust from the start, through the MOTsR and related legend organizations.⁴⁹ He claimed that he had been arrested by the Soviets in 1921 as a member of Savinkov's anti-communist People's Union, was coerced into collaborating with the GPU, and convinced Yakushev to act as the Trust's front man.⁵⁰ He was also the source of the first news of Sidney Reilly's capture more than a year-and-a-half earlier.⁵¹

Following closely on the heels of Savinkov's demise and with the Trust already largely discredited, Opperput's motives were viewed with suspicion, prompting intense debate outside Russia. Some

43. Ibid, pp. 26-27.

44. Ibid, p. 28.

45. Ibid, pp. 28-29.

46. Ibid, p. 29.

47. Ibid, p. 29.

48. Harris, p. 55.

49. Robbins, p. 117.

50. CIA, p. 62.

51. Spence, p. 24.

LIST OF SIGNIFICANT PERSONS	
Artur Artuzov	GPU (Soviet secret police) counterintelligence chief, who managed the Trust operation.
Roman Birk	Estonian press attaché and GPU asset in Moscow who was a diplomatic courier for the Trust.
N. N. Bunakov	General Kutepov's representative in Helsinki.
N. Chebyshev	General Wrangel's political advisor.
Feliks Dzerzhinskii	Ruthless head of the <i>Cheka</i> , later the GPU.
General Aleksandr Kutepov	General Wrangel's deputy who later split with him.
General E. E. Klimovich	General Wrangel's intelligence chief.
General Yevgeniy Miller	Successor to General Wrangel, eventually killed by Soviet agents.
Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolayevich	Grandson of Tsar Nikolai I and leader of the exiled Supreme Monarchist Council.
Eduard Opperput	GPU agent and central figure in the Trust who fled to Finland, publicly revealing the GPU's role.
General N. M. Potapov	Red Army general seconded to the GPU to pose as a Trust emissary.
Georgi Radkovich	Third husband of Maria Shults who became an unwitting agent of the Trust.
Sidney Reilly	British "Ace of Spies" whose early efforts to topple the Bolsheviks made him a key target of the Trust operation.
Boris Savinkov	Ally of Reilly and leader of the anti-Bolshevik People's Union for the Defense of Motherland and Freedom.
Vasily Shulgin	Prominent journalist and monarchist in the White Russian exile community.
Maria Shults	Niece of General Kutepov and anti-Bolshevik activist who became an unwitting agent of the Trust.
General Petr Nikolayevich Baron Wrangel	White Russian military leader.
Aleksandr Yakushev	"Foreign Minister" of MOTsR, a false flag anti-Bolshevik organization controlled by the GPU.
Andrei Zayonchkovski	Former Tsarist general, putative chairman of MOTsR.

viewed him as a genuine monarchist who served the GPU only under duress. Others considered Opperput a provocateur with a long history as a Soviet agent, characterizing his defection as a final, conveniently timed GPU deception to shutter the operation with maximum effect; indeed, press coverage of Opperput's allegations turbo-charged the level of distrust, recrimination and embarrassment among Russian émigré groups.⁵²

Among those who accepted Opperput's version of events was Maria Shults. Seeking revenge, she convinced her uncle, General Kutepov, to support her plan to lead a terror campaign in the Soviet Union. She organized two three-person sabotage teams, one targeting Leningrad, and the other Moscow. She would lead the Moscow team, which included Opperput, allegedly at his insistence to demonstrate his loyalty. The two teams traveled to the Russian border on 30 May 1927 by train, before separating. The

Leningrad team successfully bombed a communist meeting hall, and returned safely to Finland. TASS subsequently announced that a planned attack on the GPU's Moscow headquarters had been thwarted, with all three members of the sabotage team, including Shults and Opperput, apprehended and executed. The GPU announced implausibly in early July that an incriminating diary had been found in Opperput's possession demonstrating that the Leningrad and Moscow sabotage plans had been organized by General Kutepov and British intelligence.⁵³

Nearly a century later, the truth of Opperput's motives and role in the Trust remain cloaked in mystery and disinformation. An official 1928 Soviet account of the Moscow sabotage effort made no mention of Opperput.⁵⁴ The same year, Opperput was reportedly operating as a Soviet agent under a new name in China.⁵⁵ And in his *Memoirs of an Old Chekist*,

53. Ibid, pp. 38-40.

54. Ibid, p. 40.

55. Spence, p. 24.

52. CIA, p. 38.

published in 1962, Fedor Fomin refers to only two saboteurs participating in the planned June 1927 terrorist attack in Moscow, implying Oppenput wasn't involved.⁵⁶ These points favor the Oppenput-as-provocateur theory.

The end of the Trust operation marked the beginning of a more direct and brutal Soviet approach to eliminating émigré opposition. There is evidence that White General Wrangel's 1928 death in Brussels came at the hands of Soviet agents; his successors, General Kutepov and General Yevgeniy Miller, were abducted and killed by Red agents in subsequent years.⁵⁷ But the White monarchist leaders weren't the only victims of the regime: in an ironic twist, Artuzov and many other GPU officials who were instrumental in the Trust operation were arrested and executed in Stalin's late 1930s purges.⁵⁸ Having served the Soviet state with dedication, these men were ultimately destroyed by it, casualties of Stalin's paranoia and consolidation of power.

CONCLUSION



According to American historian Richard G. Robbins, who has chronicled Russian and Soviet history extensively, “nothing about the Trust and Syndicate is clear; almost any question concerning them begets questions and challenges.”⁵⁹ A few points of contention are cited above: the origins of MOTsR movement, Yakushev's motivation for serving the GPU, the circumstances of Savinkov's death and

Reilly's disappearance, and Oppenput's defection bona fides and subsequent fate.

But if the record is misleading about these and other critical details, should we accept the conventional narrative portraying the Trust as a colossal success? Historian Robbins skeptically asks whether the Trust and Syndicate operations were truly “brilliant examples of deception on a grand scale,” noting that “the hard evidence needed to answer [this and other] questions is in short supply.”⁶⁰

Perhaps the most critical evaluation of the Trust was prepared by Dr. Richard Spence, an historian specializing in Russian history whose works include a biography of Sidney Reilly. Spence challenges the conventional narrative of the Trust operation by highlighting exaggerated and misleading aspects of its purported success, drawing heavily on his analysis of the personal archive of Cheka/GPU chief Feliks Dzerzhinskii, the ruthless “Iron Feliks.” Housed in the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, these documents include detailed internal memos and correspondence on the planning and execution of the Trust operation, revealing internal debates and operational challenges that contradict aspects of official Soviet narratives.⁶¹

Spence points out that, aside from hailing the capture of Savinkov and Reilly, it wasn't until the 1960s that the Soviets began to tout the Trust as a significant intelligence success, which he attributes partly to an effort to rehabilitate the image of the post-Stalin security services. “As in any propaganda campaign,” he writes, “historical accuracy was valued only insofar as it was useful.” Spence refers to Soviet writer Lev Nikulin's influence in perpetuating the myth of the Trust as a masterpiece through his book, *The Swell of the Sea*, a semi-fictional account of the operation published in the 1960s; though it contains distortions and propagandistic elements typical of Soviet-era literature, Nikulin's work is often cited as a source in Trust narratives.⁶²

Spence goes on to cite evidence supporting his contention that the “Nikulinesque portrait” of the Trust's achievements is exaggerated and misleading. In particular, a secret report submitted to Dzerzhinskii in 1924 emphasized the GPU's challenges in neutralizing counterrevolutionaries with insufficient resources, and another in 1925 effectively pleads for continuation of the Trust. He points out that in Politburo debates, “Dzerzhinskii adamantly opposed Savinkov's return,”

56. CIA, p. 40.

57. Spence, p. 24.

58. Ibid, p. 19

59. Robbins, p. 118.

60. Ibid, p. 119.

61. Spence, pp. 113-143.

62. Ibid, pp. 19, 24.

indicating “a less than supportive relationship between ‘Iron Feliks’ and the Trust operation.” Spence also suggests that doubts about the Trust’s authenticity among anti-communists outside Russia were more prevalent than commonly represented, noting that “if Savinkov put little faith in the Trust, Reilly put none at all.” Finally, he emphasizes that, while the “overall plan was to link all or most of the emigre factions into a ‘united front’ controlled by Soviet agents,” it was “never the case that [the Trust] allowed the OGPU ‘to control the activities of the Russian émigrés’.”⁶³

Spence concludes that “the legend of the Trust as a brilliant counter-intelligence operation...has proved far more durable and successful than the actual operation,” and “may have been a better lesson in what not to do than anything else.”⁶⁴ He makes a compelling case for viewing the conventional Trust narrative as one hobbled by historical revisionism, Soviet disinformation, limited access to original documentation, speculation, and insufficient skepticism.

Though Spence concedes that “the Trust achieved some success,”⁶⁵ he probably goes too far in downplaying its accomplishments. If we accept that some historic details have been distorted to glorify the early days of Soviet intelligence and its operational achievements, we must also acknowledge that the GPU succeeded in its goal of averting subversive activities

of White émigrés and their foreign backers within the Soviet Union, buying time to get the Bolshevik regime back on its feet after the civil war. The deception didn’t hoodwink everyone, but to be effective it didn’t have to. If Reilly and Savinkov had their doubts, they still walked into a trap. And “revelations” from Opperput’s defection – whether it was real or orchestrated by the GPU – dealt a severe blow to the morale and cohesion of the White Russian émigré community, undermining their efforts against the Soviet regime.

Disputed details aside, the Trust also established a Cheka legacy. As former CIA officer John Sipher wrote in referring to the operation’s lasting influence, “Misplaced trust became a model for a century of Soviet and Russian subversive efforts, and the Cheka remained a source of pride for future Russian intelligence operatives.”⁶⁶

As for resolving lingering contradictions involving details of the Trust, historian Robbins maybe put it best in concluding that “Soviet and Russian ‘organs’ hold their secrets fast, and may not reveal them until after the graves give up their dead – if then.”⁶⁷

James M. Roth is a former CIA officer and the author of *The Dead Drop*, a spy novel.

63. Ibid, pp. 20-23.

64. Ibid, p. 24.

65. Ibid, p. 23.

66. John Sipher, “Putin’s One Weapon: The ‘Intelligence State’,” *The New York Times*, 24 February, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/24/opinion/putin-russia-security-services.html>.

67. Robbins, p. 119.