

When an Intelligence Agency Loses its Mind: An Analysis of the KGB's Operation RYAN and What it Means for Russia's War against Ukraine

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As an authoritarian leader, Vladimir Putin likely influences Russian intelligence to produce conclusions confirming his own views and prejudices—which likely influenced his decision to launch the brutal invasion of Ukraine in 2022. But this process of forcing information to fit conclusions creates the intelligence failure of confirmation bias. This failure is potentially disastrous. Disturbingly, there are parallels between the Russian war against Ukraine and a previous Soviet intelligence failure that followed this exact pattern: Operation RYAN. During Operation RYAN, the paranoid Yuri Andropov ordered Soviet intelligence to confirm his suspicions that the U.S. was planning a surprise nuclear preemptive strike on the Soviet Union. Forced to comply, the KGB ultimately produced bizarre intelligence confirming Andropov's fears while having no connection to reality. The resulting feedback loop increased Soviet paranoia so much that its leaders nearly caused a nuclear war themselves during NATO's Able Archer 83 exercise. Operation RYAN poses disturbing questions that can be applied today as Putin refuses to back down. Since Putin has a habit of eliminating everyone who disagrees with him, what if he's created a fantasy world where everything he believes is true? And if so, how much worse could things get?

Introduction

If someone wanted to determine what Vladimir Putin is thinking about at any given moment, one way would be to learn what his intelligence agencies are telling him. The whole point of an intelligence agency is to inform leaders about factual information necessary for their work. Rather, that's the way an intelligence agency *should* work. Under an oppressive regime like Vladimir Putin's, the truth is often the first thing to be repressed. There is no guarantee that intelligence agencies under an authoritarian regime actually produce factual content. The paranoia of a leader can easily cause intelligence agencies to become massive echo chambers, instead producing intelligence that confirms their world view while creating catastrophic intelligence failures. An organization that is supposed to provide factual updates provides fiction—effectively losing its mind.

This article makes the argument that, under a totalitarian system, a leader can inadvertently coerce an intelligence agency into reporting information that confirms

their own beliefs, and, if left unchecked, such a negative feedback loop can lead to catastrophic consequences. I will support this argument by examining a historical intelligence failure under the Soviet Union, Operation RYAN, through the lens of Russia's pre-Ukrainian invasion intelligence failure. This paper will research and analyze the origins of Operation RYAN—a Russian acronym of “Raketno Yadernoye Napadenie,” meaning “nuclear missile attack.” I will then discuss the operation's immediate failure and its consequences during NATO's 1983 Able Archer exercise. This discussion will be followed by an retrospective analysis of why Operation RYAN failed from an intelligence perspective. After that, I will discuss the possibility that such a failure is occurring again today in Putin's Russia and how such a failure may have provided the motivation for his invasion of Ukraine. By understanding the intelligence failure created by Russian intelligence under one paranoid former KGB officer decades ago, it is possible to understand how a similar

failure could be happening today under similar circumstances.

Literature Review and Methodology

After Russia's cruel and disastrous invasion of Ukraine, Western intelligence agencies, media, and academia now have some of the information necessary to determine why the invasion occurred. Many articles have explained that the war was influenced by factors such as Russian imperial ambition, President Vladimir Putin's megalomania, or the prejudicial hatred that many Russians feel toward Ukrainians.¹ But there is another factor that explains both the invasion and Russia's subsequent poor performance. According to open source reporting in outlets such as *The Washington Post*, Russia's FSB (Federal Security Service; the domestic security agency that also handles intelligence regarding former Soviet states) predicted that an invasion would be an easy victory.² FSB officers claimed that Ukrainian leaders would flee the country and that invading Russians would be joyously welcomed by a gracious Ukrainian population.³ These FSB officers—most likely influenced by Russia's totalitarian system—created an echo chamber that reinforced Vladimir Putin's pre-existing view that a war against Ukraine would be easy for him to win.⁴ Like the FSB's conclusions, Putin's internal thought process is not easily determined. However, further open source reporting in Western outlets shows that Putin is isolated and distrustful of advice that conflicts with what he believes.⁵ The result was a war likely launched because Putin's authoritarian leadership influenced his intelligence organizations to give him information that was biased in favor of what he wanted to hear.

To understand the relationship between Operation RYAN and the ongoing invasion,

I analyzed the origins and failures of Andropov's Operation RYAN to determine what similarities it might share with Putin's intelligence in the lead up to the invasion of Ukraine. Putin's intelligence failure can be better understood if it is first viewed through the lens of Operation RYAN. Both Andropov and Putin were former leaders of Soviet and Russian intelligence, both were heads of an authoritarian state that punished opposing thought, and both launched operations that appeared to be total disasters and threaten their own country's security.⁶

I utilized both primary and secondary sources that chronicled and assessed Operation RYAN. I used primary documents directly from the KGB and made available through George Washington University's National Security Archive. I also utilized recent works such as Ben MacIntyre's excellent *The Spy and the Traitor*—a biography of KGB officer Oleg Gordievsky who served through the height of Operation RYAN. Unfortunately, I faced a number of limitations during this research. I was limited to only English language accounts. Another major limitation is the overall availability of information about the inner workings of both Soviet and Russian intelligence. While Operation RYAN occurred long enough ago for some sources to be available, the closed and secretive structure of Russian politics makes it difficult to find information beyond personal accounts. Meanwhile, information about current intelligence practices in Putin's Russia was even harder to find. Much of the information I was able to find comes from Western speculation of its workings and Putin's mindset. Next, I will discuss the origins and failures of Operation RYAN.

A Suspicious Andropov Creates Operation RYAN

In May of 1981, senior Soviet intelligence officers attended a Moscow conference hosted by General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev and KGB Chairman Yuri Andropov.⁷ Andropov had an important announcement: Ronald Reagan “was actively preparing for nuclear war.”⁸ Why Andropov believed this is unclear, although Marc Ambinder’s account of Operation RYAN discusses Andropov’s unsteady mental state, highlighting his notorious paranoia and that Andropov often “saw conspiracies everywhere.”⁹ Immediately after the conference, Andropov created Operation RYAN, which quickly became the biggest peacetime Soviet intelligence operation ever launched.¹⁰ Andropov’s orders were the push. And like a row of dominos beginning to fall one after another, his orders had complicated and immense consequences. In November of that year, instructions were telegraphed to KGB stations—or *rezidenturas*—around the world.¹¹ Officers were ordered to “uncover plans...and to organize continual watch...for indications of a decision being taken to use nuclear weapons against the USSR.”¹² Soviet leadership provided a list of these indications for their officers. By 1983, the KGB “had compiled seven binders” full of observable nuclear war indicators that would be sent back to Moscow so Soviet leaders could prepare for the expected strike.¹³ Once Andropov became General Secretary after Brezhnev’s death, Operation RYAN increased in importance. In 1982 “all *rezidenturas* were instructed to make RYAN a top priority,” even if it meant “a de-emphasis on regular foreign intelligence work.”¹⁴

As Operation RYAN escalated, its scale required the KGB to make institutional changes. Nate Jones extensively discusses

organizational changes necessary to launch Operation RYAN in *Able Archer 83: The Secret History of the NATO Exercise That Almost Triggered Nuclear War*—a useful source that describes the logistics of the operation. This was the first cooperation between the KGB and GRU (Soviet military intelligence) in Soviet history.¹⁵ Neither intelligence agency had the resources necessary to implement an operation of this magnitude alone. The KGB itself was also restructured. The entire operation was overseen by a new division in the KGB’s First Chief Directorate, ironically named the “Institute for Intelligence Problems.”¹⁶ Meanwhile, “three hundred positions were created” to “report on and monitor” incoming intelligence while fifty new officers were hired for coordination.¹⁷ The KGB even developed a “primitive computer system” to process the immense quantities of intelligence coming in from *rezidenturas*.¹⁸ Not even the full power of the Soviet Union was enough. Observing signs of a sudden attack also required the Soviet Union’s allies. “The primary mission of Warsaw Pact intelligence agencies” was gradually changed to compiling intelligence that indicated an attack was imminent.¹⁹ The East German Stasi, as well as Bulgarian and Czechoslovakian intelligence agencies, became major providers of intelligence for the operation.²⁰ The Warsaw Pact’s entire intelligence apparatus gradually transformed to support RYAN and prove that the United States was preparing for a preemptive nuclear strike. In doing so, Operation RYAN arguably became one of the most important events in the history of Soviet intelligence.

An Inherently Flawed Operation Becomes a Failure

Despite the colossal investment, Operation RYAN was a catastrophic intelligence failure. Its entire premise was wrong: the

United States had no intention of attacking the Soviet Union by surprise. While Reagan aggressively opposed communism, he also feared nuclear war. In 1981 he publicly stated that, in such a conflict, “all mankind would lose.”²¹ Reagan simply did not want a nuclear war—let alone a preemptive one. KGB officers regardless began collecting intelligence on their assigned indicators, confirming something that didn’t exist. At first, many of these indicators represented expected ways a foreign intelligence service would try to target the United States and determine military plans. Officers were ordered to surveil “key nuclear decision makers”, monitor “nuclear depots [and] military installations”, and recruit sources in “government, military, intelligence, and civil-defense organizations.”²² However, these indicators became increasingly bizarre and detached from reality, revealing that the Soviet leaders knew shockingly little about the United States. Churches and banks were listed as key nuclear decision-makers that would decide when to strike.²³ Collectors were even ordered to report the price of blood in blood banks, because Soviet leadership believed they operated as literal capitalist businesses.²⁴ These obviously wrong indicators gave no indication of the United States’ war plans, and KGB officers assigned abroad knew it.²⁵ Despite their reservations, the officers complied and began producing the evidence they were required to find. Whether or not they shared Andropov’s beliefs about an incoming nuclear attack was irrelevant. By following skewed collection requirements, the KGB began producing skewed intelligence.

What followed next was what KGB officer and spy for MI6 Oleg Gordievsky described as “a vicious spiral of intelligence gathering and evaluation, with foreign stations feeling obliged to report alarming information even if they did not believe it.”²⁶ As a result, Soviet leadership became convinced their

imaginary impending nuclear attack was real and ordered the KGB to collect further proof. Operation RYAN transformed the KGB and Warsaw Pact intelligence apparatus into a giant feedback loop. Paranoid leaders ordered officers to prove their fears, officers obeyed, leaders became more paranoid, and officers received more orders to collect more proof. The already massive operation continued to expand through the eighties as the KGB devoted more resources towards discovering something that did not exist. Even mundane information, such as the construction of a highway, was presented as proof of a coming attack, convincing leadership they were right all along.²⁷ It was as if the KGB changed their mission to prove the conspiracy theory their leader believed was true. One could argue that the point of an intelligence organization is to collect the intelligence that policymakers request. After all, a policymaker may know things intelligence leaders do not or they could want to point their intelligence organization towards something they feel is overlooked. However, even if a policymaker requests to collect intelligence about something nonexistent, that organization must be free to respond and deliver facts the policymaker may not want to hear. If intelligence is conducted in a totalitarian climate, intelligence organizations will fear their policymakers and deliver the information they want to hear. By forcing the KGB to prove the imaginary attack was real, the Soviet Union led its entire intelligence apparatus into an intelligence failure. Thanks to Andropov’s paranoid orders, the KGB lost its mind.

Why Operation RYAN Failed

The reason Operation RYAN failed is obvious now: its premise was incorrect from the start. The entire operation followed the

“garbage in, garbage out” principle. If ordered to collect intelligence that proves a nonsensical idea, an organization will provide nonsensical intelligence to ‘prove’ that idea. But more importantly, why were these orders made and why were they implemented? Soviet leader Yuri Andropov shares a significant portion of the blame. His belief in a surprise nuclear attack “probably had more to do with [his] personal experience than rational geopolitical analysis.”²⁸ Andropov served as the Soviet Ambassador to Hungary during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, where Soviet power over the satellite state was threatened by mass protests.²⁹ His participation in brutal suppression as Chairman of the KGB likely also led to his assumption that all leaders—such as Reagan—would pursue the same “extreme measures” against their opponents that he would, such as launching preemptive wars.³⁰ All of Andropov’s actions were influenced by his personal experiences and beliefs. If new information did not conform to his view of reality, it was not true. As a result, he ordered the KGB to be an extension of his own thought process. They were to find him intelligence that confirmed his beliefs, institutionalizing his confirmation bias.

The totalitarian culture of the Soviet Union and the KGB are also to blame for RYAN’s failures. The orders to provide proof of a nuclear attack came directly from Andropov, the most powerful person in the Soviet Union. KGB officials had no choice but to comply. The Union’s authoritarian society created a culture of “terrified conformity,”³¹ eliminating any ability to stand up to leaders. The authoritarian Soviet regime enforced groupthink, creating a climate where “obedience was more powerful than common sense” in the intelligence workforce.³² If any KGB officers questioned why they were required to collect ridiculous intelligence about blood prices, highway

construction, or nuclear armed clergy it would have meant the end of their career, if not their life. There was nothing KGB officers could do to stop this political interference; it was a standard part of their work. The KGB was not a neutral, information-providing intelligence agency: its primary role was to be the “servant of the [communist] party.”³³ Politicizing intelligence was the very goal of the KGB. By design, all of Soviet intelligence was inherently influenced and distorted by the Communist Party’s totalitarian politics.

A Vicious Cycle Nearly Leads to Catastrophe

As Operation RYAN expanded further, its vicious cycle of false intelligence began to have dangerous repercussions. Because the operation gathered more intelligence that confirmed their fears, Soviet leaders became further convinced that war was imminent. The détente period of calmer diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and the United States ended as the Soviet leaders intensified their rhetoric. In 1982, the Soviet Union proclaimed that it would end any “attempt to achieve mutual cooperation with the United States.”³⁴ Peace was now off the table. In 1983, Andropov—now General Secretary—warned that the United States was “moving toward the dangerous ‘red line’” of nuclear war.³⁵ This sudden escalation was met with confusion in the United States. Reagan administration officials struggled to determine whether these statements represented genuine fear or some sort of calculated ploy.³⁶ Concerned by Soviet overreaction and fearing conflict, the United States began preparing NATO military exercises in response to Soviet rhetoric. Operation RYAN was inadvertently escalating the Cold War, pushing it towards real conflict.

In 1983, NATO began Able Archer—its annual simulated military exercise. The exercise was based on a theoretical invasion of Yugoslavia, Finland, and NATO allies such as Germany, Norway, and Greece by an obvious stand in for the Soviet Union called “Orange.”³⁷ The practice invasion was designed to quickly escalate to simulated chemical and nuclear warfare. Its scale was immense. Able Archer 83 involved 40,000 troops from the United States, 19,000 of whom deployed from the United States to Europe.³⁸ B-52 bombers deployed in an Able Archer exercise for the first time and NATO leaders including President Reagan, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl planned to participate.³⁹ Soviet intelligence immediately noticed these preparations. Observation of NATO planes appeared to show they were armed with nuclear weapons and signal traffic indicated that the United States moved to DEFCON 1—an unprecedented event.⁴⁰ While the United States and NATO prepared to fight an imaginary nuclear war, their exercise looked similar to a real one.

Able Archer 83 appeared to be exactly what the Soviets were waiting for. Believing the long-feared attack was finally upon them, the Soviets panicked—nearly turning simulated nuclear war into an actual one. The Soviet Union immediately prepared a response “unparalleled in scale” to previous war mobilizations.⁴¹ All three elements of the Soviet nuclear triad activated: planes were equipped with nuclear weapons, submarines were deployed to defensive positions, and “around seventy SS-20 missiles targeted on Western Europe were placed on heightened alert.”⁴² Disturbingly, there is even speculation that the Soviet Union’s ICBM silos were activated and prepared to launch.⁴³ Operation RYAN’s effects cascaded to create what historians now believe was “the moment of maximum

danger” in the late Cold War, one which could have very easily escalated to nuclear conflict.⁴⁴ Operation RYAN nearly caused the nuclear war it was created to predict.

Thankfully, the Soviet Union decided not to pursue a preemptive strike. Able Archer 83’s quiet conclusion made it obvious that the exercise was not the surprise nuclear attack Operation RYAN was looking for. In February of 1984, three months after Able Archer 83’s conclusion, Yuri Andropov died in power.⁴⁵ Both his death and the nuclear war scare marked a turning point for Operation RYAN. The operation’s mission and goals changed in the following years. Instead of gathering evidence to prove a nuclear war was coming, officers collected intelligence on general Soviet security concerns such as NATO missile specifications and the United States’ activities in the Middle East and Central America.⁴⁶ Operation RYAN declined in importance each year until it ended in 1989.⁴⁷ Russian intelligence seemed to have learned from its mistakes and Operation RYAN’s influence was dramatically reduced.

Why Operation RYAN Matters Today

History never repeats itself exactly the same way, but the parallels between Operation RYAN and Russian intelligence failures in Ukraine are too prevalent to ignore. Today, another former KGB officer is the head of state in Russia. And similarly to Andropov, Putin previously served as Director of FSB—one of the KGB’s successor organizations. Both Andropov and Putin are clear examples of paranoid, conspiracy-obsessed thinkers. During his speech to KGB leadership, Andropov claimed that every war was actually caused by imperialists who wanted to stop “the forward march of history.”⁴⁸ This claim

effectively blamed the West for any military action the Soviet Union would take and framed the Soviet Union as simply defending itself from Western aggression. Putin has similarly concocted a conspiratorial narrative of his own to justify his attack on Ukraine. Based on his previous statements, Putin's worldview is based on the idea that Russia is threatened by a bizarre collection of forces including NATO, neo-Nazis, multiple gender identities, and "cancel" culture all coming from the West.⁴⁹ Just like Andropov before him, Putin likely believes he is threatened by secretive, sinister forces.

A leader falling to delusional, paranoid thinking has ramifications for the rest of the administration. Andropov believed he was facing an existential threat, removing anyone who disagreed—something Putin is likely doing again even more ruthlessly.⁵⁰ During his time as KGB Chairman—and later as General Secretary—Andropov was notorious for his suppression of dissidents. The KGB "became a more sophisticated and effective means of enforcing near absolute political control" while leaders of independent groups such as an anti-nuclear citizen's council were sentenced to imprisonment in psychiatric hospitals.⁵¹ Putin is likely waging a similar campaign of suppression and taking it even further. A suspiciously high number of oligarchs have recently died under mysterious circumstances, such as falling out of windows. While it is not definitively known, a common factor is that many of the deceased were critics of Putin's invasion of Ukraine—leading many to suspect they were murdered under Putin's orders.⁵² Andropov was content to imprison those who questioned him: Putin wants them dead. And by silencing his critics, Putin is almost certainly creating the exact same dysfunctional climate of fear that led to

Operation RYAN's production of fake intelligence.

Russian intelligence is likely falling into another intelligence failure because little in the institution has changed since the Cold War. There have been no meaningful reforms to Russian intelligence since the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to Julie Anderson's "The Checkist Takeover of the Russian State," Russian intelligence has spent the years since the collapse of the Soviet Union taking over all aspects of the Russian state.⁵³ In 2000 Putin described the beginning of his presidency as a "a successful [intelligence] penetration operation," and immediately began empowering his former colleagues in Russian intelligence.⁵⁴ In her article, Julie Anderson extensively documents how Russian intelligence gradually seized all elements of power within the Russian state including the judiciary, the economy, the media, and even local governments. The same authoritarian culture that led to the KGB's failure during Operation RYAN never went away: the FSB simply picked up where the KGB left off. In fact, Russian intelligence has only become more powerful since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Anderson describes Russia as an "FSB state," where Russian intelligence and the government are one and the same.⁵⁵ Nothing has changed in Russia since Operation RYAN, and, if anything, it has only gotten worse. Russian intelligence is more powerful than it was in the 1980s and it has sustained the exact same environment that led to the failure of Operation RYAN in the first place.

It does not strain the imagination to consider that Putin has inadvertently recreated his own version of Operation RYAN, giving himself a constant feed of biased or skewed information from officers too frightened to tell the truth. Today, Putin has publicly

declared that he does not believe Ukraine is a real country.⁵⁶ Before his invasion, he could have ordered his officers to find intelligence proving Ukraine has a weak national identity or that a Ukrainian response to a Russian invasion would be a positive one. Given his preference for conspiracy theories, he might have also ordered them to prove that Ukrainian leaders were secretly a part of some imagined western, Nazi, LGBT cabal. Soviet intelligence officers complied with Andropov's bizarre request for intelligence about fluctuating blood prices and nuclear clergy, and this time would be no different. Whether or not Putin directly ordered Russian intelligence to prove his beliefs, or if Russia's and the FSB's culture of compliance indirectly led to it, Russian intelligence likely came to a conclusion that Putin was already sympathetic to. Disagreeing with Putin is a death sentence. And if the penalty for disagreement with Putin is death, no one is going to disagree. All it took were orders from Andropov and the KGB lost its mind, becoming an intelligence agency that did not produce intelligence. Nothing has changed in Putin's Russia. Russian intelligence exists to make him happy—and if that means delivering nothing but falsehoods about Ukraine, it's what it will do.

Both Operation RYAN and Putin's likely delusions about Ukraine are part of a much larger trend of conspiracy-minded thinking in Russian politics and security. This paranoia has almost certainly infected Russian institutions and is proclaimed by leaders at various levels of government. During protests in Russia in 2017, head of the National Guard Viktor Zolotov claimed that protesters were caused by "brainwashing through Western media."⁵⁷ Meanwhile, former head of the analytical department of the SVR Leonid Reshetnikov—someone supposedly

responsible for factual and well-reasoned analysis—claimed that a secret, Illuminati-like "world government" is actually responsible for orchestrating world affairs.⁵⁸ Instead of producing well-researched critical analysis, Russian national security scholarly journals frequently reference familiar conspiracy theories and tropes about George Soros and the "new world order."⁵⁹ These publications and statements go beyond propaganda and misinformation. This evidence indicates that Russia's national security apparatus is incapable of providing actual analysis and can only see the world through the lens of simplistic conspiracy theories. This thinking has dangerous and obvious repercussions. Geopolitical crises are viewed not as "spontaneous events but...plans for [Russian] 'regime change' (*smena vlasti*) developed in Washington."⁶⁰ No one has learned anything since Operation RYAN. Thanks to generations of paranoid leaders and a perverse culture of fear, Russian intelligence as an organization is no longer willing or able to distinguish truth from fiction. Perhaps the average Russian intelligence officer knows this is paranoid and that there are no merits to these claims, but at a certain point the beliefs of an individual no longer matter. If they are being repeated by leaders and mandated through official channels, eventually these beliefs become policy. The introduction of these paranoid theories into the intelligence process contaminates the political outcome. Operation RYAN showed this mindset can cause a nuclear war, and the invasion of Ukraine shows it can lead to horrific war crimes. How much more damage will this thinking cause?

Operation RYAN's consequences are largely theoretical, as the nuclear war never came. But Putin's intelligence failures have left devastation across Ukraine and could become even worse. Because Putin thought that a war would be easy to win, thousands

of civilians have been killed and millions have been displaced in Ukraine. But Ukraine still resists Russia, and the war is dragging on. If Russian intelligence solely exists to confirm Putin's beliefs, does he even know that he's losing? Putin's intelligence has lied to him before, and he's created an environment that encourages them to continue delivering the lies he wants to hear, so what lie will they tell him next? Imagine for a moment that Putin demands confirmation that NATO will soon launch a preemptive nuclear attack on Russia, just like Andropov did. Russian intelligence is not likely to tell Putin that such a belief is deluded and has no chance of occurring. Putin's underlings might even believe him. In the right authoritarian political climate, an intelligence service and its leader can lose

their minds. And when a nuclear-armed authoritarian leader and his intelligence service lose their minds, the lives of millions are threatened. Operation RYAN ended as an intelligence failure. Today, Putin's Russia shows us that things can also end much worse.

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