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OPERATION PROVOCATEURS: A SECRET WAR IN THE FAR EAST
(LATE 1930S AND EARLY 1940S)

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In the years leading up to the start of the Great Patriotic War the U.S.S.R. was forced to fight, the Japanese special services conducted their subversive operations against the Soviet Far East mostly through the intelligence sections of the headquarters of the Kwangtung and Korean armies, and through their counterparts at the Japanese military missions in Harbin, Pogradichnaya, Sahaliang, Hailar, and several other cities. The Japanese intelligence agencies infiltrated many seasoned agents and spies who, as rule, had been trained for specific operations in the U.S.S.R. In 1939 through 1941 alone, over 2,500 Japanese agents¹ were apprehended or exposed and nearly 10,000 border trespassers were captured² in border cities and districts of the Soviet Far East.

Difficult though the operational situation was, Soviet state security agencies launched a series of unprecedented moves and undertook administrative measures to stop subversive operations by Japanese intelligence that had already earned the reputation of one of the strongest in Northeast Asia. The Soviet government was pressured by the country's Interior Commissariat into closing a majority of Japanese consulates and ordering their staffs out of the U.S.S.R. At its meeting on February 9, 1938, the Political Bureau of the Communist Party's Central Committee resolved to ask the militarist power's rulers to keep their consulates in Vladivostok and Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky and one on Sakhalin Island (where they were given a choice between Aleksandrovsk and Okha) only.³ These measures helped reduce significantly the Japanese missions' opportunities for engaging in legal intelligence gathering.⁴

Still, the undersurface showdown between the U.S.S.R. and Japan, including provocations on the border, intensified. The situation was the tensest in Primorie Territory, an area of responsibility of the local special services, that received very close attention from Japanese intelligence in prewar years. In 1940, operatives of the Third (counterintelligence) Division of the Primorie State Security Section, Interior

Commissariat Department, carried out an unparalleled operation code-named Agents Provocateurs, later nicknamed the Far Eastern Trust.

Its successful completion was preceded by a lengthy and complicated operational game that ended with infiltration of 56 agents, including Li Hai Cheng, a skillful Japanese intelligence professional,⁵ into Soviet territory. A book of Soviet secret agents' reminiscences published in 1977 contained excerpts of the evidence given by Togama Satoshi, a Japanese intelligence officer captured in August 1945, who said that 14 agents of the 56 infiltrated into the U.S.S.R. had crossed the border back.⁶ Researchers are yet to find out why and for which purpose that small group returned from the U.S.S.R. because many details of that operation are still locked in departmental archives.

According to the Primorie Section of the Interior Commissariat, Li Hai Cheng was "chief of the counterrevolutionary Shinkoto espionage organization, a long-serving Korean provocateur, and counsel to the Japanese General Staff."⁷ A native of Korea, he began collaborating with the Japanese General Staff in 1935 by fulfilling intelligence missions in the interests of the militarist power's military and political rulers.

Li urged on his Japanese colleagues the idea of establishing a Korean state patterned on Manchukuo on the territory of Soviet East Siberia and Primorie. Given the nod, Li threw himself into subversive operations against the Korean liberation movement and the U.S.S.R. He started with setting up a Japanese intelligence station in Korea that operated under the cover of the "Sinhundong [Resurging East] communist organization" fighting for Korea's national independence against the Japanese.⁸ In this way, the Second (intelligence) Section of the Japanese General Staff, with Li Hai Cheng as section chief, wanted to stage a show of an underground Korean communist organization operating on the occupied territories of Manchuria and Korea for the Soviet special services and representatives of Comintern's International Relations Section.⁹ As Soviet state security agents were to discover sometime later, Li Hai Cheng and representatives of Japan's General Staff and the Black Dragon Society¹⁰ wanted to establish their own sabotage center in the Soviet Far East and to open a channel for legal infiltration of graduates of an intelligence school set up exclusively for this purpose in Xinjing in late 1938. The plan was approved by the General Staff and endorsed by the Japanese government.

With support from the Kwangtung Army headquarters, Li Hai Cheng set to playing out his scenario by running intelligence courses that were given to over 50 people. The trainees were given practice in shooting, bomb throwing, photography, and radio operation, taught to handle explosives and do cryptography, were familiarized, on mockups and from posters, with Soviet military equipment, learned to recognize arms and branches of the service, ranks, and symbols on Soviet staff maps, and so on.¹¹

When Li's trainees turned up on Soviet soil, they had a common cover story: "We have come to the U.S.S.R. to receive military and political education so as, upon return to Korea, to carry on revolutionary agitation for the liberation of the Korean people."¹² It was all mostly true because Sinhundong comprised both Korean agents of the Japanese intelligence service and members of the Korean Youth League and Communist Party unaware of the true objectives of their organization. Many of them had been locked away in Japanese prisons and had their spirit broken. Li Hai Cheng calculated, therefore, that those people's revolutionary past would make their cover stories sound convincing and their real intentions impossible to be unraveled by Soviet counterintelligence agents.¹³

However, the plans to have an underground of saboteurs and terrorists deep in Soviet rear in the event of war between Japan and the U.S.S.R., infiltrate agents into the Red Army, collect intelligence, and force the Russians to supply weapons were not fated to come off because the principal actors of that operations were lured in across the border. On July 10, 1940, Li Hai Cheng and Kim Den San (also known as Kim Yong Sung and Kim Yong Sang in different sources – Author), accompanied by interpreter Kwan Hwan Sek and a bodyguard crossed the Soviet border at seaside Poltavka community, where they were surprised by Soviet border guards.¹⁴ The Soviet special service agents outsmarted Li Hai Cheng and succeeded in having his other agents who had finished the Xinjing intelligence school and were fulfilling the Japanese intelligence service's assignments, still formally remaining Sinhundong's members, cross into Soviet territory. All the participants in Operation Provocateurs were arrested and brought to trial. Li Hai Cheng, who had been taken to the Butyrka Prison in Moscow, died of heart failure on April 16, 1941, after he had gone on a hunger strike.¹⁵

As investigation in this case went on, a Korean suspect, Kim Yong Sung, persisted in offering his services to Soviet counterintelligence agents. He said under questioning one day that he knew about the defection of Genrikh Lyushkov, former chief of the Far Eastern Section of the Interior Commissariat, to Manchuria and spoke about plans he had thought up to abduct the fugitive special service officer from Tokyo where he had been relocated by the Japanese special services.

Much has been written about the former chief of the Far Eastern Section of the Interior Commissariat.¹⁶ Exercising his powers of superior, he misled K.Ye. Grebennik, chief of the 59th (Posyet) Border Guard Unit, and K.N. Strelkov, deputy chief of the Foreign Department, State Security Branch of the Far Eastern Section, Interior Commissariat, about the purpose of his late visit to the border in the night of June 12 to 13, 1938, crossed over to Manchuria and surrendered to the Japanese occupation authorities.¹⁷

The Japanese counterintelligence chiefs called his desertion a “defection of the century.” The phrase suggested the defector's high position in the Soviet hierarchy and the importance of official secrets he took along with him. Lyushkov gave away information about the dispositions and strength of the Soviet forces and construction of defenses in the Far East and Siberia to the Japanese intelligence, and revealed military radio codes and also some of the Interior Commissariat's intelligence stations in the region. Lyushkov wrote in his booklet “Why the Flight from the U.S.S.R.?” published in Shanghai in 1939 that “...Stalin had, in the Far East alone, an army 270,000 strong or approximately 20 infantry divisions. Add to this the GPU units, and you will have nearly 400,000 Red Army soldiers stationed on the territory between Lake Baikal's eastern shore and the Far Eastern border, some 2,000 fighter planes on the border and 90 submarines near Vladivostok.”¹⁸ Lyushkov's betrayal of “very valuable data”¹⁹ to the Japanese is confirmed in other documentary sources as well. Still, contemporary historians have not come yet to a consensus on the measure of treachery committed by G.S. Lyushkov, a State Security Commissar 3rd Grade. Some researchers suggest that Lyushkov gave the Japanese just as much information as was enough to receive political asylum,²⁰ if even for a time. American researcher I. Kuksin, though, holds, on the basis of American and Japanese archive records, that “in the history of numerous defections and

betrayals by Soviet security service employees, Genrikh Lyushkov did the greatest harm to the U.S.S.R.”²¹

On September 9 to 11, 1940, Kim Yong Sung laid out three plans for Lyushkov’s abduction before the investigators. Yet another one followed on September 12. Under the first plan, the operation was to be staged near the Manchurian or Korean border with the U.S.S.R. The second plan was to snatch Lyushkov up from Tokyo. Kim Yong Sung thought the third plan the easiest – killing the former commissar. “...Tracking him down at home or on the street, all depends on the circumstances. In short, Lyushkov’s abduction plans 1 and 2 can easily be used here. If we manage to take him out of Tokyo, we’ll have to use a motorboat...”²² In another option of the third plan, Kim Yong Sung suggested killing Lyushkov in Tokyo as well, in a house prepared in advance.

Under the fourth plan, a commando force was to be sent to snatch out Lyushkov.²³ This option called for Kim Yong Sung to come to Tokyo, rent a private apartment, make friends with someone, and start gathering information about the target unobtrusively. To proceed with his plan, Kim was to marry a Japanese woman (rent a temporary wife for 200 to 300 yen a month). He said there were plenty of shrewd and intelligent girls of this sort in Tokyo. Taking up residence somewhere near Lyushkov’s place, he wanted his wife, after she must have become friends with Lyushkov’s wife, to help them to move in on Lyushkov.²⁴ It only remained to think up a pretext to arrest him, hire a plane for five or six, or a motorboat, and speed on to the U.S.S.R.²⁵

Naturally enough, the Soviet secret service agents shrugged off Kim’s naïve plans of snatching a man who was watched and guarded closely by Japan’s special services. Major M.M. Gvishiani, Senior Grade, chief of the Interior Commissariat’s Primorie Section, wrote across one of Kim Yong Sung’s countless letters on October 3, 1940, “...Still daydreaming. Bring him in for questioning.”²⁶ In his desperate efforts to hang on to life, the prisoner was spinning new fantasies of bringing G.S. Lyushkov back to the U.S.S.R. Long before they were fed Kim Yong Sung’s fantasies, Soviet secret service and state security operatives had been working on their own plans of bringing G.S. Lyushkov back to the U.S.S.R.

Most historians believe that the former chief of the Interior Commissariat’s Far Eastern Section was shot by the Japanese themselves on August 19, 1945 (with a second shot after the first failed to put him dead – Author)²⁷ as the Soviet forces were rapidly overrunning Manchuria. That certainly meant that the Soviet special service’s plans had not been put into life. There is no straight answer to the question “why” in the documents declassified so far. It can be assumed that the Soviet intelligence service was aware of how far the defector had been hidden away by the Japanese and had no chances of capturing him. In the late 1930s, the special service was shaken up thoroughly by the purges that undercut its potential. Operation Provocateurs initiated in 1938 required the Primorie special service to give it enormous efforts, and it made little sense to launch yet another risky game (even by standards of the Interior Ministry’s central staff operatives in Moscow), without the slightest hope of retrieving the secrets Lyushkov had betrayed to the Japanese. One more final reason why the Soviet special services were restrained in their desire to set out scouring for the traitor was that they had a far more important task on hand – putting in their all into cooling tensions fanned by Japan on Soviet Far Eastern borders.

NOTES:

1. A.I. Kolpakidi, Entsiklopediya sekretnykh sluzhb Rossii [An Encyclopedia of Russian Secret Services], Moscow, 2004, p. 312.
2. A.M. Pashkov, Za kray rodnoy – Dal’nevostochniy: O deyatel’nosti Kommunisticheskoy partii i Sovetskogo pravitel’sтва po organizatsii i usileniyu okhrany Gosudarstvennoy granitsy SSSR na Dal’nem Vostoke (1920-1941 gg.) [For the Fatherland – in the Far East: Activities of the Communist Party and Soviet Government to Organize and Upgrade Guard Service on the State Border of the U.S.S.R. in the Far East (1920-1941)], Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, 1985, p. 122.
3. Russian State Archives of Sociopolitical History, Folio 17, List 162, Folder 22, Page 120.
4. Lubyanka: Iz istoriyi otechestvennoy kontrrazvedki [Lubyanka: A History of National Counterintelligence], Moscow, 2007, p. 208.
5. A.M. Buyakov, Organy gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti Primoriya v litsakh, 1923-2003 gg.: Ocherki. Biogr. Sprav. [Personalities of State Security Bodies in Primorie, 1923-2003: Stories, Biographies, References], Vladivostok, 2003, p. 111.
6. Lyod i plamen’ [Ice and Flame], Vladivostok, 1977, p. 216.
7. Archives of the Khabarovsk Territorial Section of the Russian Federal Security Service, Folio 65, Portfolio No. 1526, Page 66.
8. A.M. Buyakov, op. cit., p. 113.
9. Lubyanka ..., p. 218; A.M. Buyakov, op. cit., p. 114.
10. Black Dragon Society (Kokuryukai in Japanese) was an ultranationalist reactionary organization active in Japan between 1901 and 1946. Black Dragon is the Chinese and Japanese name for the Amur River. Espionage to harm Russia and, in the 1920s through 1930s, the U.S.S.R. was one of the principal objectives of the Black Dragon Society. Kokuryukai was linked closely to Japan’s military and political leaders and monopolist bourgeoisie. It arose as an anti-Russian society. A far-flung network of organizations that were set up in many Asian countries was used for intelligence gathering, sabotage, and propaganda of Pan-Asianism, which Kokuryukai had written on its banners. In Japan itself, Kokuryukai spread extreme chauvinism and fought against progressive and democratic forces. Kokuryukai’s traditions are today continued by Kokuryu kura-bu (Black Dragon Club) established in 1961.
11. Lyod i plamen’, p. 209.
12. Archives of the Khabarovsk Territorial Section of the Russian Federal Security Service, Folio 65, Portfolio No. 1526, Page 79.
13. Trud, September 7, 2000.
14. Lyod i plamen’, p. 214.
15. A.M. Buyakov, op. cit., p. 114.
16. S. Nikolayev, “Vystrely v spinu [Shots in the Back],” Dal’niy Vostok, Nos. 2 and 3, 1991; S. Nikolayev, “Komissar, perebezhchik, predatel’ [Commissar, Turncoat, Traitor],” Trud, August 5, 1990; A.V. Tryokhsvyatskiy, “Delo Lyushkova [The Lyushkov Case],” Rossiya i ATR, No. 1, 1998; A.M. Buyakov, A.V. Polutov, “Dal’nevostochniy Gess i gosudarstvo-prizrak [The Far Eastern Hess and a Ghost State],” Dal’nevostochnaya panorama, Vladivostok, 1991; M.A. Tumshis, A.S. Papchinsky, “Ya schastliv, chto prinadlezhu k chislu rabotnikov karatel’nykh

- organov ...,” ili Istinnye prichiny pobega chekista Lyushkova za kordon [I’m Happy to be a Member of the Punitive Bodies...,” or The True Reasons for Cheka Officer Lyushkov’s Defection],” *Novyi chasovoy*, Nos. 6-7, 1998; M.A. Tumshis, A.S. Papchinsky, 1937. *Bol’shaya chistka. NKVD protiv Cheka [1937. The Great Purge. The NKVD v. Cheka]*, Moscow, 2009; M.A. Tumshis, A.S. Papchinsky, “Pochemu Lyushkov bezhal za kordon [Why Lyushkov Defected],” *Rossiya i ATR*, No. 1, 2000; N.S. Cherushev, *Udar po svoym. Krasnaya armiya, 1938-1941 gg. [Hitting the Friendly. The Red Army, 1938-1941]*, Moscow, 2003; Na zashchite Otechestva: Iz istoriyi Upravleniya FSB RF: Vospominaniya sotrudnikov organov gosbezopasnosti Khabarovskogo kraja v ocherkakh, dokumentakh, rasskazakh i fotografiyakh [Defending the Fatherland: A History of a Section of the Russian Federation’s Federal Security Service: Reminiscences of State Security Operatives in Khabarovsk Territory in Stories, Documents, Accounts, and Photographs], Authored and compiled by V.V. Bogaichuk, Khabarovsk, 2001; B.A. Starkov, *Dela i lyudi stalinskogo vremeni [Deeds and People of Sta-lin’s Time]*, St. Petersburg, 1995; E. Hiyama, “Yaponskiye plany pokusheniya na Stalina [Japan’s Plans to Assassinate Stalin],” *Problemy Dal’nego Vostoka*, Nos. 3-5, 1990; Nos. 3-7, 1991; O.V. Khlevnyuk, 1937: *Stalin, NKVD, sovetskoye obshchestvo [1937: Stalin, the NKVD, Soviet Society]*, Moscow, 1992; A.S. Sutorin, *Delo krayevogo masshtaba [A Territorial-Scale Affair]*, Khabarovsk, 1991; V.S. Mil’bakh, *Osobaya Krasnoznamyonnaya Dal’nevostochnaya armiya (Krasnoznamyonnyi Dal’nevostochnyi front). Politicheskiye represssii komandno-nachal’stvuyushchego sostava, 1937-1938 gg. [Special Red Banner Far Eastern Army (Red Banner Far Eastern Front). Political Repressions Against Commanders and Chiefs, 1937-1938]*, St. Petersburg, 2007; L.A. Naumov, *Stalin i NKVD [Stalin and the NKVD]*, Moscow, 2007; I. Kuksin, “Pobeg stoletiya [Defection of the Century],” *Vestnik, U.S.*, August 17, 1999; J. Stephan, “Tayna nochnogo pobega [Mystery of a Nighttime Defection],” *Problemy Dal’nego Vostoka*, No. 6, 1990, etc.
17. “Khotelos’ by vsekh poimyonno nazvat’ [I Wish I Could Give Everybody by their Names],” *A Martyrology Book, Komsomolsk on Amur*, Vol. 2, 1998, p. 16.
 18. State Archives of Khabarovsk Territory, National Security Service, Inv. 6816, “Pochemu begut iz SSSR? [Why the Flight from the U.S.S.R.?], Shanghai, 1939, p. 8.
 19. E. Hiyama, “Yaponskiye plany pokusheniya na Stalina [Japan’s Plans to Assassinate Sta-lin],” *Problemy Dal’nego Vostoka*, No. 4, 1990, p. 135.
 20. See: A.M. Buyakov, A.V. Polutov, “Dal’nevostochnyi Gess i gosudarstvo-prizrak [The Far Eastern Hess and a Ghost State],” *Dal’nevostochnaya panorama, Vladivostok*, 1991; *Delo vzyato iz arkhiva... [A Case from the Archives]*, Collection of Accounts from the History of State Security Bodies in Kamchatka, Vladivostok, 2008.
 21. I. Kuksin, “Pobeg stoletiya [Defection of the Century],” *Vestnik, U.S.*, August 17, 1999 – <http://www.vestnik.com/win/>; accessed November 13, 2010.
 22. TsA FSB Rossii [Central Archives of Russia’s Federal Security Service], Folio 3, List 7, Portfolio No. 399, Page 191.
 23. *Ibid.*, p. 193.

24. Ibid., p. 194.
25. Ibid., p. 197, backside.
26. Ibid., p. 193.
27. Na zashchite Otechestva [Defending the Fatherland], Khabarovsk, 2001, p. 101.