19-56-4

TITLE: Soviet Comint And The Civil War, 1918-1921

AUTHOR: Thomas R. Hammant

VOLUME: 23 ISSUE: Summer YEAR: 1979

SOVIET COMINT AND THE CIVIL WAR, 1918-1921*

Thomas R. Hammant

Translator's note: The following is a translation of the article "The Organization and Combat Use of Radio Intelligence During the Civil War," by Col. Yu. Ural'skij in *Voenno-istoricheskij zhurnal* (Journal of Military History), Moscow, No. 11, 1972. The article gives a rare glimpse into the early operations of Soviet Comint and the importance that the top leadership gave to it from the very beginning of the Soviet regime. Footnotes citing Soviet archival records have been eliminated, and a few explanatory footnotes, enclosed in brackets, have been added.

When setting up control agencies, units, and subdivisions of the communications troops of the Red Army that was being created to defend the Soviet authority, the Revvoensovet [Revolutionary Military Council] of the Republic (RSVR)[1] attached great importance to the use of radio as a means of communication among the troops and to its application in the interests of intelligence.[2]

During the period of the civil war, the radio situation that had developed on all fronts favored the organization of radio intelligence by the Red Army, since the combat actions encompassed a large territory of Soviet Russia and were of a mobile nature. The interventionists and White Guardists made rather broad communications use of fixed and mobile (field) radio sets, which were supplied to the headquarters of their armies, corps, and divisions, as well as to naval vessels and merchant ships that were carrying troops, arms, ammunition, and other military supplies to the White Armies of the Entente.[3] Attached to the headquarters of Kolchak, Denikin, and Wrangel were military-diplomatic missions from the Entente countries with a staff of military advisors who had radio sets at their disposal. They maintained contact with London, Paris, Warsaw, Athens, Constantinople, and other cities.

The interventionists and the internal counter-revolutionaries carried out radio communications in the range of 250-3500 meters, with wave lengths from 290 to 740 meters being used for field communications. The White Guardists had at their disposal the radio sets of the former Russian Army, as well as American, British, and French equipment that had been supplied by the Entente. For example, Kolchak's

*For previous articles on the origins of Russian communications intelligence, see works by the same author in *Studies* Summer 1977 XXI/2, p. 21, and Summer 1978 XXII/2, p. 29. This article is adapted from the September 1978 issue of CRYPTOLOG.

[1] [The RSVR was set up on 2 September 1918 to unify all military control at the fronts and in the rear during the civil war period.]

[2] Radio intelligence had sprung up and had received its organizational formulation during World War I.

[3] [It appears that the Soviet use of the term "Entente" includes all the non-Russian interventionist forces, rather than just the World War I Allies.]

headquarters in Omsk had a radio set with a power of 30 kilowatts, which was used to set up communications along the lines: Omsk-Arkhangel'sk-London and Omsk-Nikolaev-Constantinople-Paris. The fixed radio sets had a power of 3-30 kilowatts, and the field and shipboard radio sets, respectively, 0.5 and 3 kilowatts; this made it possible, on medium and long waves, to cover rather considerable distances either directly or by way of intermediate radio sets. At the same time this allowed radio intelligence to monitor the enemy's radio transmissions from a considerable distance.

There was almost no observance of communications security or discipline among the White forces.[4] Operational summaries concerning combat operations at the fronts, and sometimes even combat orders, were transmitted by radio in the clear. Sometimes the addresses in the radio messages were not encrypted, for example: "Urgent. Operational [summary] No. 3. Via Krinichnaya by radio to General Shkuro. . ." The radio data [callsigns, frequencies, etc.] of field radio sets were not changed for long periods of time. It was possible to determine who the radio sets belonged to by their call-signs, for example: PGW—poezd generala Wrangelya (General Wrangel's train); ALM—cruiser *Al*maz; ZhA—destroyer *Zha*rkij; ShI—submarine *Shi*pka; GRV—*Gur'ev*; etc. The grouping of enemy troops and the department and movements of headquarters could be learned from radio messages; from radio direction-finding information, from conversations in the clear between officials, or, indirectly, when the field radio set ceased operating and then started broadcasting again, but with reduced audibility.

Thus, the White and interventionist radio communications were a priceless source of information for the Red Army radio intelligence service concerning the enemy.

When, in the course of the civil war, Soviet Russia proved to be surrounded by a fiery ring of fronts, telegraphic communication with the Western European countries was cut off, and the delivery of foreign newspapers and magazines stopped, there was a sharp limitation in the amount of incoming information concerning international life. However, as during the years of World War I, the international radio stations (Paris, Lyon, Nauen, Carnarvon, Corsi, Rome) continued to transmit regularly (within the wave-length band of 600 to 1500 meters) newspaper reports concerning the international and military situation. The reports submitted by the foreign correspondents accredited to the headquarters of the White armies traveled along these channels. All this was of interest and enabled the RSVR, and the Red Army headquarters and troops, to intercept that information and to be informed concerning the international and military events, and to obtain valuable information about the enemy.

For the Petrograd Telegraph Agency (PTA) and subsequently the Russian Telegraph Agency (ROSTA), the interception of foreign reports was carried out at the Moscow, Tver', and Tsarskoe Selo radio stations, which had been constructed in 1914 for the purpose of linking the Russian Army's General Staff with the frontline staffs and with the Allies. In April 1918 these and other radio stations in the War Department were transferred, by decree of the Council of People's Commissars, to the People's Commissariat for Mail and Telegraph. In order to increase the amount of information, in the facilities occupied by ROSTA, its own radio station was set up in

[4] [It also appears that the Soviets had a problem in maintaining communications security as well, especially during the Red Army's offensive against Poland in the Civil War. According to a former Colonel of the Polish Army General Staff, Polish Comint units kept the General Staff constantly informed on the movements and intentions of the Red Army. See M. Stezhinskij, *Radiotelegraf Kak Sredstvo Razvedki* (Radiotelegraph as a Source of Intelligence) (Translated from the Polish), Moscow, Voenizdat., 1932, pp. 20-21, cited in Marshal I.T. Peresypkin, *Voennaya Radiosvyaz'* (Military Radio Communications), Moscow, Voenizdat., 1962.]

1919; that radio station received reports from the correspondents at the civil war fronts, and also intercepted foreign telegrams. They were used in *Pravda* and *Izvestiya*, which regularly printed surveys of military operations at the front, and, in addition, provided special "pages for the Red Army man." A similar station was located at the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs.

The organization of a radio intelligence service in the Army dates from the beginning of 1919. However, attempts to carry out radio intelligence and to intercept enemy radio messages had been undertaken earlier by Red Army units. For example, during the second half of 1918, the interception of foreign reports was organized at radio stations 504, 600, 601, and 602 of the Western Sector of the screen detachments which had been intended for operational communications. This was carried out by radiotelegraph operators who were familiar with radio intelligence from having served in the old Russian army. During the period from July to October 1918, they intercepted 1576 radio messages. In July 1918, radio station 504 carried out surveillance and interception of the radio messages from the field radio stations of the Kransnov troops which were operating in the Don area. The necessity of organizing not only radio intelligence, but also radio counterintelligence, was recognized by the front headquarters. For example, the Board for the Administration of the Military Telegraph Communications of the Northern Front, in a report to the military commissar of the Northern Front in November 1918, noted, ". . . in order to detect and to provide warnings concerning the possible operation of enemy radio stations in the rear of our armies, and also in order to obtain information concerning the location and operation of radio stations attached to enemy military units, it is necessary to set up radio direction-finding stations and to organize radio monitoring on the front. . . ."

The formation of radio intelligence subdivisions began in January 1919. Every front and army headquarters was supposed to have one intercept station (*priemo-informatsionnaya stantsiya*) and a radio direction-finding station. The former was intended for the reception of ROSTA summaries beginning with the words "to all Soviet deputies, to all editorial offices, to all propaganda points," and for the interception of foreign newspaper reports and radio messages transmitted by the enemy's field radio sets. It was manned by eight persons and had one or two radio receivers with a vacuum-tube amplifier. The latter was supposed to detect enemy radio stations and get bearings on them. The staff at the radio direction-finding station consisted of 19 persons. In January 1919, for the purpose of supporting the Field Staff of the RVSR with intelligence information, a radio intercept station manned by 22 persons was set up at Serpukhovo.

Radio intelligence tasks were frequently assigned also to the field radio stations of troop staffs. But that was caused by an acute shortage of radio facilities and radiotelegraph operators working in the intelligence field.

The radio apparatus used for radio intelligence consisted of old models and was produced both by foreign companies and in the shops of the Navy Department. For the most part, they were detection receivers with a wave length range of 240 to 5100 meters. With the aid of changeable circuits, the limit of the range was extended to 15,000 meters. In order to increase the sensitivity at the radio receivers, three-cascade amplifiers operating on radio tubes were used.

Because of the shortage of radio direction-finding stations, an engineer at the Communications Directorate of the Red Army, V. I. Bazhenov, invented a special antenna. This antenna made it possible to adapt for purposes of direction-finding the ordinary field radio sets.[5]

[5] See *Instruktsiya po prisposobleniyu polevykh radiostantsij k radiopelengovaniyu po sposobu inzhenera Bazhenova* (Instruction Manual for Adapting Field Radio Sets to Radio Direction-Finding by Engineer Bazhenov's Method), Moscow, 1922.

Organizationally speaking, the radio intercept and radio direction-finding stations were part of the radiotelegraph battalions of fronts and armies.

The over-all management of the radio intelligence service was carried out by the radio department of the Communications Directorate of the Red Army, and, at the front, by radio-communications and radio-intelligence sections of the communications directorates of the fronts and armies. The sections summarized the radio-intercept data, and drew up informational documents—daily radio-intelligence summaries and diagrams showing enemy radio communications as they had reconstructed it. These materials were intended for the Field Headquarters of the RSVR and for the intelligence sections of the appropriate staffs. The most important information was immediately transmitted by telegraph to the Field Headquarters of the RSVR and to other interested headquarters.

It should, however, be noted that the possibility of organizing and making combat use of Red Army radio intelligence at the fronts was limited because of the shortage of radio equipment and specialists. As a result of this circumstance, on all fronts except the Caucasian Front it was impossible to carry out completely the radio direction-finding of enemy radio sets.

During the civil war years, the radio-intercept stations intercepted a large quantity of radio reports issued by foreign telegraph agencies. During 1919-1921, approximately 1000 intelligence summaries were issued solely on the basis of materials intercepted by just one radio station, attached to the RSVR (translated from English, French, German, and Italian). Summaries of radio-intercept materials from the foreign press were reported to V. I. Lenin. They were also regularly provided to members of the RSVR, People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs G. V. Chicherin, the Moscow Oblast' Committee of the RKP(b), the Cheka,[6] ROSTA, and the directorates and departments of the RSVR Field Headquarters on matters pertaining to their areas of responsibility.

The communiques transmitted by foreign radio stations contained important political, economic, and military information. For example, a radio message intercepted early in 1919 revealed Kolchak's over-all strategic plan for the 1919 spring offensive. In a statement made by Kolchak in Omsk, it was started, "We will attempt to establish contact with Arkhangel'sk, and as soon as we succeed in occupying a line on the Volga, we shall establish contact with the south and General Denikin, after which we will change over to the offensive and advance on Moscow. Seizing Moscow is our primary goal. . . ."

In his article "How the Bourgeoisie Uses Renegades," V. I. Lenin emphasized the value of foreign radio communiques. "Our radio stations," he wrote, "intercept radio messages from Carnarvon (England), Paris, and other European centers. Paris is now the center of the worldwide alliance of imperialists and, therefore, its radio messages are frequently of particular interest."[7]

The radio waves were the first to carry across the front line the information that the Entente was preparing a new campaign against Soviet Russia (the chief reliance being placed on bourgeois Poland and Wrangel).

During the period of Red Army combat operations against Kolchak in 1918-1919, the radio intelligence service on the Eastern Front successfully monitored the radio communications of Kolchak's Siberian, Western, and Urals White Cossack armies, as well as White Guard radio stations in the Astrakhan, Gur'ev, Krasnovodsk, and Baku

[6] [Secret police; predecessor of KGB.]

[7] V. I. Lenin, *Poln. sobr. soch.* (Complete Collected Works), Vol. 39, p. 182.

areas. Kolchak's radio contact with the Entente was also established. Radio messages and radio conversations in the clear made it possible to establish the location of the headquarters of Kolchak, Denikin, the Caspian Front, the Caucasian and Don Armies, the Astrakhan Detachment, and the group of forces in the Northern Caucasus.

In the summer of 1919, in combat engagements against the White Cossack Urals Army, the enemy's radio communications were monitored not only by the radio-intercept stations at the headquarters of the Turkestan Front and the I and IV Armies, but also by radio station 529 at the headquarters of the 3rd Cavalry Division, 596 at the 24th Rifle Division, and 530 at the 25th Rifle Division.

On the Southern and Southeastern Fronts in 1919, radio stations 504, 522, 518, and others monitored the field radio stations of Denikin's army and the fixed stations situated on the coast of the Black Sea (Nikolaev, Odessa, Sevastopol). On the basis of radio messages and radio conversations in the clear, the radio intelligence service on the Southern Front in May 1919 succeeded in revealing rather precisely a grouping of Denikin troops in the south and in noting a concentration of the Volunteer Army in the Azov-Donetsk sector, the III Don Army in the Lugansk sector, the II Don Army on the Northern Donets, the I Don Army to the south of the Don, in the Tsaritsyn sector, and General Wrangel's Caucasian Army in the Northern Caucasus, and also succeeded in establishing the deployment of many of the White Guard troop headquarters.

On 5 October 1919 a radio intercept station at the IX Army headquarters intercepted and decrypted radiogram 04118, which contained a combat order issued by the Commander of the Voronezh Group, General-Lieutenant Shkuro. The order assigned tasks to the units of Shkuro's cavalry corps after its seizure of Voronezh. The information received was immediately transmitted to the headquarters of the Southeastern Front.

The radio intelligence service of the Red Army operated more successfully against Wrangel in the concluding phase of the civil war. Factors that contributed to this were the experience that had been accumulated in the combat use of radio facilities for purposes of intelligence, and the improvement in the supplying of technical equipment to radio battalions.

During the Red Army's combat actions against the Wrangel forces, many of the intercepted radio messages dealt with enemy groupings, the redeployment of headquarters, and the headlong flight of the White Guardists from the Crimea. For example, in one radio intelligence summary issued by the headquarters of the Southern Front it was indicated, "From radio messages intercepted by the chief front [station] from radio stations 6ZhT, 7ZY, and 5PY, one can make the following conclusion: radio station 5PY, attached to the 2nd Don Cavalry Division, approximately between 29 September and 1 October, was transferred, together with the division, to the area to the north of Volkovakha; previously that radio station had been in the Aleksandrovka area." The data obtained was subsequently confirmed by tactical reconnaissance.

Beginning on 8 August 1920 the radio stations on the Caucasian Front noted an exceptionally large amount of radio traffic in the Sea of Azov area. The possibility of a landing operation was raised. And, indeed, on 14 August, under the command of General Ulagay, a landing was made in the Akhtarsk area. Front-line radio intelligence continuously monitored the enemy's radio communications, intercepting radio messages and official conversations. The information thus received contributed to the defeat of this landing.

On 16 October a radio intercept station of the Caucasian Front headquarters intercepted an order from the Commander of the II Army, General Abramov, which

had been sent in the clear. That order concerned the changeover on 17 October to the offensive against the Red Army units on the Kakhovka bridgehead. Knowledge of the enemy's plan of operations helped the headquarters of the Southern Front—to whom the intercepted White order was forwarded—to destroy the Wrangel forces at Kakhovka.

In the final stage of the Red Army's combat actions in the fight for the Crimea, the White Guardists did not have enough time to encrypt their combat documents, and the radio traffic was sent in the clear. The radio messages contained information concerning the withdrawal of units, their evacuation from the Crimea. For example, changes in the enemy's groupings were mentioned in the 25 October 1920 radio-intelligence summary issued by the Southern Front: ". . . radio station 0Ch, attached to I Army headquarters, was removed, for transfer to a new location. Apparently the enemy has begun evacuating Melitopol. Radio station 8IT, which serves the headquarters of the troops operating in the Nikolaev area, also has been removed for transfer to a new location. During the past few days we have observed almost no activity by the enemy's field radio stations. One can assume that the headquarters of the divisions and corps to which the field stations are attached are being redeployed."

Radio communications also provided information about the course of the evacuation of Wrangel's troops from the Crimea. For example, General Kutepov reported to the fleet commander that he had 6500 officers and men on board a steamship, and there was absolutely no water or bread. He also reported that "the LAZAR, which was being towed by it," had sunk as a result of a leak. The KRONSHTADT reported to Constantinople that it had absolutely no coal or food supplies, it had 5000 passengers on board, and was towing the ZVONKIJ.

On the basis of the radio intercept information, the Commander of the Southern Front, M. V. Frunze, in order dated 15 November 1920, demanded the "development of the most energetic efforts on the part of submarines and the liquidation of the enemy's attempts to use the sea to escape the blows being dealt by our armies."[*]

Thus, it follows from what has been stated that during the years of the civil war the Red Army's radio facilities were used successfully for intelligence purposes against the enemy.

At a conference of front-level chiefs of communications troops that was held in 1921, the activities of radio intelligence were rated highly. The radio intelligence service that had been created in our Armed Forces "completely justified its purpose and provided the Red Army with valuable material concerning the enemy, thus helping the Red Army to achieve victory." The role and importance of communications troops, including the role and importance of the radio facilities, were also given their proper credit by the Revolutionary Military Council of the Republic, which, in recognition of the valorous and extremely valuable work for the benefit of Soviet Russia, expressed its appreciation to the entire complement of commissars, commanders, and Red Army men in the Red Army communications troops.

The combat experience of using radio equipment for intelligence purposes during the years of the civil war was used for the further development of the radio intelligence service in the Red Army.

[*] *M. V. Frunze na frontakh grazhdanskoj vojny* (M. V. Frunze on the Civil War Fronts). Collection of articles, Moscow, 1941, p. 448. Unfortunately, the submarine forces could not execute this order. The two submarines in the Black Sea—the AG-23 and the AG-24—were not ready for operations in the open sea.