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Dismissing Russian Agents as ‘Disposable’ Misses How Espionage Works

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It is unclear who coined the phrase “disposable agent” in relation to Russia recruiting human intelligence sources (HUMINT), but we need to stop using it. By focusing on supposedly disposable agents, we ignore Russian recruited agents who have not yet been identified, and who are progressing and moving to more complex tasks.

The first time I saw the phrase "disposable agents" being used in relation to Russia was in late 2024. The term has become trendy since then, with even respected organizations like the Royal United Services Institute jumping on the bandwagon.

Calling low-level, untrained Russian agents “disposable” does not align with Russia’s

clandestine recruitment process. The term ignores the historical record about Soviet and Russian intelligence, much of which is openly available, which shows these operations are not new and not disposable. Soviet services never recruited agents with the intention of disposing of them. Allowing agents to get caught is a waste of effort and resources, especially in a sparse recruitment environment. It makes hostile territory even more hostile, as counterintelligence services are alerted to Russian methods.

Soviet services often recruited low-level, untrained agents. However, the intention was to target candidates who could become productive, long-term agents. As agents successfully fulfilled low-level assignments, they received more complicated ones along with clandestine training to fulfill them. Soviet services knew that not all agents would develop to that level. Some would fail. That is part of HUMINT. Nevertheless, they handled them as if they would develop further, and some did.

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Historical examples are numerous.

The U.S. Army Counterintelligence Corps became aware of the Soviet recruitment and repatriation of Japanese POWs and initiated "Project STITCH" to interview them and double some of them back against their Soviet handlers. Among the repatriated POWs were Masaji Shii and Mitsuhashi Masao, whom KGB officer Yuriy Rastvorov handled in the early 1950s. Shii was hired as a linguist for the U.S. Army CIC and became a damaging agent. Mitsuhashi, on the other hand, operated as a U.S. double agent. Both were recruited as POWs, given ideological training and repatriated to Japan. They initially reported by radio, like other repatriated POWs, but as far as the Soviet knew, they developed into productive agents and were handed over to an in-person officer, Rastvorov.

Soviet services recruited German POWs after World War II, like Franz Wesendonk, just as they did Japanese POWs. The Soviets also targeted West Germans as agents, like Horst Pohle, when they traveled to East Germany after the Berlin Wall was built. Some became productive, but others disappeared once they returned to West Germany. Soviet illegals, such as Rupert Sigl and Yevgeniy Runge, were tasked with finding the wayward agents and returning them to productivity. They were never recruited to be disposable.

The KGB recruited hundreds of sabotage agents around the world during the Cold War to help plan sabotage operations targeting Western critical infrastructure and execute the plans in the event of war. Some agents were local criminals who could be bought, while others were employees of the targeted entities. They began as low-level agents who provided simple observations and some progressed into productive agents.

In each of these settings, the counterintelligence environment was hostile to Soviet operations. Today, the environment in Europe is hostile to Russian services due to mass expulsions of embassy staff, arrests of numerous agents and public rhetoric in support of Ukraine.

Operational hostility forced Soviet services to use remote control methods for handling agents. During the Cold War, that meant instructing agents to buy a specific model of radio.

That still applies today, but means using a social media app like Telegram. The technology has changed, but the operational concept is the same.

We are enamored with the supposed newness of Moscow's operations and with finding new labels for them. But with Russia, looking to history is more valuable. Russian services hope low-level agents will progress and handle them that way, just as their Soviet predecessors did. They are not disposable from the outset, even if some get caught. If agents are reused, as was the case with an initial low-level agent, Dylan Earl, they are not "disposable." Thinking of them as "disposable" allows some agents, like Masaji Shii in the 1950s, to develop without being noticed and remain in place for more damaging operations later. Who are those agents today?

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