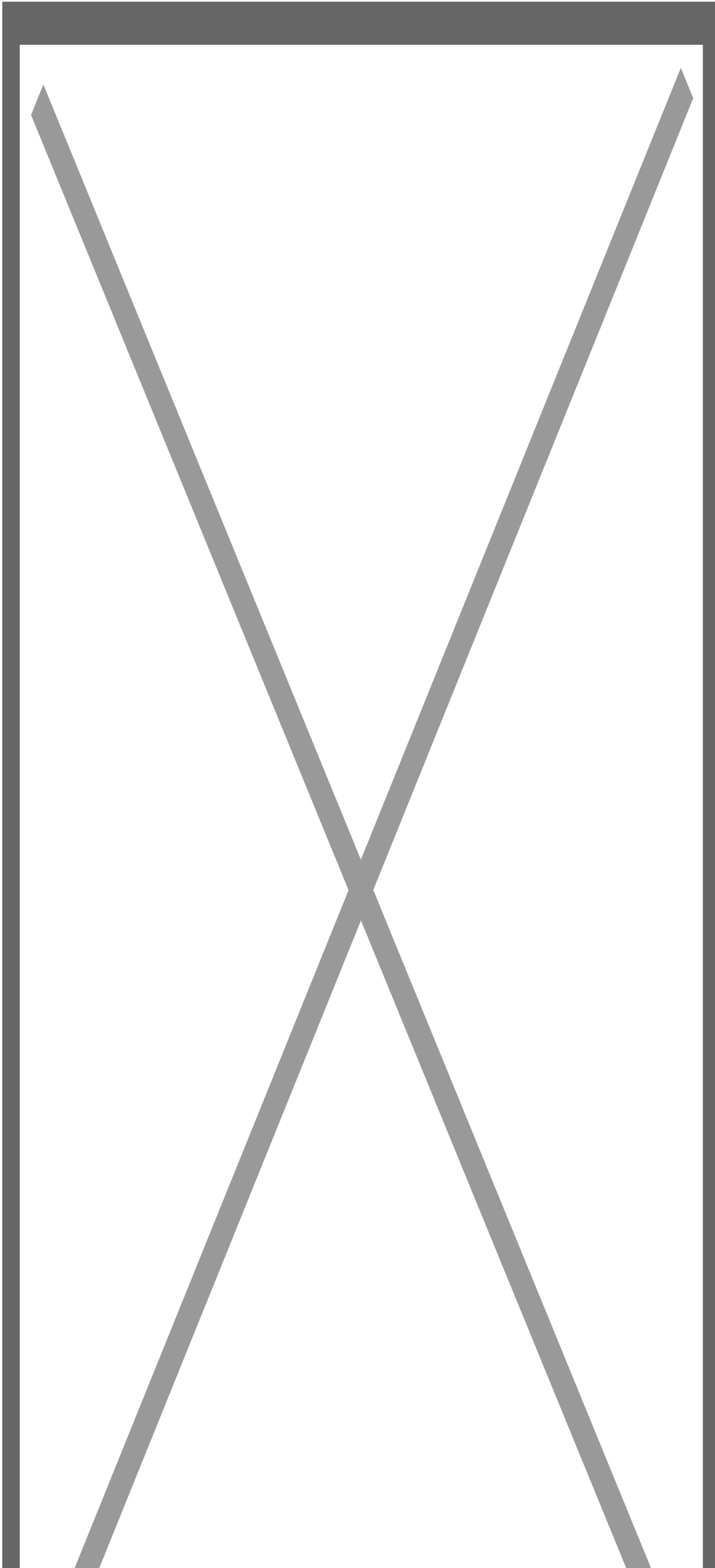


The Great Seal Bug: How the Soviet Union Spied on the US Embassy

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US Representative to the United Nations Henry Cabot Lodge shows Soviet “bug”, 1960, USA

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In 1943, on his return from the Teheran conference, Stalin placed an important task before Beria: at all costs, to penetrate the working office of the U.S. ambassador, Averell Harriman. The ensuing operation, resulting in the successful eavesdropping of the office of the head of the U.S. diplomatic mission in Moscow, became one of the classics of espionage. As the result of this operation, Stalin learned about decisions being decided over there even earlier than did the president of the United States. For eight years, the unique Soviet “bug” literally undermined the heraldic symbol of American freedom – the U.S. coat of arms – outlasting four ambassadors of the United States of America to Moscow.

Diplomatic relations between the USSR and the U.S.A. were established on November 16, 1933. From day one Soviet counterintelligence agents mounted a full-scale effort to penetrate the U.S. Embassy in Moscow.

In 1938, charming agents of the 2nd Department of General Directorate of State Security of the NKVD – in essence, ballerinas from the Bolshoi Theater – managed to establish intimate working relationships with a number of high-ranking American diplomats. Moreover, the vigilance of the U.S. Marines, who guarded the Embassy’s premises, was constantly undermined by the NKVD’s sex-bombs – attractive Russian language instructors. In the course of mass onslaughts on the hearts of Americans greedy for free “strawberry,” the “gardeners” from the NKVD found out that the most protected area in the embassy were the upper floors. There were situated the offices of the political department, of military intelligence officers, cipher clerks, security officers, and, finally, the office of his Excellency the ambassador.

The NKVD’s attempts to eavesdrop on this special zone acquired a frenzied tempo, following information received in September 1941 from a NKVD agent of the 5th Department of the General Directorate of USSR State Security, nicknamed “Sergeant.” According to his report, the American Air Force attaché in Moscow was a German agent, passing on intelligence information about the Soviet Union to the Germans.

On December 17, 1943, Beria reported to the Boss that a microphone of unique design had been developed and successfully tested. However, installation was stalled because of the inaccessibility of the ambassador’s office. Even a big fire organized the day before – with the aid of “the swallows” who had won access to the premises – did not permit the NKVD agents to enter the embassy in the guise of firemen. Security was adamant: “The whole place can burn to the ground, but, in the name of the president of the United States, entrance to any outsiders is denied!”

After listening to what Beria had to say, Stalin reminded him that “there are no such fortresses, which cannot be taken by Bolsheviks.” Then, in his usual familiar, condescending manner, he suddenly asked: “Lavrentiy, did you ever hear of the Trojan horse?” By the Trojan horse Stalin meant – and Beria understood this instantly – the production of a listening device, camouflaged under any object which, being given to Harriman, would remain in his office.

About an hour afterward, two dozen souvenirs made of wood, bone and skin had been delivered to the reception area of the People's Commissar of Internal Affairs' office. Especially prominent was the large shield of a Scythian warrior, made of black alder; 6.6-ft mammoth tusks; "Ericsson" telephone equipment made of ivory, presented to Nicholas II by the Swedish king; and also a 3.3-ft high wastepaper basket made from an elephant foot.

After examining the exhibits, Beria summoned academics Axel Berg and Abram Ioffe for consultation. Under their leadership, a team of highly qualified professionals from the operational and technical NKVD department began the development, production and testing of a unique bug, one hitherto unknown in the annals of international espionage and the acquisition of state secrets from another another state.

This device was a passive listening device: there were neither power supply, nor any electronic elements that could be detected by technology available to the experts of the time. The device resembled a tadpole with a small tail – that is, a 4- to 5-inch antenna. The tadpole part was a diaphragm that could vibrate. From an exterior source the eavesdroppers would beam powerful microwaves pointed at the hidden device, forcing the diaphragm of the "tadpole" to resonate. If someone was speaking in the room, this would alter the resonant frequency of the antenna, which would send back its signal – the conversations in the office – to a receiver, which would be situated out of line with the powerful beam.

This microphone could operate indefinitely. A powerful transmitter sitting in an apartment across the street beamed a strong continuous microwave signal at a distance around 300 meters . Reception, decoding and tape-recording of the slightly altered signals was achieved by a sensitive receiver well out of the path of the beam from the transmitter so that the transmitted and received signals would not be superimposed, thus swamping the sensitive receiver. The entire geometric figure – transmitter, device and receiver were in the form of an isosceles triangle.

Transmitter and receiver were duly installed in two separate apartments on the upper floors of residential buildings, across the street, to the left and right of the U.S. Embassy. The previous tenants were of course evicted. Liberated in this manner the communal apartments were occupied by specialists from the technical-operational department of the NKVD, operating the equipment. On the balconies facing the American Embassy, laundry continued to be hung, as it had been before, and, on Sundays, women (sergeants of the State Security) shook out rugs and blankets – thus, literally blowing dust into the eyes of the embassy's security officers.

The microphone bore the code name the "Chrysostom" ["Golden mouth"]. It should be noted that neither the technical designers nor the specific microphone manufacturers knew the intended target. All they knew is that it served the national security of the USSR.

Called for consultation, the leaders of the technical team were asked to advise on the feasibility of installing "Chrysostom" into one of the exhibits located in the office of the People's Commissar. Their instant and unanimous verdict was that the proposed souvenirs were entirely impractical as shelters for the device. They explained that the specific design features of the microphone required a souvenir specifically adapted to it, but not vice versa. For this reason, they insisted on the installation of a microphone simultaneous with the production of a gift.

Such a gift was duly made.

Trojan horse in the American camp

On February 4-11, 1945, the Big Three – Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill – met for the Yalta conference in the Crimea and hashed out fateful decisions on the shape of postwar Europe. Simultaneously came resolution of the fate of Lavrentiy Beria – whether he would be a marshal. Such was the indomitable will of the Boss: “Microphone in the office of ambassador – then marshal’s epaulets on your shoulders, Lavrentiy!”

The stage presentation of “Chrysostom” to the American ambassador needed an appropriate setting. To this end, the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the pioneer camp “Artek” was planned on February 9. The day before, on February 8, deputy chairman of the People’s Commissariat – Commissar for Foreign Affairs Vyacheslav Molotov – in the presence of Stalin, handed to Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill the children’s invitation to visit them on the opening day of Artek. The desire of the young pioneers to see, at their holiday celebration, the president and the premier of their nation’s allies was appropriate expression of their deep gratitude for the assistance provided to children in the USSR during the war.

The calculation of the Minor Trio – Stalin, Molotov and Beria – was based on the assumption that neither Roosevelt nor Churchill, whatever whatever zeal they might have nourished to do so, would take this furlough from weightier duties during the already protracted Yalta Conference. Although the distance between Yalta and Artek was only 18 kilometers, during the war it required about two (!) hours to cover this distance on the bombed-out highway.

The strategists from the Minor Trio also knew that neither Edward Stettinius nor Sir Anthony Eden – the foreign ministers of the United States and Britain – would be able to leave their patrons in order to travel to the pioneer camp. Next in rank as candidates for a trip to the children’s celebration in Artek could only be the U.S. ambassador to Moscow, Averell Harriman, and his colleague from the U.K., Sir Archibald John Clark Kerr. These two were unable to reassign the mission to any of their deputies, because they got direct instructions – from the lips of Roosevelt and Churchill – to visit the Russian children.

The motorcade of the cars with foreign guests, led by the huge black, German-built Horch of Lavrentiy Beria, entered the territory of Artek and slowly moved toward the brigade of “Stalin’s falcons,” where was to take place the encounter of ambassadors with pioneers. There was music, smiles, and – despite the winter – fresh-cut roses, delivered by military aircraft from Sukhumi. The principals were guarded by two battalions of NKVD officers camouflaged as pioneer leaders.

At the finale of the welcoming ceremonies, Averell Harriman gave the pioneers a gift from the government of the United States – a check for \$10,000. Sir Archibald Kerr – a check for 5,000 pounds. At this point, the orchestra struck up the “Star-Spangled Banner,” and the chorus of pioneers sang it in English. Harriman broke into tears. At the same moment, four pioneers carried in an enormous, wooden shield, the Great Seal of the United States of America. Amid a storm of applause, the director of Artek handed to the U.S. ambassador a passport-certificate of the Great Seal, signed by the Soviet head of state Mikhail Ivanovich Kalinin.

Valentin Berezhkov, Stalin's personal translator, translated the details of the certificate to the foreigners: sandalwood, boxwood, redwood, ivory palm, Persian ironwood, red and black wood, black alder – all these valuable species of wood had been used in the creation of the Great Seal.

Delighted by the gift and at a loss for words Harriman – perhaps for the first time in his commercial and diplomatic practice – said what he thought: “Where shall I place it? ... Where to keep it? ... I cannot take my eyes of it!”

Berezhkov, instructed the day before, said casually – his voice a murmur so Sir Archibald Kerr could not hear – “Just hang it in your office ... The British will die of envy.”

Thus, in February 1945, “Chrysostom,” framed by the coat of arms of the United States, was safely installed on the top-secret floor of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. The NKVD operation – codenamed “the Confession” – on the eavesdropping of meetings conducted by U.S. ambassadors, was successfully launched. By ambassadors? Yes! “Chrysostom” worked for eight years, surviving four ambassadors. It is noteworthy that every newly appointed head of the U.S. diplomatic mission in Moscow would order a complete makeover of the office interior inherited from his predecessor – from inkstand to the parquet on the floor. However, the only non-replaceable object in the room was the Great Seal. Its artistic perfection had a hypnotic effect on America's higher diplomats. Even the curtains on the windows and sofa and chair covers were selected to match the colors of the Soviet gift!

After it was eventually discovered in the Great Seal, the “Chrysostom” lived on. The Americans and British attempted to make copies. Work on making an analog of the Soviet “bug” by Americans was carried out in a secret laboratory in the Netherlands, under the code name “The Convenient Chair.” Simultaneously, English counterintelligence conducted its own research, codenamed “Satyr.”

The British advanced in research more than the Americans, but used a weaker microave beam, effective up to only 30 yards. The United States sat on their humiliating discovery for seven years. Then, in 1960, after the USSR brought down a U-2 spy plane with Gary Powers on board, Washington counterattacked, making public the Soviet listening device, which the Soviets had installed in the office of the American ambassador in Moscow.

Henry Cabot Lodge, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, during the Organization's emergency session on the U-2 crisis, showed the Great Seal of the United States, opened it, and demonstrated the “Chrysostom.” Later, the coat of arms and the miracle microphone were also demonstrated during the Security Council meeting. Primed by Soviet diplomats, India's envoy jokingly asked for a copy of the microphone. Lodge was embarrassed, and the Great Seal with the embedded “bug – a shameful memento for U.S. security services – has never been exhibited since.

Currently, the “Chrysostom” is stored in the museum of the CIA in Langley.

Note by Igor Atamenenko via Counterpunch:

The actual inventor of the bug was a fascinating figure. Léon Theremin, born Lev Sergeyevich Termen, born in St. Petersburg in 1896. By his mid-teens, Theremin was doing advanced work in electronics, with important missions in radio communication during World War One. By 1920, he had invented the world's first synthesizer, known as the Termenvox in the Soviet Union and as the “theremin” in the

United States. He also developed a television receiver in the mid-1920s.

By the 1930s, he had settled in the United States, organizing the world's first electronic concerts, and – divorcing his first wife Katya – marrying Lavinia Williams, a dancer in the American Negro Ballet. Money problems and bruising encounters with the IRS took him back, solo to the USSR in 1938, when the purges were at their height. For a while, it looked as though ongoing struggles with the IRS would have been the safer bet. Theremin was put in prison, later the Kolyma gold mines, and there were rumors of his execution. In fact, he was now in a sharashka, an advanced lab and design shop within the Gulag system, and worked alongside such famous figures as the aircraft designer, Tupolev and Korolyov, father of the Soviet space program.

In the team led by his former mentor in his youth, Abram Ioffe, he invented the “Chrysostom” as well as the Buran eavesdropping system, precursor to the modern laser microphone, using a low power infrared beam to pick up the sound vibrations in glass windows, allegedly used by Beria to spy on Stalin. Theremin supposedly kept tapes of these intercepts in his apartment. Theremin was given the Stalin prize in 1947. In later life, he toured the world with his daughter Kavina, daughter from a third and final marriage Maria Guschina. Keenly admired by Robert Moog, who made many Theremin instruments, he died at the age of 97, thus outlasting his “victim,” Averell Harriman, who had died in 1986 at the age of 95.