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NKVD-SOE Cooperation and Austria 1941-1945

During the Second World War the Soviet Union infiltrated native German-speakers behind enemy lines in Central and Western Europe. An unknown number were defectors from the Wehrmacht, but those about whom we know most were political refugees from fascism living in Russia since the 1930s and more often than not veterans of the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War. The total number of such agents is under 100, and at least 40 were Austrian. The agents dropped by parachute over East Prussia or Poland in the early stages of the "Great Patriotic War" were either taken prisoner or killed on landing.

Who were these *Fallschirmkundschafter* working for, who trained them in the first place? There were three main Russian bodies involved: the Comintern with a school near Ufa; GRU, the Intelligence Service of the Red Army; and the Fourth Directorate of State Security NKVD. The latter department sent agents to Britain for further training in 1941/42, the topic of this paper. With the Germans at the gates of Moscow in early winter 1941/42, it was impossible for the Soviets to transport agents to a dropping zone over Austria.

Already in July 1941 the SOE had sent an officer to negotiate with the NKVD in Moscow. An agreement was signed there on 30 September, whereby SOE pledged to train NKVD agents in Britain and arrange their dispatch to targets in Central or Western Europe. SOE subsequently dropped 25 NKVD agents from RAF aircraft: three agent teams each were thus dispatched to Germany, Austria and Holland-Belgium, five to France and one to Italy in the period January 1942 to September 1943. In SOE parlance these were PICKAXE missions; the single operations were given the name of a drink (whiskey, coffee, soda, sauterne, burgundy, rum/brandy) and later that of a mountain (Everest, Eiger, Jungfrau, Etna etc). In all 34 agents were accepted by the British, of whom 25 were successfully transported to a dropping zone, 9 were considered unsuitable for transport. A further 28 agents were either rejected by SOE or never arrived in Britain.

Before dealing with PICKAXE missions in detail, we must examine the constraints and difficulties that arose during the cooperation. Ivan Chichayev, the NKVD officer posted to London to liaise with SOE, complained constantly that his agents were being refused outright for training or being kept so long in Britain that their missions had become obsolete.

1. Conflict arose firstly because the remit of SOE was a constant source of bureaucratic infighting in London. The Foreign Office demanded a veto option regarding the expedition of agents to France and Belgium and it went to great lengths to avoid controversy with governments-in-exile in London which were inimical to or suspicious of Soviet strategy. The Secret Intelligence Service SIS was jealous of SOE's self-perceived role "to set Europe ablaze" because it wished to uphold its predominance in the allocation of resources. Furthermore, the RAF, in resolutely adhering to its policy of carpet bombing was loath to release aircraft and aircrew for "special missions".
2. Secondly, meteorological and technical difficulties hampered the speedy executions of flights. British bombers were approximately 12 hours in the air on a return flight to Austria, which made missions impossible during the extended periods of daylight between May and September. And in the winter months, the full moon periods were preferred by the RAF. Storms, icing-up and bad visibility often forced the pilots to break

off the flight and to return with the agents. These flights, of course, were without fighter escort.

3. Thirdly, fundamental strategic differences and hidden agendas ascribed to the respective partners weakened SOE-NKVD liaison from its inception. The British wanted sabotage or guerrilla fighting, with SOE chairman, Major-General Sir Colin Gubbins, preferring the latter over the former. He had served in Ireland during the War of Independence 1919-1921, and the widespread guerrilla warfare of the IRA may have influenced his preference for commando-like attacks. One clause in the September 1941 agreement, however, vetoed any discussion on or disclosures of the tasks to be carried out by any of the agents. The British side, rightly in my view, came to the conclusion that the majority of Soviet agents sent for training to Britain had been given a remit that was not in accordance with the SOE charter, i.e. once in enemy territory the agents would carry out classical intelligence tasks such as industrial espionage, collect data on troop movements, re-build communist party structures, or more disturbingly, establish Soviet "sleeper" networks to be activated in a post-war scenario.
4. Fourthly, the cooperation was bound to be imbalanced since the British did not usually need Soviet assistance to infiltrate their agents. Because of what the British side saw as a lack of Soviet co-operation, SOE headquarters recommended cancelling the agreement on several occasions, but either the Foreign Office or SOE liaison staff in Moscow (Major Robert Guinness, later Brig. Gen. George Hill) pleaded for its continuation, mainly for political reasons. Ironically, at a time when SOE was so well organised that it could infiltrate a greater number of agents to Europe, the Russians capped the programme in May 1944.

The balance for the British was disappointing: although they received much German military documentation from the Soviets and were allowed visit parachute and partisan training schools in the USSR, they were refused a SOE office in Vladivostok, access to German POWs (potential agents) in Russia or a liaison agreement in respect of Yugoslavia, Turkey and Rumania. Resentment in SOE circles was also caused by the fact that many of the agents sent to Britain, especially in the early phase, were badly documented, had had next to no training, were medically unfit or were supposed to be equipped with British radio transmitters.

The majority of the German-speaking PICKAXE agents had served with the International Brigades in Spain and had attained officer rank before being repatriated to Russia in the spring of 1939. On the outbreak of war these military veterans volunteered for service in the Red Army. At the time German speakers were not trusted in regular army units, so the refugees who had volunteered were either appointed to work as propagandists among German POWs or asked to carry out unspecified "special tasks". Such specialist training in Moscow or near it was interrupted by the German advance on the capital and the trainee agents were transferred to Kuibyshev, the seat of most ministries evacuated from Moscow.

The general impression that I have gained from SOE files in London, from Communist Party cadre documents or NKVD prosecution files in Moscow and from interviews with two surviving agents of the Coffee PICKAXE team is that the British treated the agents well, were not fooled by their Russian pseudonyms and were not too overtly inquisitive about the aims of any one mission. On the other hand, the Russian liaison staff in Britain rarely visited their agents or gave them money and insisted on completion of a mission at all costs. Put in a nutshell, Chichayev and his assistant Toroptshevko saw their agents at the Parachute

Training Schools or in the Special Training Schools as cannon-fodder. The NKVD officers, true Stalinists who saw failure as the result of sabotage and not of objective circumstances, did not recognise the technical reasons for postponing expedition of the agents, be it because of weather conditions or questionable forged documentation to be used after landing.

Fourteen PICKAXE missions were executed, from January 1942 to September 1943. As regards the 17 German-speaking agents identified to date, 3 were killed in aircraft crashes, 5 were returned to the Soviet Union and 8 were captured by the Gestapo. Of the eight prisoners, five were executed and three survived the concentration camp. Only one agent managed to escape from German detention by fleeing to Switzerland. None of the agent-teams that landed safely remained at freedom for longer than two months and none seemed to have built a network of collaborators or conducted radio links with Moscow for very long.

Now I wish to concentrate on 4 PICKAXE teams whose dropping zone was the general Vienna area. First, the WHISKEY duo sent to Britain in January 1942 by the usual route: ship from Murmansk or Archangelsk to a Scottish port and then by train to London. Lorenz Mraz and Franz Löschel. Mraz had taken part in the Austrian Civil War of February 1934 and subsequently fled to Moscow via Czechoslovakia. He volunteered for service in the International Brigades, was wounded several times and last served as Political Commissar of the Austrian "12.Februar" battalion in the 11th International Brigade. On his return to Moscow in April 1939 Mraz worked as a printer before volunteering for active military service in June 1941. His colleague Löschel had more or less the same background, except that Löschel had attended the prestigious International Lenin School in Moscow. Also an officer in Spain, Löschel, after being badly wounded at the front, seems to have worked for the NKVD tracking down activists of the semi-Trotskyist POUM. WHISKEY was the fourth PICKAXE team, and as one mission was still on hold and another had ended in an air crash, Soviet liaison in London was very insistent that Löschel and Mraz should be dropped over Laaben in the Viennese Woods before the spring offensive on the Eastern Front. As you can see from their cover documentation as engineers, their prime task seems to have been the collection of armament production data. Three flights over Austria with the agents on board were aborted because of bad weather conditions or because the dropping zone was not visible. Mraz had complained about his documentation: the letter introducing him as an engineer in Vienna had been written on a Sunday and was subsequently changed; and he thought that changes to his Wehrpass might not pass inspection in Austria. In any case, Chichayev insisted on a fourth attempt.

RAF 138 Squadron at Tempsford was the unit designated to carry out for SOE. It had a considerable proportion of Polish aircrew. Fl. Lieut. Hockey, who in December 1941 had dropped the team that was to assassinate Heydrich, was to pilot the aircraft pictured here and bring the WHISKEY duo to the dropping zone over the Viennese woods. However, Hockey was delayed on his way to the airfield and the Squadron Leader, Wing Commander Farley, decided to pilot the craft. When Hockey arrived shortly before take-off, he and the crew pleaded with Farley to stay at base: Hockey was the more experienced pilot and Farley allegedly had never flown this model of the Halifax bomber. Farley insisted and the plane took off at 2100 on 20 April 1942 and was due back nine hours later. However, it seems that the pilots could not find the dropping zone and were returning to Britain when the plane hit the Blaue Bergen ridge in dense fog at about 3AM on the Bavarian-Tyrolean border west of Kufstein. Mraz and Löschel and all of the nine man crew, of whom seven were Polish, were killed. The bodies were temporarily buried near the peak and later interred in the British War Cemetery at Durnbach near Kreuth. When I visited their graves in 1998, the headstone

over Mraz and Löschel read "Unknown". I could convince the Commonwealth War Graves Commission that the interred were indeed Lorenz Mraz and Franz Löschel and a headstone with their proper names was erected in August 1999. The Austrian State, i.e. the Ministry for the Interior, refused to participate in the funding of this modest memorial to members of the Austrian resistance.

The Everest PICKAXE two-man team landed in Britain in January 1943 and were dropped almost one year later between Wilhelmsburg and St. Pölten in Lower Austria. Albert Huttary came from a working class family and had joined in Austrian Communist Party KPÖ in 1929. Called up for service in the Wehrmacht, Huttary deserted to the Red Army in April 1942. Josef Zettler was a veteran Bavarian Communist and had worked for Soviet military intelligence in the USA in the 1930s before serving in the International Brigades as a Political Commissar. The drop on 6 January 1944 was executed in good weather about 5 miles east of the dropping zone and the agents landed about 8 miles from one another. Huttary's landing was observed and he had to bury the radio set. His contact address in Vienna was obsolete and he moved to a flat of a family friend. On a visit to his parents, he was arrested by Gestapo officers disguised as plumbers. After fearful tortures, Huttary was forced to send false radio reports (Funkspiele) to Moscow but he warned his Russian employers. The Gestapo detected this and sent Huttary to Theresienstadt, which he survived. Both his parents and his aunt died in concentration camps. Zettler survived and later served in a high capacity in the army of the GDR. Their mission was to report on troop movements and war production.

The Sodawater PICKAXE mission ended in like manner. Emily Boretzky, a German Communist, was held by the British to be a very talented radio-operator. Her companion was Hermann Köhler, member of the Polbüro of the KPÖ and the long term secretary of the Communist youth movement in Austria. After five months in Britain they were dropped on 24 February 1943 over the Leitha Gebirge hills east of Vienna and reached the capital without difficulty. In his attempt to contact secret communist groups, Köhler's contact man was denounced by a Gestapo informer within the Vienna City leadership of the KPÖ. Gruesome and sustained torture at Gestapo headquarters led, in turn, to the arrest of Köhler and Boretzky who were also subjected to protracted beatings. It is believed that information obtained in this way led also to the arrest of the Tonic PICKAXE duo Elsa Noffke (Köhler's wife) and Georg Tietzke, both of whom had successfully landed on 24 February and were transmitting from the region of Freiburg. Köhler, Tietzke and Noffke were executed; Emily Boretzky survived Ravensbruck concentration camp but was arrested by SMERSH in Vienna in May 1945 and later sentenced as a "traitor" to a term in the Gulag.

PICKAXE mission Coffee also ended in the frozen wastes of Stalin's Gulag empire. I have written about this group at some length in the Winter 1997 number of Labour History Review, the journal of the British Society for the Study of Labour History. This team spent the most time of all PICKAXE units in Britain, between December 1941 and April 1943. The group was unfortunate in that its members had received little or no training in the USSR. The original group consisted of Leopold Stancl, Anton Barak, Willi Wagner and his wife Hilde Wagner. When the SOE liaison officer met them at Kuibyshev airport, they were attired in light summer coats and held their other belongings in brown paper parcels. The British officer was disgusted and had a lengthy argument with NKVD staff before the group was given winter clothing. On their arrival in Britain it was discovered that they had no documentation, and since SIS was unable or unwilling to provide them with German documents, these had to be manufactured in Moscow and brought to Britain. All members

of the team were designated as medically unfit: Stancl had contracted dysentery and typhus in Spain and had a badly damaged liver; he was sent back to Russia; Barak, badly wounded twice in Spain, was also in poor health; Hilde Wagner, who had visited the International Lenin School with her husband Willi Wagner was also in poor health and suffered from glandular trouble. None seemed enthusiastic about parachute training, and when Hilde Wagner, against the advice of the Ringways Parachute School commander, did jump she injured herself and was hospitalised.

Proper documentation was on its way from Moscow, with Stancl's replacement Albin Mayr in September 1942. Mayr, also a former officer of the International Brigades, was lucky to survive when his ship was torpedoed, but his baggage and the documentation went down with the vessel. The survivors were picked up the Queen Mary liner and brought to Scotland via Iceland. New documentation for the group finally arrived in November 1942. By this stage the majority of the group were obviously totally estranged from their Communist past, perhaps with the exception of the newcomer Albin Mayr. In any case they rejected the proposed dropping zone 60 kilometres from Vienna in the depths of winter and proposed instead a drop over the Danube water meadows. The RAF or the Russians rejected this alternative, perhaps because of the dangers from anti-aircraft fire in an area so close to the capital. Another – more convincing, perhaps – complaint concerned the documentation: on various identity cards supposedly issued over a periods of ten years the same contemporary photograph had been used; or on the certification excusing the male mission members from military call up there was no detailed exposition of the medical grounds for granting exemption.

Chichayev had enough and he ordered the group's repatriation. However, heavy storms forced the return of the Murmansk convoy to a Scottish port in January 1943. In the intervening period before the second repatriation from Middlesbrough on route to Vladivostok via San Francisco all group members confided in as much as they believed they could in their SOE handlers and to a representative of SIS, saying they wished to remain in the UK and join the British armed forces. They were sent back all the same, with the vague promise that SOE would inform the FBI of the group's impending fate. Wagner and the others believed this meant being rescued from the ship as it passed through the Panama Canal. SOE London contacted their office in Washington but left it to its representative there to decide whether to inform the FBI or not. He did not. When the group were docked at Oakland in California, they jumped ship, crossed the Canadian border on foot and illegally but were subsequently deported by the Canadian authorities. They landed in Vladivostok in November 1943. After months of gruelling interrogations, both Wagners, Barak and Mayr were each sentenced in May 1944 to ten years in the Gulag. Barak killed himself in the camp, but the other three survived. Hilde Wagner remained in the USSR on her release, while Mayr returned to Vienna in 1955 and Willi Wagner nine years later.

I think it is clear from the foregoing that all PICKAXE agents were really "dead men walking" Both the British and the Soviets overestimated the potential for resistance in the German-speaking countries, underestimated the level and depth of Gestapo terror and the popularity that the Nazi regime enjoyed in Austria before the Wehrmacht defeat at Stalingrad. And, at least in the case of the Coffee group, the harsh living conditions in Russia during the Russo-Finnish war, and of course the Great Terror had long since undermined the belief in the Soviet experiment.