

Cold War Exiles and the CIA: Plotting to Free Russia

The American state, the fascists and the Soviet Union's ex-revolutionaries

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In *Cold War Exiles and the CIA: Plotting to Free Russia*, published by Oxford University Press last year, Benjamin Tromly, a professor of history at University of Puget Sound, explores the relationship between America's post-war spy agencies and anti-communist Russian and Soviet émigrés dedicated to regime change in the USSR.

His work contains extensive evidence of the machinations of the fascists with which the US government was working and the willingness of former socialists to work alongside the far-right to promote the anti-Soviet cause. Yet the book's considerable strength is also at times a weakness. Tromly traces in detail the twists and turns in the reactionary, backstabbing, at times buffoonish, politically tragic, and frequently ineffective efforts of émigrés jockeying for money and political influence. But the author does not make sense of all the evidence. In the final analysis, what fused all of the figures and organizations that populate Tromly's book was their bitter opposition to working class revolution—both that which occurred in Russia in 1917 and those on the post-war horizon.

Cold War Exiles and the CIA: Plotting to Free Russia identifies four groups of Russian and Soviet exiles who played a central role in the early years of the Cold War—Whites (counterrevolutionary supporters of the Romanov dynasty and monarchists), “old socialists” (Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries who opposed the formation of a workers state under the leadership of the Bolsheviks in Russia in 1917), Vlasovites (followers of Andrei Vlasov, a turncoat Soviet general who went over to Hitler's side), and “Solidarists” (Russian fascists who, during the inter-war period, formed an organization with the acronym NTS). During World War II, both of these last two organizations collaborated in the Nazi invasion of the USSR, anti-partisan warfare, and mass killings.

Tromly shows that over the course of the 1940s and 1950s, all of these forces worked to varying degrees—sometimes in competition and sometimes in collaboration with one another—with American intelligence and spy agencies being formed out of the remnants of the defeated Nazi regime. The most right-wing of these four groups—the Vlasovites and the Solidarists—operated with the support of the Gehlen Organization. Reinhard Gehlen had been Hitler's military intelligence chief on the eastern front. After the war he was tasked by the US with setting up a new West German spy agency.

American and Western German operations were directed at recruiting supporters within the Soviet displaced-persons camps scattered across Europe, with the aim of uncovering Soviet spies in Germany, securing information about life behind the “Iron Curtain,” and cultivating underground networks of assets in the USSR who could communicate information back to Washington and Bonn.

Even though the official US Cold War policy became that of “containment” of the Soviet Union, the more aggressive “rollback” approach continued to figure in the work of the CIA and its émigré

operatives. This included “organized political warfare” and “political-psychological operations” intended to destabilize the USSR and facilitate resistance and guerrilla movements inside the country. Using radio transmissions and printed material sent by human couriers, air-dropped agents, and even balloons, the CIA and its assets sought to propagandize within Soviet borders.

The American state's fascist allies in the NTS hoped that even if these efforts failed, which they usually did, Soviet discovery of the intelligence operations would, according to Tromly, elicit “a feedback loop of provocation, repression, and radicalization.” Their aim was to create “something like a replay of the Great Terror of the 1930s with the NTS being a ‘candidate’ for the role of internal enemy that Trotskyists had earlier occupied.”

In short, according to these right-wing, US-funded psychopaths, the road to “liberty” would be achieved by the arrest and execution of millions of ordinary people falsely accused of fascist sympathies, just as millions of innocent people had been rounded up and killed during the Stalinist Great Terror, based on accusations of “counterrevolutionary” and “Trotskyist” activities. Tromly notes that the NTS itself, as well as the CIA, at the same time attempted to hide the organization's fascist outlook and past. They were depicted to both American and Soviet audiences as “virtuous Russian freedom fighters” (p. 187).

Of particular interest are those portions of *Cold War Exiles and the CIA* that address the relationship between sections of the Russian left that opposed the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 and the right-wing forces recruited by the CIA. The central player in this was the New York-based League of Struggle for the People's Freedom, in which the Mensheviks Boris Nikolaevskii (more commonly transliterated as Nicolaevsky), David Dalin (usually Dallin), and Rafael Abramovich played leading roles. Some within the League, such as Nikolaevskii, had set aside their opposition to the formation of the Soviet state for several years and played an active role in building the new country. But beginning in the 1920s, they renewed their agitation against the Bolsheviks, emigrated or were exiled, and moved to the right politically.

Speaking about the League, Tromly writes, “The leftists in New York directed their efforts at courting ... the Vlasovites, who were then still associated with the Whites. ...[T]he old socialists attempted to woo the second-wave Vlasovites away from the monarchists and conservatives who held influence in the immediate post-war years. In this competition between putative ideological parents, the socialists had an advantage: they had the goodwill of powerful circles in the United States” (p. 73).

Basing himself on archival material at the Hoover Institution and a number of American universities, intelligence reports accessed through Freedom of Information Act requests, and the published writings of members of the League, Tromly establishes that Nikolaevskii and Dalin

worked closely with the CIA and its forerunner organizations.

In 1947 and 1948 Nikolaevskii and Dalin each took separate trips, sanctioned by the American state, to displaced person camps in Europe with the aim of developing relationships with former Soviet citizens. Here, they established ties with Vlasovites, followers of Andrei Vlasov, a Stalinist general who defected to the Nazis and formed the anti-Soviet Russian Liberation Army. In Europe, Nikolaevskii and Dalin worked towards getting the Nazi collaborators, grouped in an organization known as SBONR (Union for the Struggle for the Liberation of Soviet Peoples), to “either enter the League directly or establish a permanent alliance with it” (p. 79).

The effort ultimately stalled because, according to Tromly, the CIA stopped backing the venture and Nikolaevskii and Dalin were unable to deliver the level of access to the American state that the Vlasovites hoped for. However, a corollary of Nikolaevskii’s and Dalin’s endeavors to build these ties was an attempt to rehabilitate the Nazi collaborators as “democrats” so as to make them more palatable to the “old socialists” in New York.

Nikolaevskii, in particular, was instrumental in trying to whitewash the collaborators’ pro-Nazi views. In a series of articles, he developed the position that Vlasov’s Russian Liberation Army was “‘from the very start,’ ‘an attempt to create an anti-Bolshevik movement on the basis of a democratic program’” (p. 81) and that Vlasovites’ collaboration with the Nazis was really more a misguided form of “defeatism”—that is, they were democratic opponents of Stalin working for his defeat.

Nikolaevskii’s positions were justified by some in the League as expressing a necessary leniency towards those who had to take unprecedented measures to oppose Stalin, but provoked opposition from others as an unacceptable accommodation to fascism. Criticism of Nikolaevskii came from a number of the League’s Jewish members, who throughout this period were the continued object of anti-Semitic slurs from the Vlasovite quarter. Ultimately, the League drafted theses on the Vlasovites that characterized their collaboration with the Nazis as “deeply mistaken.”

These tensions, however, did not prevent the League from participating in CIA efforts to create a “united front” out of the different tendencies within the Soviet and Russian exile communities that included the collaborationist Vlasovites and openly-fascist NTS. And while there were continued fallings-out among these various groups, according to Tromly, the major frustration of the League was that it was unsuccessful in securing for itself pride of place in the anti-communist operations of the CIA. This was increasingly going towards the far-right in the CIA-front organization the American Committee for the Liberation of the Peoples of Russia.

In 1950, Nikolaevskii wrote to the deputy head of the US spy outfit that was trying to create the “united front” and appealed for his organization to be elevated above the Vlasovites and the fascist NTS in Washington’s anti-Soviet operations. He insisted that the “old socialists” views were more reflective of the democratic sentiments of the Soviet people and stressed his organization’s ties to the anti-communist American labor movement. Nikolaevskii’s efforts failed, and the CIA refused to boot the far-right from the “united front” project. Some among the “old socialists” subsequently left the League over this issue, although others continued trying to win the favor of the American state.

Tromly’s discovery of Nikolaevskii’s role in this history is significant. Nikolaevskii had been a revolutionary socialist. In 1917 he was a Menshevik Internationalist, and while hostile to the Bolshevik seizure of power, he contributed to the building of the first workers state, chiefly in his work with the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow. In 1921 he, along with others, was exiled from the USSR. Nonetheless, for many years he remained a committed socialist and played an important role as an archivist of the personal papers and writings of major figures in the

Marxist movement, including those of Leon Trotsky. He was a committed anti-Stalinist who maintained close ties to the Trotskyist movement during the inter-war period. At the time of World War II, he advocated for the defense of the USSR against the Nazi onslaught, despite Stalin’s crimes.

That Nikolaevskii would have pursued a relationship with the CIA after the war and sought to whitewash the fascist sympathies of other layers being courted by the American state bears within it an element of tragedy. It appears that he suffered a fate shared by others among the left whose hatred of Stalinism and rejection of working class revolution drove them into the arms of US imperialism. Based on Tromly’s research, one gets the impression that Nikolaevskii thought his presence would lend a more democratic and progressive coloration to American Cold War politics. His political evolution and the historical evidence that Tromly marshals merit further study.

Within the “old socialists” milieu, Tromly also devotes special attention to David Dalin, a Menshevik who immigrated to the US in 1939. According to Tromly, Dalin, along with Nikolaevskii, “came under scrutiny from US Military Intelligence for associating themselves with suspected Soviet spies during their German travels” (p. 78). In a footnote, Tromly notes that the American Counter Intelligence Corps “connected Dalin to Il’ia Iakushev, an individual suspected of espionage for the Soviets.” Throughout the book, Tromly repeatedly points out that the CIA’s émigré networks were heavily infiltrated by Kremlin spies, a fact of which US intelligence agencies were well aware.

These revelations, though hardly surprising, substantiate the findings of Security and the Fourth International, the ongoing investigation of the Trotskyist movement into the infiltration of the Trotskyist movement by the GPU and the American spy agencies.

David Dalin was the husband of Lola Dalin, an individual who played a key role in facilitating Trotsky’s assassination in Mexico in 1940, as well as the 1938 murder in Paris of Trotsky’s son Lev Sedov, a leading member of the Fourth International. Lola Dalin helped protect Stalinist agents who fell under suspicion, thus enabling them to penetrate Trotsky’s inner circle and household.

While there has so far been no definitive proof that Lola Dalin was a Stalinist agent, her marriage to a CIA operative who himself was suspected of having ties to the Soviet state makes Lola Dalin’s claim that she was an innocent and devoted ally of Sedov and Trotsky even more dubious.

Tromly does not address these questions in his book. In response to an email inquiry, he indicated that he had not come across anything in his research related to Trotsky’s murder, which was carried out with the involvement of Russian and Soviet émigrés.

In the concluding chapter of *Cold War Exiles and the CIA*, Tromly links his study to the present. Here, a weakness appears. Tromly observes that Russian President Vladimir Putin “has spoken admiringly of Ivan Aleksandrovich Il’in, a White émigré thinker whose embrace of fascist ideas, and specifically the need to forge a ‘national elite,’ had inspired the NTS.” He thus correctly notes the Kremlin’s support for far-right politics.

However, he makes no comment about the fact that currently in the Ukraine the US is actively supporting open fascists and anti-Semites who explicitly hail the Nazi collaborators of the World War II era as heroes. Having come to power in 2014 through a Washington- and Berlin-backed coup, Ukraine’s right-wing, anti-Russian government has been arming its own military and far-right battalions with war materiel financed by the US. The American state’s efforts are supported by a whole number of supposedly left-wing organizations that claim that the US is engaged in a form of “democracy building” in Ukraine. In short, Tromly fails to note that the political relationships that took form in the early years of the Cold War continue. In Ukraine today, the American state is reviving a playbook of a long pedigree.



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