**Eitingon: A Biography of an Assassin –**

**A Review Essay**

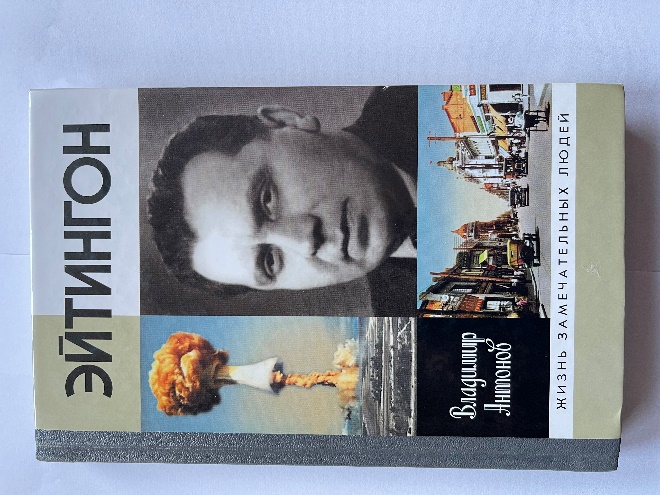
**Eitingon**

(***in Russian***)

By Vladimir Sergeevich Antonov

Lives of Remarkable People

(Moskva: Molodaia Gvardiia, 2017)



Leonid Aleksandrovich Eitingon (born Naum Isakovich Eitingon) is best known in the West as the Soviet intelligence officer who headed the assassination teams that “liquidated” Leon Trotsky in 1940. Together with his close associate and friend Pavel Sudoplatov, they played instrumental roles in many of the Soviet Union’s most successful intelligence and special operations efforts to include organizing and leading the NKVD’s partisan movement and the stealing of atomic secrets from the Manhattan Project.

**Eitingon** is a biography in the Russian language of Leonid Eitingon. It was written by a retired KGB/SVR colonel – Vladimir Sergeevich Antonov. Your reviewer selected this book for review for a variety of reasons. First, he believes it is an error for Western intelligence specialists on Russia to dismiss such books as nothing more than propaganda and disinformation and not worth the effort to read. It is argued that books of this ilk provide “facts” not only about the darker corners of Eitingon’s career but about the exploits of Soviet intelligence services. They can also provide insights into Soviet intelligence culture.

Second, your reviewer apologizes to the general reader who may find tedious the many “facts” about Eitingon’s career, especially the largely unknown early years. The decision to include many details on Eitingon was done for specialist reader who does not have access to the Russian but who may find these facts beneficial.

Third, it is hoped that this review will move others who have some level of competence in Russian or other languages to read and review similar Russian, Arabic, Farsi, and Chinese works. It should be noted that your reviewer is competent but not fluent in Russian. Indeed, he moves his lips when he reads, reads slowly, makes frequent use of the Russian-English dictionary, and curses the author of using obscure slang. Most others will face similar challenges but this ought not to deter them from undertaking to read books and articles by our foreign allies and adversaries.

**Contemporary Context**

Eitingon is a hero to Russian conservatives, especially those in the security services while the more liberal segments of Russian society see him as just another Stalinist with blood on his hands. This was clear when the book was released. In a departure from tradition the Russian newspaper **Nezavisimaia gazeta** published two reviews of the book. One review by Aleksandr Sharkovskii was laudatory calling Eitingon a “great Soviet intelligence officer.” A second book review by Maksim Artem’ev forcefully argued that the “reason Sudaplatov and Eitingon sat behind bars in the post-Stalinist era was because they were participants in the crimes of Beria.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

It is significant that the author of **Eitingon**, Vladimir Sergeevich Antonov was a retired colonel of the SVR. He joined the KGB’s foreign intelligence service in 1972 and served in Western Europe. For a long time he worked as a leading expert in the Office of the History of the SVR of Russia, as a consultant to the Director of the SVR, and as chief of the Office of the History of Foreign Intelligence. Aleksandr Sharkovskii in his review of **Eitingon** described Antonov as someone “who knows thoroughly the ‘back kitchen’ of the Federal Foreign Intelligence Service. His works are read with interest because in essence are they are the views from within the Foreign Intelligence Service.”

Following Colonel Antonov’s death in the autumn of 2020, the SVR Public Affairs Office issued a statement lauding Vladimir Antonov was a man who dedicated his life to “the preservation and development of the historical memory of the members and of the brilliant operations of patriotic foreign intelligence and who tirelessly opposed attempts to falsify and to blacken the history of our country.”



Colonel Vladimir Antonov (on right)

**Eitingon** is not a scholarly book. While there are no footnotes, there are occasional references to archives. Given Antonov’s former position as Chief of the Office of the History of Foreign Intelligence, it is not unreasonable to assume he had free and complete access to the archives of the Foreign Intelligence Service and that he incorporated information from the archives into **Eitingon.** Furthermore when Antonov states as a fact, for example, that Eitingon was the rezident in Harbin from 1927 to 1929, your reviewer takes this “fact” at face value.

**Early Years**

Naum Isakovich Eitingon was born in 1899 in the town of Shklov [Shklow], a predominantly Jewish settlement in the Mogilev region of Belorussia. His father was a clerk. Due to the generosity of an uncle, he was able to study at the Mogil’ev Commercial School.

Eitingon came of age in period of great turmoil. The First World War was raging in Europe and revolution was spreading through Europe. Eitingon was soon caught up in the revolutionary fervor of his time joining the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, an indiscretion that apparently was not held against him in later years.

In October 1919 Eitingon became a member of the Communist Party and joined a communist combat unit which saw action against the Polish Interventionists. Joining the Party was a critical step for Eitingon. Party membership opened up career opportunities. At the time he was teaching on trade union work at a local institute, and he was well on this way to a successful career as a Party leader.

In May 1920 Eitingon was assigned to the Gomel Cheka or secret police. This was a fateful move as he found himself working for Nikolai L’vovich Vollenberg, who became a senior NKVD officer and who would later play an important role in Eitingon’s career. Eitingon soon found himself leading clandestine intelligence collection efforts in the Gomel guberniia.

During this period, Eitingon played a key role in Operation Mole which resulted in the arrest of 100 members of the Western Oblast Committee of the Socialist Revolutionary (SR) Peoples Union for the Defense of the Homeland and Freedom. He was also active in conducting operations against the Poles who were locked in a war with the young Communist Soviet Union. During this period, Eitingon was wounded in the leg and developed a limp that would bother him the rest of his life.

When Nikolai L’vovich Vollenberg was transferred to the Bashkir Autonomous Republic in December 1921 as chief of the Cheka for the autonomous republic, he requested that Naum Eitingon and Vladimir Pavlovich Alekseev be assigned with him[[2]](#footnote-2). The Center agreed and Eitingon, as soon as his wound healed, joined Vollenberg in Sterlitamsk, the capital of the autonomous republic.

The Bashkir ASR Cheka was in disarray and divided along nationalist lines. Early on Eitingon displayed a flair for administration. One of his major tasks in Bashkir was to reorganize the office and make it effective.[[3]](#footnote-3) One major security concern of the Bashkir Cheka was Herbert Hoover’s American Relief Administration (ARA) which had a major presence in the area. Paranoia of Western organizations even humanitarian ones was rife. The ARA was in Cheka’s view an American intelligence organization intent on subverting the new Bolshevik Revolution.

In May 1923 Naum Eitingon and Vladimir Alekseev were both transferred to Moscow to work in the Eastern Office of the Secret-Operational Administration of the GPU. The mission of the Eastern Office was to co-ordinate the work of Chekists in Kazakhstan, Turkistan, Bashkiria, the Tataria portion of the Crimea as well as the Harbinsk and Bukharsk Peoples Soviet Republics against eastern counter-evolution and eastern espionage. While the Eastern Office had oversight of operations, it did not conduct them. This was the responsibility of the Foreign Section [INO] of the GPU.

Although only twenty-four years old, Eitingon was named the assistant to the chief of the Third Section of the Eastern Office Mikhail Markovich Kazas who was a distinguished intelligence officer. During this period, Eitingon found himself in regular contact with Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder and head of the Cheka. While assigned to the Eastern Section, Eitingon played a key role in organizing the liberation of Marshal Vasili Bucher from the Chinese who had seized him.an action that no doubt brought him to the attention of senior leaders in the Cheka.

During the evenings Eitingon attended the Military Academy RKKA later called the Frunze Military Academy where he studied in the Eastern (Special) Faculty, i.e. Department. This is significant because the Eastern Faculty is considered to be “the first higher school in the Soviet Union to prepare cadres of intelligence officers for work abroad”.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Eastern Faculty did not teach intelligence trade craft but rather Asian area studies and Asian languages. The degree from the Military Academy also provided Eitingon with some credentials as a military expert.

In October 1925 after graduating from the Military Staff College, Eitingon was assigned to the Foreign Intelligence Office (INO) of the OGPU. At the time the Foreign Section was small with only 122 people in the Center and 62 people assigned abroad.

Before leaving for China, Eitingon met personally with Felix Dzherinsky, the head of the OGPU, who gave him guidance on his first assignment abroad to Shanghai, China. It was no doubt unusual for such a junior officer to meet with a personage such as Dzherinsky and probably reflects the fact that Eitingon had already caught the attention of senior Cheka leaders.

At the time the Shanghai rezidentura (station) was a large one with seventeen intelligence officers and was headed by Iakov Grigorevich Minsker. China offered a competitive and at times highly dangerous environment in which to operate. For much of the time the Chinese Nationalists persecuted the communists, even shooting them publicly in the street. White Russian émigré groups were active planning and supporting anti-Soviet efforts in the Soviet Union. And, of course, the Japanese had a large espionage effort underway focused not only on China but the Soviet Union. Not to be left out were the British and French intelligence services which were active in China as well.

It was during this tour that Eitingon adopted the cover name Leonid Aleksandrovich Naumov, a name he used until the beginning of the 1950s. It was also a name that did not call attention to his Jewish heritage.

Eitingon was the deputy rezident in Shanghai for a short time and then was sent to Peking as the rezident and then a year later to Harbin again as the rezident. The timing of his move to Peking was serendipitous because Eitingon escaped any blame for the catastrophic raid by the Chinese Nationalists at the instigation of the British on the Soviet consulate in Shanghai. Large numbers of documents were seized including ciphers, lists of agents, and material on the provision of weapons to the Chinese Communist Party. The consequence for Soviet intelligence were devastating.

Fedor Iakolevich Karin preceded Eitingon as the rezident in Harbin. Eitingon building on Karin’s structure brought a new dynamism to the rezidentura resulting in several important successes.

The most notable was the acquisition of the so-called Tanaka Memorandum. This was a planning document from 1927 in which Japanese Prime Minister Baron Tanaka Giichi optimistically outlined to Emperor Hirohito a plan for Japan to take over Asia as a prelude to world domination.

Soviet intelligence subsequently released the text of the document in the Chinese press and later planted the document in the American press. The Tanaka Memorandum created an international uproar against Japanese militarism.

In recent years some Western specialists argued that the Tanaka Memorandum was a clever forgery. While not directly addressing this charge, Colonel Anton indirectly seeks to undermine this charge by noting that one of Eitingon’s intelligence officers, a Russian émigré named Ivan Trofimovich Ivanov-Perekrest ran a network of agents in the area. One of his subagents Vasili Pudin “acquired” the document. A short time later another copy of the document was acquired by the rezident in Seoul, Korea Ivan Andrrevich Chichaev!

Eitingon helped lead the rezidentura into the realm of SIGINT. Taking advantage of White Russians in the employ of the Japanese, the rezidentura was able to acquire 20 Japanese ciphers. A special Soviet SIGINT team was sent to Harbin to decode up to 200 messages a month. Officers of the rezidentura penetrated the Japanese consulate and as a result were able to send to the Center Japan’s plans for China and the Soviet Union.

Another one of Eitingon’s successes followed the recruitment of Viacheslav Ivanovich Pentkovskii, a White Russian émigré fluent in Chinese. Pentkovskii was employed by the Chinese police. He provided the Japanese with false documents that indicated that twenty White Russians working for Japanese intelligence had applied for Soviet citizenship. As a result, the Japanese, as the Antonov delicately put it, “liquidated” the White Russians.

In 1928 Eitingon acquired special secret information about negotiations between the Chinese war lord Zhang Zuolin and the Japanese government about forming an independent Manchurian Republic including Inner and Outer Mongolia under the protection of Japan. The negotiations came to an end following the assassination of Zhang Zuolin when a bomb detonated under his train. Over the years there was much speculation that the Soviet security services and by extension Eitingon were responsible for the bombing, but the author does not even note the death of Zhang Zuolin presumably because Eitingon was not involved in the assassination.

In a prelude to the outbreak of the Sino-Soviet War of 1929, the Chinese raided the Soviet consulate in Harbin on 27 May 1929 seizing documents and closing down the consulate. On 18 July the Soviets broke diplomatic relations with China. That same month Eitingon and other Soviet diplomatic and intelligence personnel returned to Moscow.

Although Colonel Antonov does not mention it, Leonid Eitingon did not return alone. He brought with him a new family. While in China, Leonid Eitingon took up with Olga Georgievna Vasil’eba (Zarubina) (Naumova). At the time they met, Olga was still married to Vasily Zarubin who was Eitingon’s deputy and later a famous Soviet general and intelligence officer. Olga and Leonid had one child together [Svetlana] and raised Zoya Zarubina, Olga’s daughter by Vasili Zarubina. It is noteworthy that Zoya Zarubina in her memoirs felt emotionally closer to Leonid Eitingon than to her natural father Vasili Zarubin.

It is “no accident” that Vladimir Antonov ignores this and other messy marital and sexual relationships of Eitingon. In the West the sexual exploits of spies are often celebrated in novels and films and are seen as inherent in the business, but Antonov reflects the prudishness of old style communist sexual morality.

After a short stay in Moscow, Eitingon was dispatched to Constantinople [Istanbul] as the new legal rezident replacing Iakov Minsker. Eitingon operated undercover as an attaché in the consulate.

It was a complex and politically challenging time. Leon Trotsky had arrived in Turkey in February 1929 and was living on the Turkish island of Buyukada. Although Colonel Antonov says little about Trotsky’s tenure in Turkey, he was clearly a “target” of special interest to the Soviet special services. Antonov, however, does discuss in detail the troubles that the Center faced with the two men who served sequentially in Constantinople as the illegal rezident.

The first was Iakov Grigo’evich Bliumkin who served as the illegal rezident for the entire Middle East from 1928 to 1929. Bliumkin was sent to Constantinople with the task of building a powerful center for Soviet illegal operations throughout the Middle East. For some inexplicable reason the Center seems to have overlooked the fact that Bliumkin was personally close to Leon Trotsky. He had even edited several of Trotsky’s works. Not long after Trotsky’s arrival in Turkey, Bliumkin established contact with his old mentor and friend and was soon passing classified information to him through Lev Sedov, Trotsky’s son. Then, according to Antonov, the legal rezidentura, i.e. Eitingon - caught wind of these meetings and informed the Center. Bliumkin was recalled to Moscow in October and shot on the orders of the Collegium of the OGPU on 3 November 1929.

Bliumkin’s replacement as the illegal rezident for the Middle East was Georgii Agabekov [Arutiunov real name]. Agabekov arrived in Constantinople in October 1929 and a few months later in June 1930 defected to France! With Agabekov’s defection, Eitingon’s cover was “blown”. Agabekov subsequently wrote a book which was published in France detailing his clandestine activities in Turkey and around the Middle East.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Throughout this turmoil, Eitingon was the man in the middle helping here and helping there to stabilize the situation. At one point when the illegal rezident in Greece was arrested, Eitingon stepped in to direct the illegal network there.

Following the defection of Agebekov, Eitingon along with his family returned to Moscow. His new assignment was as deputy to Iakov Serebrianski who headed the Special Group of the OGPU. The Special Group was not subordinate to the INO [Foreign Intelligence Service], but rather reported directly to the head of the OGPU.

The mission of the Special Group was to establish overseas deep agent networks in and around objectives of military-strategic significance and to prepare sabotage operations in the rear of the enemy during war time.

During this period Eitingon often in the company of Serebrianski traveled repeatedly to California where he recruited Japanese and Chinese emigrants to conduct espionage activities against Japan in the event of war.

Eitingon worked in parallel with Isak Akhmerov who had established an agent network for the Foreign Intelligence Service [INO]. During this period, Eitingon dispatched two of his agents to the United States both Polish Jews who succeeded in infiltrating an unidentified American institution and who later provided the Soviets intelligence on the American atomic bomb project.

During one of his trips to California, Eitingon recruited Yotoku Miyagi who later became a central figure in the Richard Sorge spy ring in Tokyo.[[6]](#footnote-6)

For unexplained reasons, Eitingon and Serbrianski had a falling out and Eitingon asked for a transfer. Consequently he was sent back to the Foreign Intelligence Service INO and made chief of the 8th Department [Scientific-Technical Intelligence] of the INO OGPU exchanging places with Aleksander Orlov who would later head Soviet intelligence operations in Spain during the Civil War.

Eitingon headed the 8th Department for only a few months and then he was sent on assignment to France and then to Belgium. What he did during this period of time is unclear, but he returned to Moscow in March 1933.

Then in April 1933 at only thirty-three years of age, he was named head of the 1st Department [Illegals] of the INO OGPU. This was a plum assignment especially since Artur Khristianovich Artuzov, head of the Foreign Intelligence Service [INO] was intent upon strengthening illegal networks in preparation for a possible war with Germany. It was during this assignment that Eitingon met Pavel Anato’evich Sudoplatov, his future chief and close friend.

According to Antonov, Eitingon was not head of the 1st Department for long. By the end of 1933 he was sent on assignments to the US, China, France, Iran, Poland, and Germany where he worked to improve the performance of the illegal rezidents and to prepare the legal rezidents to transfer responsibilities to the illegal side in the event of hostilities. Precisely what Eitingon did during this period is still classified “Secret”. It is astonishing, however, to this reviewer that the Center would have allowed Eitingon, a man who knew the identities of *all Soviet illegals*, to operate abroad where he might face exposure and arrest.

In recognition of his high performance at the beginning of 1936, Eitingon was promoted to rank of major of state security the equivalent of the army rank of colonel.

**The Spanish Civil War**

In the midst of the Spanish Civil War on 16 September 1936, Aleksandr Mikhailovich Orlov arrived in Madrid, Spain to serve as the NKVD rezident.[[7]](#footnote-7) Leonid Eitingon was appointed the deputy rezident. According to Colonel Antonov, “It is necessary to note that Eitingon was from the very first took on an active part in practically all the operational activities of the rezidentura.” During this period, Eitingon took on the nom de guerre of “Kotov” and “P’er”. He was commonly known among the Republicans as General Kotov.

While proud of the activities and successes of Soviet Foreign Intelligence during the Spanish Civil War, it requires some embarrassing intellectual gymnastics on Antonov’s part, namely how to treat the desertion to America of the rezident Aleksandr Orlov, one of the most successful Soviet intelligence operatives.

By 1937 Aleksandr Orlov caught wind of the purges underway in the Soviet Union and he feared that he would be swept up in them. Consequently in July 1938, he left Spain, collected his wife and daughter in France, and took a ship to Canada thereby evading the NKVD death squads. He ultimately settled in the United States. To insure his safety he sent a letter to Stalin threatening to reveal all the Soviet spy networks if any harm came to his family. Orlov did not, however, turn himself into Western authorities. He remained anonymous living among the population until the death of Stalin in 1953 when he revealed his presence by publishing a book.

On the one hand the desertion of Orlov was an embarrassment to Soviet Foreign Intelligence, on the other hand could one blame Orlov from deserting in the face of almost certain death in Moscow from Stalin’s irrational purges? Antonov maneuvers around this predicament by noting that even after Orlov published his book **A History of Stalin’s Crimes**, he did not reveal to the FBI any information it did not already know. Furthermore, when Willy Fisher alias Colonel Rudolf Abel was arrested in New York City, Orlov did not blow his cover but said that he had only a corridor relationship with Abel, not revealing that his real name was Fisher. Orlov who knew the identities of the Cambridge Five to include Kim Philby did not reveal them to Western authorities.

Consequently, Antonov notes that in the early 1960s, the Washington rezidentura was told to treat Orlov not as a traitor or defector, but rather as a “non-returnee”.

Meanwhile, during Orlov’s tenure in Spain, Eitingon functioned as his deputy with special emphasis on sabotage operations. While Lev Petrovich Vasilevskii was the official chief of intelligence-sabotage operations, so-called “Line D” under the rezidentura, Eitingon and NKVD operational groups in cooperation with the Spanish conducted a number of raids in the rear of the Franco forces. In at least one case, Eitingon led a raid against petroleum reserves of the Italian corps operating in Spain. The reserves were destroyed and the Italian corps crippled in its operations.

With the departure of Orlov, Eitingon became the INO OGPU rezident in Spain. By that time the Republican forces were in retreat and on the verge of defeat. In February 1939 Eitingon organized the departure of the Spanish Republican leaders as well as communist leaders and Soviet advisors and volunteers to France.

In mid-1939 Eitington returned to Moscow. The Foreign Intelligence Service did not escape the impact of the purges. Of 450 members of INO including those abroad 275 were either shot or sent to the gulag some 61% of the membership.

**Assassination of Leon Trotsky**

There are several detailed accounts of the assassination of Leon Trotsky[[8]](#footnote-8). Consequently your reviewer will discuss those points where Antonov provides either new details or new perspectives on the assassination.

The first challenge for Colonel Antonov is how to justify the assassination of Trotsky. Antonov starts with the argument that Stalin believed it was necessary to eliminate Trotsky in order rid the Soviet Union of the threat of a 5th Column in the forthcoming war with Germany.

Antonov then goes on to contrast Stalin with Trotsky. Stalin was a “sincere Marxist, with a deep belief in the victory of the socialist revolution even in conditions of encirclement by imperialist powers.” Stalin was the son of a humble shoemaker while Trotsky was the son of a well-to-do land owner. The main thrust of Antonov’s argument was that Trotsky did not value the lives of the Great Russians. Moreover, “Trotsky was a cosmopolitan” which is an indirect way of saying he was a Jew. “[Trotsky] described the Russian people in the course of their 1,000 year history as resembling a ‘rotten pile of potatoes’ and he did not seeing anything heroic in them.”

Trotsky was a target of Soviet foreign intelligence beginning in 1929 with Trotsky’s exile to Turkey. The Soviets made every effort to penetrate Trotsky’s inner circle. Among the first to do so were the brothers Jack Soble and Robert Soblen. They gained access to ciphers and addresses of Trotsky’s allies in the Soviet Union and they were able to pass on much of Trotsky’s correspondence. Later they went on to lead an espionage ring in the United States.

Soviet intelligence was especially able to penetrate the inner circle around Lev Segov who was Trotsky’s son. Segov, who used his mother’s name rather than his father’s, was head of the Secretariat of the IV International, a Paris based organization devoted to opposition to Stalin and to propagating Trotskyism. The INO OGPU managed to place an agent, one Mark Zaborovskii, as Sedov’s personal secretary.

With a tone of bravado, Antonov claims that Zaborovskii provided copies of Sedov’s **Bulletin of the Opposition**, a publication of the Trotskyist opposition, to Stalin even before Trotsky could read them. He also assisted in the theft of the Trotsky archives.

Iakov Serebrianski, Eitingon’s former chief, was sent to Paris to abduct Segov, but before the plan could be executed Lev Segovov came down with a case of appendicitis. He inexplicably requested to go to the Russian hospital in Paris where he died in February 1938 after two operations. It is commonly believed in the West that Soviet intelligence was behind Sedov’s death, but Colonel Antonov is adamant that Sedov died of natural causes after the decline of his body’s natural resistance.

Meanwhile, in March 1939 Stalin summoned Beria and Pavel Sudoplatov, deputy head of foreign intelligence, to the Kremlin where the decision was made to assassinate Leon Trotsky. The mission was dubbed Operation Duck. Sudoplatov was appointed overall head of the operation and was to operate from Moscow. Leonid Eitingon in view of his linguistic capabilities in Spanish and experience with operational matters was appointed Sudoplatov’s deputy and was to direct the operation from Mexico.

To demonstrate that Operation Duck was not a slap-dash operation, Colonel Antonov quotes from the OPORD for Duck written on 9 July 1939:

“Goal: Liquidation of Duck [Trotsky]”

“Methods: Agent-operational development of an active group”

“Means: In order poison food, poison water, explosion in the house, explosion in the car with the aid of chemical devise, direct blow by strangling, a dagger, blow on the head, shooting. Possible armed attack by a group.”

“People: Organizer and chief-operator “Tom” [that is Eitingon] together with “Tom” send “Mother” [Caridad Mercader] and “Raymond” [Ramon Mercader].”

The document stipulated that Trotsky’s home and the people around him should be closely studied.

The OPLAN was signed on 9 July 1939 by Pavel Fitin [Chief of Foreign Intelligence], Pavel Sudoplatov [Deputy Chief of Foreign Intelligence], and Leonid Eitingon. Curiously only their signatures are on the document. They were not identified by rank or position. Clearly the signatories understood the political sensitivity of the mission and the possibility of blowback. In early August 1939 Stalin approved the plan.

With a budget of $31,000 dollars and a six month time-line, the operation started. Eitingon and Sudaplatov went to Paris to recruit communist operatives with experience in the Spanish Civil War, among the recruits was Caridad Mercader and her son Ramon Mercader.

Eitingon created two teams, each unknown to the other. The first team was led by David Siqueiros, a famous Mexican painter and veteran of the Spanish Civil War. The second group consisted of Caridad Mercader and her son Ramon.

The precise membership of the Siqueiros team is not clear, but several were Mexican college students bolstered by veterans of the Spanish Civil War. Among the members of the Siqueiros team was Joseph Grigulevich, an INO OGPU officer with substantial experience in assassinations.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Sudaplatov states that Grigulevich played a key role in the assassination attempt on Trotsky by befriending Robert Sheldon Harte, one of Trotsky’s bodyguards. Sudaplatov implies that Grigulevich recruited Harte. And, indeed, it was Harte who opened the door to Trotsky’s villa to the assassination team upon seeing Grigulevich. Mitrokin simply states that Grigulevich and not Siqueiros was the leader of the assassination team. Curiously Colonel Antonov does not mention Grigulevich at all, but he makes the point that Harte was recruited by the rezident in New York, given the nom de guerre of “Amur”, and directed to go to Mexico. This undercuts the notion that Grigulevich recruited Harte.

On 24 May 1940 the Siqueiros team assaulted Trotsky’s villa. Robert Sheldon Harte allowed the assassination team in, then supposedly showed the team where the Trotsky archives were located and where Trotsky was sleeping, but he showed the assassins the wrong rooms. Although the room where Trotsky was hiding was shot up, Trotsky was not even wounded.

Sometime later a shallow grave was found containing Robert Sheldon Harte’s body. He was murdered by the assassination team. According to Sudaplatov, they killed Harte so that he could not identify Grigulevich. Colonel Antonov, however, has another take. Quoting from a statement by Eitingon made on 9 March 1954, “During the operation it was determined that Sheldon [Harte] was a traitor. Although he opened the door of the villa, however the room where he led the attack group contained neither the archive nor Trotsky…Such behavior served as the basis for taking on the spot the decision for his liquidation. *He was killed by the Mexicans* [emphasis added by reviewer].”[[10]](#footnote-10)

With the failure of the attack to either kill Trotsky or destroy the archives, Eitingon had the unenviable task of communicating the news to the Moscow. Communications with the Center were poor. Yet on 30 May Eitingon managed to send a remarkable message back.

“About our misfortune, you know about in detail from the newspapers. I will provide you with a report later. Thus far all the people are accounted for and part have left the country.”

“If matters don’t become especially complex, in two to three weeks we will act to correct the situation, since not all the reserves are exhausted.”

“I completely accept responsibility for this catastrophe. I am at your first command prepared to leave and to receive punishment for this failure. 30 May Tom”[[11]](#footnote-11)

It was at this point that the second group was activated – Caridad Mercader [“Mother”] and her middle son Ramon Mercader [Raymond”]. Colonel Antonov provides biographical details on both. It was Eitingon who in 1937 formally recruited Caridad into the Soviet foreign intelligence service. Ramon, who fought in the Spanish Civil War and was wounded, was recruited by Aleksandr Orlov in 1938.

Both were sent to Mexico with orders to penetrate the Trotsky household. Ramon Mercader posed as a Canadian operating under the nom de guerre of Frank Jacson. The handsome and well funded Ramon seduced Sylvia Ageloff, one of Trotsky’s secretaries, and a woman with the reputation as being an “old maid”. Consequently while courting Sylvia Ageloff, Ramon became a familiar face around the Trotsky compound with his name appearing in the guest book at least 12 times. He managed to arrange a private meeting with Trotsky during which Ramon Mercader produced a pick-axe and struck Trotsky killing him. Eitingon and Caridad were outside waiting for Ramon, but Trotsky’s bodyguards seized him before he could escape.

Unfortunately Colonel Antonov does not provide any details as to how Eitingon convinced Ramon Mercader to carry out the assassination with a high probably that he might be killed or captured. Did Eitingon sweet talk him, brow beat him, ask his mother Caridad to influence him?

Antonov does go into some detail as to Ramon Mercader’s fate following his arrest by Mexican authorities. While Ramon did confess to the murder of Trotsky, claiming he did so for personal reasons, he never acknowledged a link with Soviet intelligence or government authorities. While the Mexican police quickly determined that Frank Jacson was not the real name of the man they had in custody, it took several years and the assistance of Spanish authorities before they were able to identify him as Ramon Mercader.

Arrested and imprisoned, Ramon Mercader was not forgotten! Colonel Antonov notes, “First of all the prisoner was secured solid legal support…Ties with “Raymond” were secured by two trusted, specially instructed agents in Mexico. They in turn were connected through a cut-out with the rezidentura in New York.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Antonov further notes that Raymond Mercader “received the necessary moral support and material help”. Indirect evidence of this is a photograph in the book of a plump Ramon Mercader in a Mexican prison.[[13]](#footnote-13)

After the assassination of Trotsky, Leonid Eitingon and Caridad Mercader escaped to Cuba. At that point the decision was made that Eitingon and Mercader would return separately to the Soviet Union. Although Antonov does not mention it and Sudaplatov denies it, it is generally believed that Leonid and Caridad were lovers. Given Eitingon’s reputation as a ladies man and the fact that they traveled together, it seems unlikely they were not enjoying time between the sheets.

Caridad like her son was not forgotten by Soviet Foreign Intelligence. After the war, she returned to Paris where she received financial support from the Center. Zinaida Nikolaevna Batraeva [“Tat’iana”], an experienced Soviet intelligence officer based in Paris, recounted to Colonel Antonov her meetings with Caridid, “Usually we met in a café. I brought her a letter from Ramon which was sent to the [Paris] rezidentura from Mexico through the Center. Periodically I transferred money to her. Beria gave her a good pension. I was very sad for Ramon and his mother. And sometimes at the meetings we cried…Caridad having prepared a letter for Ramon, I sent it to the Center which in turn sent it to Mexico.”

**The Great Patriotic War**

For most of the Great Patriotic War [World War II] Leonid Eitingon focused his energies on organizing and directing partisan activities behind German lines. According to Colonel Antonov, the day before the war started, Beria personally ordered Eitingon to form a special group for sabotage operations in the rear of the enemy. A few days later on 5 July 1941 this special operations group was formally created with Sudaplatov as its head and Eitingon as his deputy. Working on behalf of the organs of state security, i.e. its “main missions were: conducting intelligence operations against Germany and its satellites, the organization of the partisan war, and formation of agents nets in the occupied territories.” Upon signing by Beria the NKVD Order No 00882 on 5 July 1941, Antonov argues, the Soviet spetsnaz were born.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Much of what Colonel Antonov discusses is covered in the World War II section of Pavel Sudaplatov’s book **Special Tasks**. There are, however, several new details that emerge in **Eitingon**. First, Antonov makes the point of emphasizing the patriotic role of the Russian Orthodox Church during the war as well as the inherently patriotic nature of the church. Illustrative of this is his discussion of Operation Courier.

In the first days of the war Bishop Vasilii Mikhailovich Ratmirov asked permission to go the front “to serve the Fatherland and to defend the orthodox church from the fascist devils.” The fever of his requests increased after his diocese of Zhitomir fell to the Germans.

Lieutenant Colonel Zoia Ivanova Voskresenskaia-Rybkina, one of Sudaplatov/Eitingon’s intelligence officers, caught wind of the Bishop’s requests. She invited him to a meeting where she pitched him with a plan. He would go to Kalinin as a bishop, and he would allow the NKVD’s Foreign Intelligence Service to insert as his assistants two intelligence operatives. Bishop Ratmirov’s major concern was that the two operatives not profane the Church by bloodshed. After receiving assurances from Rybina that would only collect intelligence on the enemy, the Bishop agreed to provide “cover” for the intelligence operatives.

Rybkina searched diligently for two operatives who could serve as assistants to the Bishop. They settled on Lieutenant Colonel Vasilii Mikhailovich Ivanov (nom de guerre “Vas’ko”) and Ivan Vasil’evich Kulikov (nom de guerre “Mikhas’”)[[15]](#footnote-15) Since both were communist atheists, they required special instruction on how to behave as an Orthodox Christian, i.e. pray, cross one’s self, bow, etc. The Bishop provided this training.

When the German forces conquered Kalinin, Bishop Valsili was in place along with his two assistants. Most of the city was destroyed but the church escape unscathed. Valsili went to the German authorities with the request that they leave him and his flock alone to practice their faith. He told the Germans that he was not disposed towards the communists since they had sent him to a gulag camp in the far north.

Indeed, the Bishop’s flock returned to church after the German occupation and his two “assistants” were able to obtain valuable intelligence to forward to the Center. Moreover, they uncovered two Gestapo agent networks and arms caches.

“Vasko” and “Mikhas” were awarded the Badge of Honor and the medal Partisan of the Great Patriotic War 1st Degree. After the war Bishop Vasilii was made archbishop of Smolensk and given a gold watch from Soviet intelligence.

In addition to his discussion of Operation Courier, Colonel Antonov also discusses Operation Monastery and Operation Birch. Operation Monastery was centered around Aleksanr Petrovich Dem’ianov (code named “Heine”) who deceived the Germans by claiming to be a junior officer on Marshal Shaposhnikov’s staff and by sending false information to the Germans. Interestingly Willy Fisher, alias Rudolf Abel, served as Dem’ianov’s radio operator.

Towards the end of the war, Aleksandr Dem’ianov played a key role in Operation Birch which was an elaborate plan to convince the Germans that there were German military units cut off from the main body of the German army but who were willing to serve as partisans. The Germans were convinced to air drop supplies to these stay behind units. Antonov proudly notes that the Germans between September 1944 and May 1945 sent 39 flights into the Soviet rear with supplies and dropping 22 German intelligence operatives.

Sudaplotov and Eitingon played oversight roles in these operations as well as many others. There are not many details on the precise role of Eitingon in these operations. There is, however, one interesting “fact” that Antonov presents without detail or context, “At the end of 1941 [during the Battle of Moscow] based on a decision of the NKVD, Naum Eitingon went on a special TDY abroad. In August 1942 he returned to Moscow.” Why did Antonov even mention this mission if he was unwilling or unable to give any details? Perhaps at some later date the information will be available.

In November 1945 Leonid Eitingon was promoted to major general, no doubt in recognition of his service to the Soviet Union, the NKVD, and the Foreign Intelligence Service.

**The Post War Years**

With the end of the Great Patriotic War [Second World War], the intense pace of operations for Sudaplatov and Eitingon did not end. In February 1944, Sudaplatov who was already head of the 4th Administration of the NKVD was given additional duties as head of Department “S” which was charged with coordinating securing intelligence materials for Problem No 1, i.e. the atomic weapons program. Eighteen months later on 27 September 1945, Eitingon was appointed Sudaplatov’s deputy.

***Bulgaria***

The Soviets in their efforts to build an atomic bomb needed uranium. They found some deposits in Bulgaria. Worried that the U.S. and Britain would try to sabotage their efforts to mine the uranium and ship it to the Soviet Union, Eitingon was dispatched to Bulgaria to prevent Western intelligence and sabotage operations directed against the uranium mining operations.

When the Soviets discovered an even larger and higher quality uranium deposit in the Soviet Union, Eitingon’s mission shifted to one of disinformation. He focused his energies on a “massive disinformation campaign” aimed at convincing American intelligence that the Soviet Union was dependent upon Bulgarian uranium deposits for its atomic bomb project. This program, Antonov argues, helped shift the American intelligence focus away from activities underway in the Soviet Union.

In October 1946, the 4th Administration which Sudaplatov and Eitingon headed was abolished. A few months early in May 1946 an independent “DR” Division was established with “the mission of preparing to initiate in the event of war intelligence-sabotage operations against military-strategic bases of the USA and its allies located around the USSR.” The mission of the 4th Administration and the “DR” Division were similar and Sudaplatov was named the head of the “DR Division”. Upon his return from Bulgaria, probably in late 1946, Eitingon was officially named Sudaplatov’s deputy in February 1947.

As an interesting aside, Colonel Antonov notes that Eitingon was involved in training Willy Fisher alias Rudolph Able for an overseas tour, probably to the United States.

***Xinjiang***

Xinjiang Province in northwestern China is a region that for the first half of the 20th Century alluded central authority from Beijing. Formally a part of China, it was controlled by local war lords interspersed with occasion forays from the Soviet Army. It was riven by internal ethnic strife among Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Han Chinese, and others. Moreover, the Chinese communist army was on the verge of occupying the province. It was into the cacophony that Leonid Eitingon was sent in 1947.

According to Colonel Antonov, there was already a NKVD group of internal security troops already in place in Xinjiang. Eitingon’s mission was to “help this group in conjunction with Chinese security organs organize efforts to dissolve the Uyghur movement”.

Eitingon helped organize together with the Chinese communists combat groups under the overall command of foreign intelligence service officer Colonel Nikolai Prokopiuk. By the end of the 1949, the Uyghur movement was effectively defeated.

During his tour in Xinjiang, Eitingon sent detail reports to Moscow and Beijing that detailed the military-political situation in the province. As the result of this information, the Soviets and Chinese were able to disrupt agent and sabotage groups supported by British intelligence.

***TDY to Lithuania***

Working out of his office in Lubyanka, Leonid Eitingon made repeated trips to Lithuania to help local officials suppress the Lithuanian nationalist movement. Colonel Antonov details efforts by US and British intelligence to foment revolution in Lithuania.

As for Eitingon’s role in suppressing the Lithuanian nationalist movement, Antonov simply states, “Under his leadership the Lithuanian Chekists worked out and implemented successful agent operations. However, details of the operations are covered by the “top secret” stamp.”

In September 1950 Department DR was transformed into Bureau No. 1 of the MVD. It was essentially the same organization with the same mission but a different name. Sudaplatov was appointed chief and Eitingon was appointed as his deputy.

**Twice A Prisoner of the Soviet Union**

Upon returning from Lithuania where he had just helped neutralize the leadership of the anti-Soviet underground, Leonid Eitingon was arrested on 28 October 1951. He was accused of being a part of the so-called Doctors’ Plot or Zionist Conspiracy. His sister Sofia, a prominent Moscow physician, was also arrested for refusing to treat Russian patients. The real crime for both Leonid, his sister Sofia, and others was being Jewish.

Leonid Eitingon spent approximately seventeen months in prison. Then with the death of Joseph Stalin, he was released on orders of Beria. On one day Leonid Eitingon was a prisoner and the next we was back to work as the deputy chief of the 9th Division within the MVD!

Eitingon’s freedom was short lived. Soon Beria was arrested and he and Sudaplotov were arrested as well[[16]](#footnote-16). The official reason for their arrest was that they were plotting together with Beria and Abakumkov to overthrow the regime. The real reason was they were perceived as being Beria allies and hostile to the rule of Khrushchev and Malenkov.

It was not until March 1957 that Eitingon was “tried” and then it was by the Military Collegium of the Supreme Soviet. He was found guilty of “treachery to the Fatherland” and was sentenced to twelve years in prison.

Eitingon was sent to Vladimir Prison where he eventually ended up sharing a prison cell with Pavel Sudoplatov! To while away their time in prison, they wrote letters to Krushchev and other leaders with suggestions on how to improve Soviet security and intelligence efforts.

In one case they wrote a letter suggesting that KGB establish an organization similar to the American Green Berets [Special Forces]. The letter ended up on the desk of Aleksandr Shelepin, then a Senior Secretary of the Secretariat responsible for security and intelligence and a future head of the KGB who found the suggestion compelling. He sent it over to Lieutenant General Fadeikin, then head of the 3rd Administration of the KGB (counterintelligence). This resulted in discussions with Eitingon and Sudaplatov on how to implement their suggestion. Soon a training school for KGB spetsnaz was established and units such as Group Alpha came into existence.

In another case Sudaplatov and Eitingon suggested that Soviets develop a relationship with the Kurdish independence leader Mustafa Barzani in order to undermine the Iraqi dictator Karim Kasem. For this, they were rewarded with two kilograms of sugar!

During their imprisonment, a number of distinguished, retired Soviet intelligence officers signed a petition to the Central Committee asking that the case of Eitingon and Sudaplatov be reconsidered[[17]](#footnote-17). There was no response at all to the petition.

To the end, Eitingon and Sudaplatov remained faithful to the Foreign Intelligence Service, the Communist Party, and the nation in spite of being ill-treated for their patriotism.

In view of his already having served unjustly for seventeen months in prison for the Doctors Plot, Leonid Eitingon was allowed to leave prison earlier than his friend Pavel Sudaplatov. Eitingon left Vladimir prison on 20 March 1964. Sudaplatov was released on 21 August 1968.

**About the Personal Side**

Colonel Antonov does not devote much space to the personal side of Leonid Eitingon’s life. He notes that Eitingon had three wives. He does not name the first wife, but identifies Olga Georgievna Vasil’eva [formerly Zarubin] as the second wife and Muze Grigor’evna Malinovskaia as the third. Eitingon had four children (two boys and two girls) and one step-daughter and one step-son.

As for Eitingon’s numerous affairs, this is ignored by Antonov, no doubt a reflection of his communist prissiness.

Leonid Eitingon died of a heart attack on 3 May 1981 and was buried in the Donskoi Cemetery in Moscow. Sudaplatov died several years later on 24 September 1996.

Vladimir Antonov summarized Eitingon’s life:

*The grave of Eitingon is in the Donskoi Cemetery in Moscow surrounded by the graves of his colleagues and friends:*

*Iosif Grigulevich, William Fisher (Rudolph Abel), Konon Molodyi, Iakov Serebrianskii, Pavel Sudoplatov, Sergei Shpeigel’glaz who like Naum Eitingon were romantics and long serving knights of foreign intelligence and after the departure from life are again together.*

*Long live their memory!*

**Summary**

Does a biography of a Soviet intelligence operative really tell us much about the culture of the Soviet/Russia intelligence service? Yes, indeed it does.

This biography was written by the semi-official historian of the Soviet/Russian intelligence service – Vladimir Antonov, a man dedicated to honoring the achievements of the foreign intelligence. He chose or was encouraged to select Eitingon as a subject of a biography no doubt because Eitingon was seen as embodying the best virtues of the intelligence service. There are a number of themes that emerge in this biography that reflect the larger culture of Soviet/Russian foreign intelligence.

First, Great Russian nationalism permeates the book. Indicative of this is that Antonov cites Trotsky’s supposed anti-Great Russian sentiments and less his ideological position of encouraging world revolution as a sufficient cause to justify Trotsky’s assassination.

Antonov also emphasizes the patriotic role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Great Patriotic War, a theme that is also manifesting itself in recent Russian war films.

Second, there is also an underlying sense of ant-Semitism. While not explicit, it is hinted at. For example, Antonov refers to Eitingon as Naum Eitingon, his legal name albeit a Jewish name, but his friends and family called him Leonid.

Third, there is little agonizing over the morality of intelligence operations. An order is an order and it must be followed. There is no concern over whether an order is a “legal and lawful order” or not.

Fourth, the Foreign Intelligence Service does not abandon its friends. Indicative of this is that Ramon Mercader’s legal expenses were paid by the Foreign Intelligence Service and once he was in prison the authorities were bribed to provide him with a comfortable existence. His mother Caridad Mercader received a pension from the Soviet state and payments were delivered to her directly by Soviet intelligence operatives.

Fifth true and faithful service to the Fatherland and to the Foreign Intelligence Service is admired even if the State and Party do not return the favor.

Sixth, the Soviet/Russian concept of “foreign” includes service in regions that are nominally part of the Soviet Union/Russia such as the Bashkir and Tatarstan and not just foreign countries like Iran and Turkey.

Your reviewer hopes that others will take the time to read similar books in foreign languages and not be put off by concerns that they may be just propaganda or disinformation. Behind the bravado there are often kernels of truth.

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1. Lieutenant General Pavel Sudaplotov was Eitingon’s superior and friend. He was the author of **Special Tasks** (New York: Little Brown, 1984) which discussed in detail many of the OGPU/NKVD/KGB’s operations in the 1930-1950. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Vladimir Pavlovich Alekssev became a highly successful intelligence officer serving in Harbin, China and then for many years as a consular official in Japan [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In an aside, Vladimir Antonov spends a page and a half outlining Nikolai Vollenberg’s distinguished career. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a full discussion of the importance of the Eastern Faculty of the Frunze Military Academy to the development of Soviet intelligence see V. A. Runov and D. G. Vaisman, **Na zare sovetskoi razvedki (At the Dawn of Soviet Intelligence)** [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Agabekov, Georgii, **Sekretnaia politika stalina: ispoved’ rezidenta** **(The Secret Policies of Stalin: Confessions of a Rezident)** [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Yotoku Miyagi told his captors that he was recruited when he was living in Los Angeles, California by an “American” named “Roy”. Roy was quite possibly Eitingon. See Owen Matthews book **An Impeccable Spy: Richard Sorge, Stalin’s Master Agent** (London: Bloomsbury, 2019) p. 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. According to the official declaration of the Politboro, Orlov was to serve as the NKVD rezident to Spain and the main Soviet advisor on internal security and counterintelligence under the Republican Government and the Main Administration of Security of the Government. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, **The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB** (New York: Basic Books, 1999) and Dmitri Volkogonov, **Trotsky: The Eternal Revolutionary** (New York: The Free Press, 1996) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Grigulevich is said to have played a key role in the assassination of Andreu Nin, head of the POUM party during the Spanish Civil War. Later in his career under the name of Teodoro B. Castro, he would ingratiate himself sufficiently with the Costa Rican authorities to be named Ambassador to the Vatican and then as Ambassador to Italy and Yugoslavia. In the months preceding Stalin’s death, he was involved in planning the assassination of Tito. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This was the first explicit statement identifying precisely who killed Harte. However, since Eitingon was in prison and facing grave charges when he made this statement, he had an ulterior motive in shifting the blame off his shoulders to the Mexicans. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. To your reviewer’s knowledge, this is the first time that the text of Eitingon’s message back to the Center was published. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Since Mexico did not have a death sentence, Ramon Mercader was sentenced to the maximum punishment of 20 years in prison. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Antonov also provides details of Mercader’s life after imprisonment. He returned to the Soviet Union where he was awarded the medal Hero of the Soviet Union, made a Soviet citizen, and appointed a major general. He later died in Cuba serving as the Soviet representative to the Cuban Ministry of Internal Affairs. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Aleksandr Sever in his book **Voennyi spetsnaz rossii: vezhlivie liudi iz gru** **[Military Spetsnaz of Russia: The Polite People of the GRU]** argues “Indeed the spetsnaz of our country was established on 24 October 1950 with the publication of Directive of the Ministry of Defense USSR No Org/2/395832 signed by Marshal of the Soviet Union Aleksandr Mikhailovich Vasilevskii and Chief of the General Staff General Sergei Matveevich Shtemenko”. This may be a debate over semantics since the Special Group under Sudaplatov and Eitingon was part of the NKVD while Marshal Vasilevskii order covered the Ministry of Defense. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. There is a discrepancy between Colonel Antonov‘s statement that agent “Mikhas” was Ivan Vasil’evich Kulikov and the claim by one Ivan Ivanovich Mikheev who said he was “Mikhas”. Ivan Mikheev, a prominent painter after the war, published his memoirs in **Nauka I religia** (**Science and Religion**) and became a Russian Orthodox believer. See “Bog prostil” (God Forgave) by Nikolai Dolgopolov in **Rossiiskaia gazeta** – Nedeliia No 278 (7444) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Colonel Antonov notes that virtually the entire senior leadership of the MVD [Former NKVD] was arrested and executed to include Colonel General Bogdan Kobulov, his brother Lieutenant General Amaiak Kobulov, Chief of the Investigative Department for Special Affairs Lieutenant General Lev Vlodzimirskii, Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs Colonel General Sergei Goglidze, and the former chief of Foreign Intelligence and Ambassador to Germany Vladimir Dekanozov. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Among the distinguished signatories of the petition were Willy Fisher (alias Rudolf Able), Lev Vasilevskii, Georgii Mordinov, Zoia Voskresenskaia-Rybkoina, and others, [↑](#footnote-ref-17)