KGB "Evangelism": Agents and Jehovah's Witnesses in Soviet Ukraine

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In the autumn of 1952, two Jehovah's Witnesses from Ukraine clandestinely met in L´viv in a safe house owned by a Witness courier named Tatiana. They did not know each other. This was their first meeting since the 1951 deportation and wide-scale repression of Jehovah's Witnesses in western Ukraine. They met to discuss possible attempts to restore the Witness underground network and to set up new leadership. The two Witnesses did not know, however, that the place where they met was under KGB surveillance and that their host, Tatiana, was a KGB informer code-named Ania.[1] She reported on them a few days later. But there were two more reports informing on the same clandestine meeting. One of the two Witnesses at the meeting was Agent Kirpichenko: in his report, he informed on Tatiana and the other believer, whom he knew only as "Jonadab from Heavenly Jerusalem." The third report correspondingly was submitted by that same "Jonadab" and signed as Agent Vladko.[2]

For the next four years, as part of a KGB secret operation, Agents Kirpichenko and Vladko traveled all over western Ukraine, holding clandestine prayer meetings and Bible study groups, baptizing, preaching at funerals, and disseminating *Watch Tower* literature. However, as we will see, the

[1] The Soviet security service underwent a series of restructuring reforms and went by different names (Cheka/NKVD/GPU/MGB/KGB). By the time of this secret operation, the Soviet security service (MGB) was in the midst of its final reincorporation, until eventually, in 1954, it was formed as the Committee for State Security (KGB). I use the term "KGB" to refer to the Soviet secret police and intelligence agencies before and after their final reorganization.

[2] Haluzevyi derzhavnyi arkhiv Sluzhby bezpeky Ukraïny (hereafter SBU Archive) f. 2, op. 1, spr. 2431, ark. 261, 282; spr. 2432, ark. 87, 251. I keep the original names and code names of agents.

religious literature was produced by the KGB. Neither ever knew that the other was an agent. Being under deep cover and avoiding encounters with the local militia, they walked at night, slept in train stations or in the forest, and followed all assigned conspiratorial regulations any ordinary Witness in the Soviet Union would follow. What made them different from other Witnesses was their regular meetings with KGB operative officers and the submission of their agent reports after every journey. They reported on every believer they met, giving names, addresses, and other sensitive information.

Soon after World War II, the Soviet state launched a wholesale repression campaign against Jehovah's Witnesses in western Ukraine. There were a handful of Witness communities in the Soviet Union prior to the war, despite persistent missionary attempts from abroad since the late 19th century.[3] After the annexation of territories in 1939, however, the Soviet Union became home for over 6,000 Witnesses, most of them located in eastern Galicia, Volyn´, northern Bukovina, and Bessarabia (with smaller groups in Belarus and the Baltic region). The communities steadily grew, and by the end of the 1940s, there were about 8,000 Witnesses, mainly peasant Ukrainians, Poles, and Romanians living in the countryside, running the most complex underground operations in the Soviet Union. Their network of close-knit communities; system of bunkers, hideouts, and underground printing presses; smuggling operations; couriers with coded communication; and other secretive practices distinguished them from other religious organizations functioning in the Soviet Union. In the Soviet obsession with conspiracy, they were represented as stooges of American imperialism, despite the fact that Witnesses were largely criticized as being un-American and unpatriotic in the mid-20th-century United States.[4] Witnesses living on the Ukrainian borderlands were often accused of being emissaries of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists. Hence Jehovah's Witnesses in all recently annexed territories became the primary target of the KGB. Apart from mass arrests and two deportations (1949 and 1951) of Witnesses from Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, the Soviet secret police attempted to infiltrate the Witness organization. From the mid-1950s until at least the late 1970s, the KGB reported that the Witness country committee (the main governing body of the Soviet Witnesses) was under its control, infiltrated with police agents.[5]

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[3] Emily Baran, *Dissent on the Margins: How Soviet Jehovah's Witnesses Defied Communism and Lived to Preach about It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 15–19.

[4] Zoe Knox, "Jehovah's Witnesses as Un-Americans? Scriptural Injunctions, Civil Liberties, and Patriotism," *Journal of American Studies* 47, 4 (2013): 1081–108.

[5] Some of the first details on the KGB's operations against Jehovah's Witnesses appear in 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), 504–6.

This article reconstructs the history of one KGB operation called Termity (Termites). The secret operation was launched by the Ukrainian KGB office in 1951, the same year the state organized a large-scale deportation of Witnesses from the western borderlands, and it was suspended in 1954, soon after Stalin's death. The operation aimed to infiltrate the Jehovah's Witness underground organization in Ukraine (and later in the entire Soviet Union) and to organize a Witness country committee as a covert operation. The plan was designed in such a way that the Soviet security service became the head of the Jehovah's Witnesses organization, and the headquarters of the official Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society (hereafter the Watch Tower Society), located in Brooklyn, became a channel in its counterintelligence operations against the United States.

There were about 200 agents and informers working in the religious underground as part of the operation. Most of them were recruited from within the Witness organization. This article attempts to reconstruct the "file stories" of some of them, focusing on the entanglements and ambiguities of collaboration and secret police surveillance in the Soviet era.[6] Based on KGB archival materials recently opened in Ukraine, this study tells about the failures and unexpected side-effects of the operation. A thick reading of the files reveals many layers of meaning. It unveils the unseen forms of agency that believers developed within the context of surveillance or while being forced to collaborate with the secret police; when the burden of collaboration was perceived as a religious experience; and when the KGB, ironically, became a platform upon which Witnesses (outlawed and repressed by the state) restored their communication channels and rebuilt their communities.

The boundaries between believers and agents were blurred and uncertain. Furthermore, as the story below shows, there was no clear line between religious *dissent* and the political *center*. While interfering with the internal life and the leadership of the Jehovah's Witness organization, the KGB in fact acted as a source of religious reproduction. It was the agent network that facilitated the redistribution of religious knowledge and its circulation between underground local communities when no other ways of communication were possible.

The "file stories" below are the result of a meticulous deconstruction of several thousand pages of documents produced by the KGB in its work against

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[6] "File stories" is a term suggested by Valentina Glajar to refer to the intertwinement of file and life: fragments of life stories (of both collaborators and victims) scattered in secret police files. Valentina Glajar, "'You'll Never Make a Spy out of Me': The File Story of 'Fink Susanne,'" in *Secret Police Files from the Eastern Bloc: Between Surveillance and Life Writing,* ed. Glajar, Alison Lewis, and Corina L. Petrescu (New York: Camden House, 2016)*,* 56–83.

the so-called Jehovist underground in western Ukraine during the 1950s. The primary focus is a five-volume top-secret letter-coded file titled "LKB, Legendirovannoe kraevoe biuro" (Regional Bureau Covert Operation), kept nowadays in the Archive Branch of the Security Service of Ukraine in Kyiv (SBU Archive)—the former KGB archive. In the reconstruction of this history, I also use documents from other collections in the SBU Archive, such as files on the deportation of Witnesses in 1951 (*fond* 42), fragments of surveillance files (placed in annual reports in *fondy* 1 and 2); group penal cases of repressed Witnesses, both rehabilitated (*fond* 6) and nonrehabilitated (*fond* 5); secret directives (*fond* 9); and top-secret KGB internal periodicals (*fond* 13).

Despite the fact that the former KGB archives in Ukraine are almost fully declassified and opened for researchers, there is not much left that relates to surveillance operations and agent networks, particularly in the Cold War period. The collection of agents' personal files was almost completely destroyed, first as a result of the mid-1960s reform (when most agents' files were replaced by the index-card system), then as an outcome of the cleansing in 1990–91. The most important surveillance files (*agenturnye dela* on groups and *dela-formuliary* on individuals) were also destroyed around that time. The LKB letter-coded file was, luckily, preserved thanks to its placement in the collections of annual reports of the Fourth Department that mainly dealt with the Ukrainian nationalist underground (*fond* 2).

A Note on Methodology: Ethnography in the Archives

Much controversy revolves around the opening of the secret police files in the former Soviet bloc and the role they play in remembering the past. While the opening-up has been understood as an index of the transition to democracy, declassified secret police files have often been used for revenge seeking and power struggles in postsocialist times.[7] The harsh anti–Jehovah's Witness propaganda in contemporary Russian media—launched in ways reminiscent of the old Soviet tradition—is often backed by scandalous revelations from KGB archives. Published soon after Russia's ban of the Watch Tower Society in 2017, a viral Internet article titled "Jehovists-extremists" accuses

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[7] Katherine Verdery, "Postsocialist Cleansing in Eastern Europe: Purity and Danger in Transitional Justice," in *Socialism Vanquished, Socialism Challenged: Eastern Europe and China, 1989–2009,* ed. Nina Bandelj and Dorothy J. Solinger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 63–82; Glajar et al., *Secret Police Files*; Lavinia Stan and Lucian Turcescu, "The Devil's Confessors: Priests, Communists, Spies, and Informers," *East European Politics and Societies* 19, 4 (2005): 655–85; Lavinia Stan, "Spies, Files and Lies: Explaining the Failure of Access to Securitate Files," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 37, 3 (2004): 341–59.

the Witnesses of being dangerous American spies and the "enemy foothold."[8] It cites KGB documents from the 1950s, juggling code names of agents and informers, quoting agent reports and internal circulars taken out of the context. A historian (and Ukrainian Security Service reserve colonel) Dmitrii Vedeneev, has published a series of articles and a book on KGB secret operations against religious institutions in the Soviet Union, based on materials from the KGB archives in Ukraine. Adopting the KGB narrative without critical examination, he describes the glorious era of the Soviet "Chekists" who struggled against the dangerous "Jehovist" organization that "recruited adherents of the sect to collect intelligence information for foreign services."[9] The lack of critical analysis of such an ambiguous, multilayered, and multivoiced historical source inscribes it as an "object [taken] for granted" or "a privileged space to generate the 'truth'."[10] This approach translates the logic of the Soviet authoritarian system into contemporary life.

The growing literature on the secret police archives of the socialist era challenges the truth-value of the files and stresses their complicated relations with the reality they describe. Sonja Luehrmann argues that the "reality effects" of the documentation of life in the Soviet Union "never intended to be neutral or objective but to participate in transforming the reality it described."[11] Katherine Verdery calls it "the agency of the file" that implies a performative force of "making up people" and recreating reality, including their time-bomb effect in post-1989 politics.[12] Cristina Vatulescu most eloquently summarizes the issue: "Each time we take a file from its shelf, we run a great risk built into the simple act of reading: the risk of bringing to

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[8] For more on Russia's decision to ban Jehovah's Witnesses as "extremists," see Zoe Knox, "Jehovah's Witnesses as Extremists: The Russian State, Religious Pluralism, and Human Rights," *Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 46, 2 (2019): 128–57. Emily Baran traces the historical continuity of marginalizing rhetoric applied to Witnesses from postwar to present-day Russia in "From Sectarians to Extremists: The Language of Marginalization in Soviet and Post-Soviet Society," *Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 46, 2 (2019): 105–27.

[9] Dmitrii V. Vedeneev, "V ozhidanii Armageddona: Organy bezopasnosti i podpol´e 'Svidetelei Iegovy' v Ukrainskoi SSR (1940–1960-e gody)," *Zhurnal rossiiskikh i vostochnoevropeiskikh istoricheskikh issledovanii* 8, 1 (2017): 111–21.

[10] Katherine Verdery, *Secrets and Truths: Ethnography in the Archive of the Romanian Secret Police* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2013), 62; Ioana Luca, "Secret Police Files, Tangled Life Narratives: The 1.5 Generation of Communist Surveillance," *Biography* 38, 3 (2015): 366.

[11] Sonja Luehrmann, *Religion in Secular Archives: Soviet Atheism and Historical Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 32; see also Florin Poenaru, "Contesting Illusions: History and Intellectual Class Struggles in (Post)Socialist Romania" (PhD diss., Central European University, 2013), 219.

[12] Katherine Verdery, "Ethnography in the Securitate Archive," *Social Analysis* 4, 1–2 (2014): 23.

life once again the secret police's writing of its subject; the risk of becoming cocreators of this story by reading it on its own terms."[13]

In this article, I take the risk of reading the files, including those that were misused in the media attacks against Jehovah's Witnesses. Following the ethnographic approach in archival research,[14] I undertake a "thick description" of KGB files and interpret the variety of contexts, voices, emotions, motivations, and intentions that lie behind the "file stories" in focus. Rather than reconstructing history, the aim of this article is to demonstrate a practical example of how files can be differently read, and how their thick description reveals new and unexpected meanings of conventional historical facts.

Since the opening of the SBU Archive in Ukraine, a range of scholars have approached the KGB files as a source for the history of religion under secret-police surveillance.[15] The research done by Hiroaki Kuromiya and Emily Baran best illustrates a careful approach toward such biased and multivocal historical sources (although both scholars have limited their scope to penal files and interrogation protocols). Kuromiya, who was among the first scholars to access the SBU Archive, provides a book-length analysis of a two-volume KGB penal file on the group of Reformed Adventists in Ukraine, tried in 1952.[16] His close reading of interrogation records provides insight into the hidden mechanisms of the secret police in action: distorting statements and fabricating cases to construct an image of an organized "ideological subversion" out of dispersed peasant believers, many of whom were illiterate and who privately practiced their faith within their families. However, his speculation on who was an agent (for an example, based on what seemed to him a suspicious refusal to speak about one of the defendants, which in fact was a quite common practice) looks more like a guess, mainly because he did not have access to any other documents aside from a single case file. In a similar vein, Baran treats KGB interrogation protocols of arrested Jehovah's

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[13] Cristina Vatulescu, *Police Aesthetics: Literature, Film, and the Secret Police in Soviet Times* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 193.

[14] Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Verdery, *Secrets and Truths*; David Zeitlyn, "Anthropology in and of the Archives: Possible Futures and Contingent Pasts. Archives as Anthropological Surrogates," *Annual Review Anthropology* 41, 1 (2012): 461–80.

[15] Liudmila Babenko, *Radians´ki orhany derzhavnoi bezpeky v systemi vzaemovidnosyn derzhavy i pravoslavnoi tserkvy v Ukraini (1918–seredyna 1950-kh rr.)* (Poltava: ASMI, 2014); Kostiantyn Berezhko, "Peresliduvannia svidkiv Egovy v pisliavoennyi period (1945–1951)," *Z arkhiviv VUChK-GPU-NKVD-KGB* 37, 2 (2011): 254–65; M. Delegan, "Dokumenty Derzhavnogo arkhivu Zakarpats´koi oblasti pro peresliduvannia sektantiv-egovistiv u 1947–1953," *Z arkhiviv VUChK-GPU-NKVD-KGB* 1, 2 (1999): 419–27.

[16] Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Conscience on Trial: The Fate of Fourteen Pacifists in Stalin's Ukraine, 1952–1953* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

Witnesses as sites of contestation that "offer a valuable window into the relationship between the Soviet state and Witnesses and how each saw the other." She also admits the complicated truth-value of the documents and the need to see what is said and what is absent in the protocols (for example, implicit signs of coercion during interrogations).[17]

A comprehensive attempt to address collaboration stories at a biographical level has been made by Roman Skakun.[18] Based on the history of the KGB secret operation called *Rify,* focused on the Greek Catholic Metropolitan Joseph Slipyi (1939–41), he critically reads the documentation produced by the KGB, searching for grains of truths and signs of fabrication in agent reports. Skakun reconstructs life stories of agents who worked in the religious underground, the methods of their recruitment and possible motivation (the latter he considers the crucial factor in the societal evaluation of collaboration). It is mainly his thoughtful but transparent approach to the issue of collaboration that convinced me to reveal the real names of agents in the story below.

This article suggests reading multiple KGB documentation genres, including both pre-arrest and post-arrest documentation. The primary aim of my analysis is to work with what Verdery argues, following Mikhail Bakhtin, is the document's heteroglossia, the co-existence of a variety of often antagonistic voices that participate in the production of the text and are subordinated to a single dominant interpretation.[19] In its record keeping, the Soviet secret police processed discordant textual pieces into a standardized textual format—a wooden language that is often difficult to read. This biased compilation of heterogenous sources constructed a new socialist reality and had enormous power over people's lives. In this production of reality, however, the secret police files often failed to overcome heteroglossia. Local KGB officers, in their rush to report the success of their work, were not always consistent or skillful in coding the text in standardized formats. "Brushed" typewritten copies of agent reports cannot always conceal informers' fear and abhorrence, nor their faith and agency. Confiscated believers' letters or diaries, enclosed in penal files, often undermined the patterns of KGB narrative and exposed different storylines.

That is to say, *the file leaks* and reveals the internal conflict that the Soviet documentation so methodically tried to subordinate to a single dominant interpretation, the clashing voices of different agents of history: informers,

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[17] Baran, *Dissent on the Margins,* 52.

[18] Roman Skakun, "'Storozh bratovi tvoemu': Agentura organiv bezpeky SRSR u seredovyschi greko-katolytsʹkogo dukhovenstva v 1939–1941," *Kovcheg: Naukovyi zbirnyk z tserkovnoi istorii*, no. 2 (2018): 72–189.

[19] Verdery, *Secrets and Truths*, 51–52.

collaborators, repressed believers, persons under surveillance, KGB officers and their high-ranking superiors. I follow these traces and deconstruct the text, breaking it down into separate voices. Then I reconstruct a story by putting dispersed pieces into a coherent picture. The same voice or story pattern can appear in a variety of documents. A paragraph or just a few sentences, a marginal note, an image of a person looking straight into the camera on a surveillance photograph (an agent?), an indirect citation of an informer's voice—all these traces are dispersed in different files (*spravy*) and even in different archival collections (*fondy*). Comparing documents of diverse provenance, I follow different storylines and reconstruct untold life stories of Witnesses who collaborated with the KGB as agents and informers. When the file exposes its cracks, history can be seen differently. It gives a glimpse of the crashed ambitions of the authoritarian state, failed operations of the secret police, and unseen agency of a marginalized religion.

Jehovah's Witnesses and the Religious Underground in the Soviet Union

The "Bible belt of the Soviet Union," Ukraine was home to the largest evangelical communities in the country.[20] Many of them were outlawed by the state and later formed what came to be known as the "religious underground." These groups fell under the jurisdiction of the KGB, but little is known about their encounters with the secret police. The strong focus on the religious establishment (mainly of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church) and state policies on religion distracted scholarly attention away from wider patterns of everyday religious dissent and collaboration. However, as A. I. Savin argues, wide-ranging agent recruitment among Protestant congregations started as early as the mid-1920s. Applying the same "divide and conquer" strategy developed to deal with the Russian Orthodox Church, the KGB initiatives against Protestant groups consisted of recruiting religious leaders, compromising the ones considered most fanatical, and stoking internal conflicts within religious communities. One of the first ideologues of the KGB's "church politics" was Martin Latsis, a chairman of the Cheka, who argued it was more effective not to shoot the *pop*, who anathematized Soviet power, but to recruit him, so he would bless Soviet power as the power of God.[21] The consequence of this policy led to a majority of Protestant

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[20] Catherine Wanner, *Communities of the Converted: Ukrainians and Global Evangelism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 1.

[21] A. I. Savin, "Sotrudnichestvo s tainoi politsiei kak spetsificheskaia forma politicheskoi adaptatsii veruiushchikh v sovetskom gosudarstve (1920–1940)," *Vestnik Omskogo universiteta: Seriia "Istoricheskie nauki"* 3, 3 (2014): 39–40.

leaders collaborating with the KGB and being the main pro-Soviet allies. In 1933, the Baptist Union, for example, was headed by two NKVD agents, Sovetskii and Bobrov, until the arrests of both in 1935.[22] Savin compares this adaptation strategy of political mimicry with Scott's "weapons of the weak" and Millar's "little deal," which allowed the legal functioning of religious organizations and hence their survival.[23]

Such a "little deal" of political mimicry was less possible for Jehovah's Witnesses because of their fundamental stance toward earthly governments as corrupted by Satan and soon to be destroyed by God in the pending Apocalypse. With one exception in 1949, Witnesses did not seek to legalize their organization in the Soviet Union. Furthermore, any kind of participation in the life of the state was believed to be an apostasy, with the subsequent disfellowshipping of an infringer. Witnesses refused to serve in the Red Army; to participate in elections; to join the Communist Party, state collective farms, or state organizations like the Komsomol; to salute the national flag; or to obtain a passport (the refusal of which was a criminal offense), let alone to collaborate with the police. They openly challenged the Soviet order and, in their house-to-house ministry, preached the establishment of theocratic government during the millennial rule of Christ.[24]

Although part of the Soviet-era religious underground along with many other religious minority groups, Jehovah's Witnesses stood apart from the rest. Unlike the underground Ukrainian Greek Catholics, Witnesses had no church structure but represented themselves as a lay society or corporation. Unlike other clandestine evangelical groups, they developed a highly organized hierarchical network of local congregations, local circuits (cluster of congregations), regional districts (group of circuits), and country branches. Each unit had its own overseer and clandestine couriers that communicated across the network. The structure was transnational: Soviet Witnesses were subordinated to the Polish branch and the headquarters of the Watch Tower Society was located in the United States. Throughout the Cold War, Soviet

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[22] Savin, "Sotrudnichestvo," 44.

[23] A. I. Savin, "'Mnogie dazhe ne dopuskaiut mysli, chto sektant mozhet byt´ chestnym chelovekom': 'Brezhnevskii povorot' v antireligioznoi politike i rossiiskii protestantizm (1964–1966)," *Vestnik Tverskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta: Seriia "Istoriia"*, no. 4 (2016): 62; James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); James R. Millar, "The Little Deal: Brezhnev's Contribution to Acquisitive Socialism," *Slavic Review* 44, 4 (1985): 694–706.

[24] For more on the development of the organization's structure, theology, and practices and Witness conflicts with other state authorities, see Zoe Knox, *Jehovah's Witnesses and the Secular World: From the 1870s to the Present* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); and George D. Chryssides, *Jehovah's Witnesses: Continuity and Change* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

Witnesses maintained their contacts with the superior branch offices abroad, sending monthly missionary reports and receiving the Watch Tower literature. As Baran points out, in the case of Witnesses, the Soviet state dealt with a real underground organization. There was no need to invent crimes: Witnesses repeatedly violated Soviet laws, illegally crossed borders, smuggled and mass-produced religious literature, and preached the coming destruction of the Soviet state.[25]

Witnesses had no professional clergy, a primary target for infiltration. Each rung of the organization had an appointed elder, called a "servant," who supervised local religious life, was responsible for the distribution of religious literature, and submitted regular reports up the hierarchy. Circuit and district overseers, elders, and couriers were often changed, which aimed to make Witness leadership invisible to the secret police. Because the organization's headquarters were located abroad, one could assume that made Soviet Witnesses immune to police infiltration of the governing body. The Soviet secret police, however, learned very quickly the local and international structure of the Witness organization, as well as their practices of clandestinity. Already by the mid-1940s, KGB documentation was describing, in full detail, the composition of local congregations, circuits, and districts in Ukraine; their communication channels abroad; practices of appointing servants; submissions of coded missionary reports; smuggling operations, and more. In fact, it was the transnational structure of the Watch Tower Society that made the Soviet Witnesses an object of interest for the KGB counterintelligence department. As the story below shows, the KGB tried to make the Witness organization in Ukraine a channel in their spy games with the US intelligence agencies.

Witness "theocratic warfare" and principles of noncooperation made Soviet Witnesses a hard nut to crack for the KGB. At the same time, these elements made the issue of collaboration and informing an ever more wrenching matter for Witnesses who lived under the total surveillance of the Soviet regime. Likewise, they made it difficult to come to terms with the fact that many Witnesses actually did collaborate with the KGB, despite the organization's rigorous standards of noncooperation with state authorities. As we will see, collaboration did not always lead to the disfellowshipping of a member. By the mid-1950s, there was room for doubts, fear, lies, compromise, and forgiveness. Living through dramatic moments of their lives, under the risk of arrest and long sentences, believers creatively adapted both their faith and the regulations of their organization to the circumstances. To follow Baran's

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[25] Baran, *Dissent on the Margins*, 49.

argument, there was no clear line between resistance and compromise: "In the course of a single investigation, the same person might resist, compromise, and yield. Indeed, the Witnesses showed remarkable creativity and ingenuity in developing a myriad of strategies for coping with interrogations." Sometimes, certain forms of cooperation were chosen in order to protect the organization.

In 1952, the KGB confiscated a diary of Mariia (Marina) Veretel´nik, a Witness country committee member. "Marinka's diary" was subsequently cited in KGB circulars as an example of believers' counterintelligence techniques.[26] The diary revealed that Witnesses were aware of agent infiltration and KGB surveillance and knew agents' names. They also carefully examined KGB case officers, studied KGB surveillance techniques, and were aware of some secret operations carried out against them. While being shadowed by the secret police, they shadowed KGB officers, too. Counterinfiltration was another pattern of their everyday resistance. Some believers intentionally entered the informers' network or were chosen to become collaborators by their own congregations. Appointed agents delivered partial or less sensitive information in exchange for getting to know KGB plans and operations. Other believers wrote fake denunciations to mislead the secret police.

Yet, as Baran notes, the voices of those who compromised have been silenced in the history of the organization. Official Witness literature tells the story of stubborn resistance of faithful Witnesses who did not "knuckle under to communism" and never compromised with Soviet authorities.[27] As with many other religious organizations that lived through dictatorial regimes, Witnesses see themselves as heroic defiers or victims of the Soviet regime. The politics of memory has not yet found the path to come to terms with the fact that many believers spied on one another.

Deportation and a Bigger Plan

"I see, by the events of 8 April 1951, that it is only a key inserted into the lock to open the door of this case," a secret agent, who was also a well-known Jehovah's Witness, wrote in his report to the Soviet security service.[28]

The infamous date of Operation North—the mass deportation of Jehovah's Witnesses from the western borderlands of the Soviet Union—was 8 April 1951.[29] That night, over 6,300 Witnesses and their families were put

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[26] SBU Archive f. 1, spr. 1102, ark. 196, 219.

[27] Baran, *Dissent on the Margins*, 52–53.

[28] SBU Archive f. 2, op. 1, spr. 2431, ark. 9.

[29] The operation had a broader reach and included borderland territories in Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, with over 10,000 Witnesses and their

into cattle cars and sent to deserted areas in Siberia. The Ukrainian part of Operation North (the secret file "Troika") was only a piece in this story.[30] As the Cold War began, the Witnesses became a high-profile target for the Soviet security service. By the early 1950s, the KGB deployed a full-scale "attack against the Jehovist underground," and their exile was only a part of it. In the period between 1947 and 1953, the state arrested about 2,000 Witnesses, confiscated hundreds of thousands of journals and leaflets along with over 300,000 rubles and other valuables, and exposed several underground printing presses. The entire country committee was arrested three times.[31]

The repression nearly wiped out the organizational structure of the Jehovah's Witnesses and fractured their coherent network of congregations in Ukraine, leaving believers in terror. Dispersed communities and individuals were cut off from each other. Their communication abroad was interrupted. The Soviet state authorities, however, were aware that not all Witnesses had been deported.[32] As soon as Operation North was complete, the secret police started to compile lists of those who remained in the western borderlands of the country. They had the most detailed information. The liquidation of the Witness branch office in Łódź, Poland (which oversaw the activities of Soviet Witnesses), earlier in 1951 allowed the secret police to get access to the entire archive of the Łódź office, which contained detailed missionary and finance reports from all over the Soviet Union. The Łódź archive, along with documentation confiscated during mass arrests, provided the KGB with a comprehensive picture of the Society's geographic structure in the Soviet Union, with names of members, addresses of safe houses, and information about theocratic courses and donation funds.[33]

In 1951, a few months after the deportation, KGB agents reported on the remaining Witnesses in western Ukraine under the new leadership of Mykola Tsyba. Under harsher conditions, deep underground, Tsyba and

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families deported overnight. See M. I. Odintsov, *Sovet ministrov SSSR postanovliaet: "Vyselit´ navechno!"* (Moscow: Art-Business-Tsentr, 2002); Baran, *Dissent on the Margins*, 59–66; T. V. Tsarevskaia-Diakina, ed., *Istoriia stalinskogo Gulaga: Konets 1920-kh–pervaia polovina 1950-kh godov,* 5: *Spetspereselentsy v SSSR* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2004); V. I. Pasat, *Trudnye stranitsy istorii Moldovy, 1940–1950* (Moscow: Terra, 1994), 557–716; and Oleg Gol´ko, *Sibirskii marshrut*, 3rd ed. (Moscow: Bibleist, 2007).

[30] The Ukrainian Operation Troika combined the deportation of three groups: Witnesses, Poles, and kulaks (SBU Archive f. 42, spr. 81, vol. 1–2).

[31] SBU Archive f. 2, op. 1, spr. 2434, ark. 94. See also Berezhko, "Peresliduvannia svidkiv Yehovy," 255–65; S. I. Ivanenko, *Svideteli Iegovy—traditsionnaia dlia Rossii religioznaia organizatsiia* (Moscow: Art-Business-Tsentr, 2002), 130–36.

[32] For unknown reasons, the deportation did not include one of the Witness hotspots, Transcarpathia.

[33] SBU Archive f. 2, op. 1, spr. 2431, ark. 253.

his circle were trying to restore the ruined network, to realign, and to re-build local districts and circuits, looking for new contacts with the Society abroad. The majority of Witness elders and congregation servants were re-pressed, and Tsyba did not know personally those who remained. Rumors were spreading—KGB agents were everywhere. Tsyba did not know whom to trust. His wrong choice of people led to his arrest in August 1952, and the last communication channel with the international Society was cut off. With no leadership, no literature, and no communication, the Witness organization in the entire Soviet Union was temporarily paralysed. This made the religious underground vulnerable to agent infiltration—a perfect moment for the security service to start the game.

To eliminate religious dissent was not an immediate goal. In the last years of Stalin's reign, straightforward coercive measures were slowly giving way to more sophisticated and veiled ways of control and surveillance. "Jailing is not allowed, education is needed" (*sazhat′ nel′zia, nuzhno vospityvat′*), was a frequent answer that echoed a turn in the Soviet police state from the brute force of mass political repression but not a change in its underlying coercive principles toward religious minorities branded as sects.[34] The time of Khrushchev's large-scale antireligious "educational" campaigns had not ar-rived yet. In 1951, the reeducation of religious dissenters meant a very dif-ferent thing: putting the underground organization under totalizing control. But not only that—it also meant *heading* it.

The KGB as the Head of the Jehovah's Witness Organization

While local authorities were busy supplying hundreds of cattle cars to deport over 2,000 families of Witnesses from western Ukraine, the KGB office in Kiev was planning another operation, called the Legendirovannoe kraevoe biuro (Regional Bureau Covert Operation, LKB).[35] The idea was ambitious: the KGB planned to organize the Jehovah's Witness country committee as a front that would take under its control all ten districts in Ukraine known to the secret police. All ministerial servants, from the lowest to the high-est, should be replaced by agents and informers. Communication between units should be under the strict control of agents (i.e., couriers and pioneers should be recruited as well).

"Gradual disintegration of the Jehovist underground" was a stated goal of the operation. But its complex measures showed that elimination of the

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[34] Ibid., ark. 173.

[35] The main leadership body of the Jehovah's Witnesses in the Soviet Union was called at that time the regional bureau (*kraevoe biuro*), later renamed the regional committee (*kraevoi komitet*) and country committee *(komitet strany)*.

dissident organization was not its primary aim. An ambitious plan was drawn up in a few top-secret circulars: to intercept the Jehovah's Witness communication channels with their centers in foreign countries—in Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia, then Western Europe, and eventually the Brooklyn headquarters, so as to penetrate the entire Jehovah's Witness pyramid with KGB undercover agents.[36] As such, the Watch Tower Society was groomed to become a secret channel in Soviet foreign counterintelligence.

The paradox of the covert operation was that to achieve success, the KGB needed not disintegrated groups of believers paralysed by fear but rather a consolidated network of mobilized believers, supplied with all necessary equipment to continue their religious activities. Thus the KGB needed well-functioning communication channels, a set of couriers, safe houses, a developed coding system—and a printing press. The secret police most accurately grasped the idea of Witness power relations: the authority was with those bringing the Watch Tower literature that Witnesses read during their weekly Bible study meetings and distributed through house-to-house ministry.

The LKB plan sought to eventually separate Soviet-based Witnesses from their foreign centers, gradually changing social attitudes of Witnesses toward "Soviet loyalty and patriotism." The aim was not to destroy religious dissent but to domesticate it, turning radical believers into controllable and loyal citizens. A few years later, when a significant part of the underground network of Witnesses was already under secret police control, the KGB instructed the main agents to prepare special talks to be delivered at congregational meetings. The main message was to promote the idea of loyalty to the existing socialist order. A secret instruction mentioned a community of 80 believers in Transcarpathia as an example of the utmost success. The group was fully integrated into Soviet life: believers "recognized military service and participated in the sociopolitical life of the country," and their religious leader was a KGB agent, regularly reporting to his officers about the religious life of the group.[37]

The secret operation was designed to make the KGB the head of the underground Soviet Witness organization. The LKB plan was very explicit about that. From now on, a document states, "the capital organization of Jehovah" will be located not in Brooklyn but in Kiev, at a new address: 33 Vladimirskaia Street—quite a meaningful location for Ukrainians, as this was the address of the Ukrainian KGB and is the contemporary headquarters of the Ukrainian Security Service.

Being aware of the top-down hierarchy and the practices of data collection developed by the Watch Tower Society, the KGB plan drew a similar model

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[36] SBU Archive f. 2, op. 1, spr. 2431, ark. 38–58; spr. 2432, ark. 134–35.
[37] Ibid., spr. 2434, ark. 94–103.

with the division of groups, allocation of funds, and submission of missionary and financial reports. The "capital organization" at 33 Vladimirskaia Street was supposed to regularly receive detailed lists of all ministerial servants and ordinary believers, along with inventory balance reports from all the regions. The center ordered every ministerial servant to mark on a map their circuits or districts. Being the top of the pyramid, it was only the "capital organization" that got a comprehensive map of all Witness circuits and districts in Ukraine.

The plan ensured that all information, funds, and religious materials were submitted to the top—to the KGB itself. The top, correspondingly, became responsible for supplying the entire Jehovah's Witness network with Bibles, all types of religious literature, gramophones and gramophone records, typewriters, and even bicycles.

The plan, Kafkaesque as it was, tried to make the Jehovah's Witness organization a KGB annex.

The KGB Religious Network

After his arrest, Mykola Tsyba, the last member of the Witness country committee in Ukraine, managed to smuggle out a letter from a prison, where he appointed Aleksandr Mamchuk as a new country committee member. The letter was a KGB fake, and Mamchuk appears in the files under the code name Agent Kirpichenko. In the 1940s, he was a district servant in the Volyn´ region and worked closely with Tsyba. But after the terror of mass arrests and deportations, Mamchuk shifted away from an active role within the organization, moved to eastern Ukraine, got a job, and started a new, legal life. This made him vulnerable to KGB recruitment. After signing an agreement to collaborate with the police, the KGB brought him and his wife back to L´viv, rented a flat for him, and gave him a few Watch Tower journals to start his prayer group. Mamchuk never knew that the letter he received from Tsyba was a fake.[38] Despite being recruited as a KGB agent, he believed that he had been genuinely appointed by the Watch Tower Society.

The second member of the covert regional bureau, Vasilii Kryzhanovskii, code-named Agent Guiva, was the only non-Witness agent recruited for the operation. A former Pentecostal, he joined the regional bureau in order to control its other members. The duo of Kirpichenko and Guiva, code-named Dvoika, started reorganizing the Witness organization in Ukraine. To enhance their deep cover, the KGB de-legalized Kirpichenko and Guiva: they left their official jobs and de-registered from their places of residence. From

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[38] Ibid., spr. 2431, ark. 282; spr. 2432, ark. 91; spr. 2414, ark. 366–67; f. 6-fp, spr. 69256, vol. 5, ark. 281.

then on, the secret police fully funded their work and paid their monthly wages. The covert underground printing press was set up in the Ternopil´ region, and the KGB allocated an initial 5,000 rubles to purchase the paper and the ink.[39]

Slowly, the KGB recruited more agents, promoting them to leadership positions within the Witness organization and therefore expanding its control over Ukrainian Witnesses. Within a couple of years, by 1953, the covert regional bureau already controlled 700 Witnesses in Ternopil´, L´viv, Stanislav, and Volyn´ regions. Five more districts (with approximately 1,100 believers) were under control of other agents who were not part of the LKB cover operation.[40]

In 1953, at the peak of the operation's success, the KGB published a scheme of the Jehovah's Witness Society, with the Brooklyn headquarters at the top and Soviet districts and circuits at the bottom (fig. 1).[41] Dotted red lines indicated Witness circuits under a KGB agent's control. Another diagram (fig. 2) shows how the covert regional bureau was constructed, indicating groups of believers and code names of agents to whom they were subordinated. According to the plan set up two years earlier, the covert operation should expand so as to cover the entire network of the Watch Tower Society.

The diagrams did not show the existence of an alternative Jehovah's Witness country committee organized by Bohdan Terlets´kyi, who was outside of KGB control. After the arrest of Mykola Tsyba in 1952 and until his own arrest in 1955 (which led to his sudden renunciation of faith), Terlets´kyi struggled alone against the KGB's infiltration and tried to discredit an oppositional regional bureau, which he believed was under KGB control.[42] Meanwhile, the two country committees functioned synchronously and published newsletters, where they accused each other of being KGB collaborators. Witnesses had to choose whom to trust.

The Regional Bureau Covert Operation lasted four years. After KGB reforms in 1954, Moscow required approval of every local initiative. For reasons explained below, the covert regional bureau run by the Ukrainian office was disapproved and suspended.

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[39] SBU Archive f. 2, op. 1, spr. 2432, ark. 289; spr. 2431, ark. 38–58.
[40] Ibid., spr. 2435, ark. 251.
[41] For more on KGB visual diagrams of the religious underground, see Tatiana Vagramenko, "Visualizing Invisible Dissent: Red-Dragonists, Conspiracy, and the Soviet Security Police," in *The Religious Underground and the Secret Police in Communist and Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. James Kapaló and Kinga Povedák (New York: Routledge, 2021), 60–82.
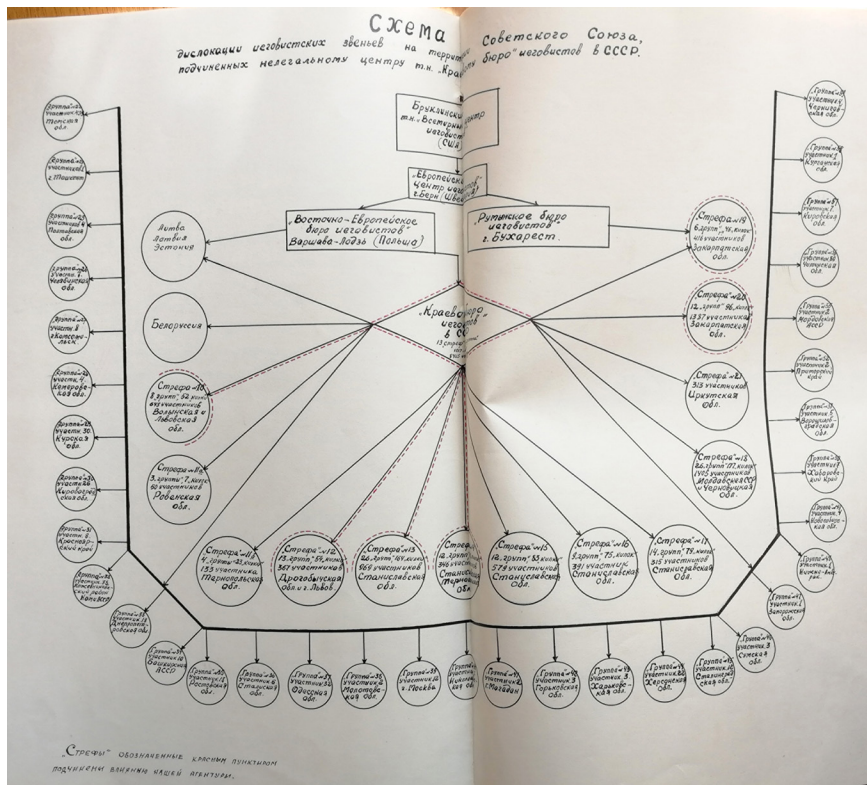[42] SBU Archive f. 5, spr. 42795.

Figure 1. KGB Diagram of the Jehovah's Witness Society with Dotted Lines
Marking Circuits under a KGB Agent's Control
Source: SBU Archive, f. 2, op. 1, spr. 2433, ark. 94.

The Liminality of Agents

So far, this is the story as it appears on the surface. Let me now lift one
layer and look at the story from a different angle: the insider agents. Some
of them were active in elaborating the secret operation from the very begin-
ning. The LKB file opens with a nine-page report written by Agent Krestinski
and addressed to Colonel Viktor Sukhonin, the head of the so-called Church
Department of the Fourth Directorate.[43] In his report, Krestinski drew a
detailed plan of the covert operation as he saw it, giving recommendations
on how to set up the regional bureau and how to better reorganize the entire
Jehovah's Witness underground in the Soviet Union. A conventional agent
report written in Chekist formulaic language, Krestinski's text nevertheless
reveals a semantic conflict as he obstinately mixes two conflicting language

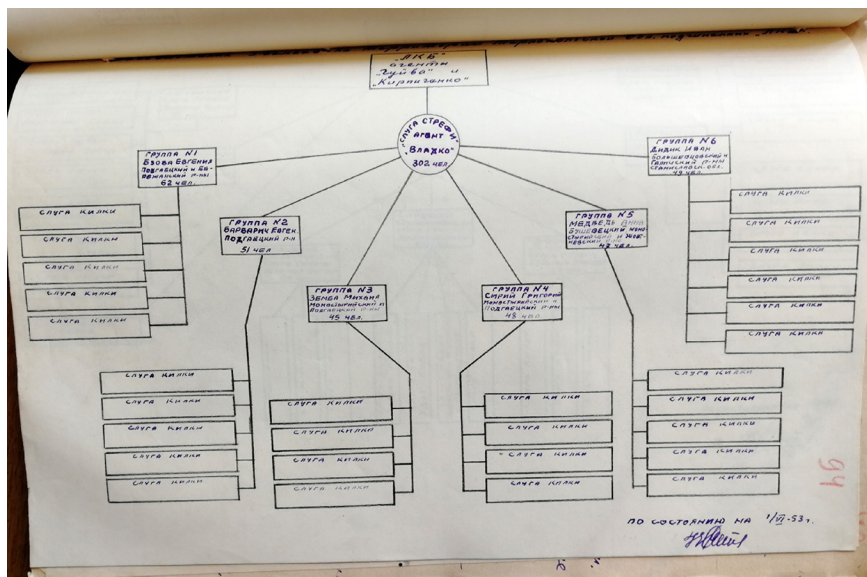---

[43] SBU Archive f. 2, op. 1, spr. 2431, ark. 9–18.

Figure 2. One of the Diagrams of the Covert Regional Bureau
Source: SBU Archive f. 2, op. 1, spr. 2432, ark. 355.

registers: the canonical vocabulary of the secret police bureaucratic language "heretically" blended with the deeply religious language of a faithful Witness.

"We have to know what is going on with the Jehovist underground in every single corner of our country," Krestinski begins. He writes about the liquidation of the Łódź branch office as a great achievement and about the planned liquidation of the entire Jehovist underground in the Soviet Union. Then Krestinski suggests replenishing vacated (after the deportation and mass arrests) leadership positions and gives a list of believers he recommends as "trustworthy." One might assume that being trustworthy means here being suitable for KGB recruitment, but it is not that unambiguous. As we continue reading, we learn that being trustworthy for Krestinski actually means being able "to serve the theocratic organization." "I would come to them on behalf of God Jehovah and call them to work as God's servants," Krestinski continues in his report.[44]

The mixture of conflicting language registers in Krestinski's reports allows us to look at the story from a different perspective. His plan to set up the covert regional bureau and the way in which he frames his recommendations actually read like an official agreement between the Witnesses and the KGB—an agreement that explicitly outlines the rights and duties of both

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[44] Ibid., spr. 2431, ark. 12.

parties. While agreeing to relocate the new Jehovah's Witness headquarters to 33 Vladimirskaia Street, Krestinski repeatedly demands that the new headquarters should not merely regulate the internal life of the Witness organization but at the same time should supply it with religious literature and the means to produce it. If the center cuts off communication with the foreign branch offices, it then has to take on the role of an advocate and a sponsor of believers in the Soviet Union.

Krestinski gives detailed instructions on how the Jehovah's Witness network should be restored: every community should receive instructions regarding the "spiritual sowing campaign"; Bible study groups should meet regularly, baptisms and funerals should be allowed and regulated, believers should receive religious literature and be instructed "how to study the old Watch Tower journals, until Jehovah sends new ones to us."[45] The text is read as if the author is trying to ensure the survival of a network of Witness congregations, although on an alternative basis.

Krestinski suggests heightening the secrecy of group gatherings and following the example of Jesus Christ, "because the enemy should not know." The boundaries between the two registers are blurred, and one cannot be sure who "we" refers to in the following, or whether "the enemy" refers to a socialist enemy or to the religious enemy, which for every Christian is Satan: "If with the help of Jehovah we can achieve all of this, than we will be the masters of the situation.… One should not forget that the enemy will try to achieve power, and we have to watch him closely to be able to liquidate him and to watch out for his regroupings."[46]

Krestinski made it clear: the capital organization had to support the timely production of religious literature. The *Watchtower* magazine had to be published at least every second month. If the regional bureau is responsible for the content of the literature, the capital organization ensures a fair allocation of funds. The report has the form of an agreement: "In case the capital organization declines the request of the regional bureau for even one or two typewriters, then the capital organization becomes entirely responsible for the production of a current issue."

The name of Agent Krestinski appears many times on the pages of the LKB files. He was an ambiguous figure in the complicated relations between the Witness underground and the Soviet secret police. Under his real name, Andrei Grinishin, he had been known as an elder pioneer (full-time evangelizer) in Poland since 1926. Grinishin was recruited by the KGB soon after the Soviet annexation of western Ukrainian territories in 1939. Later, his

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[45] Ibid., ark. 13.
[46] Ibid., ark. 16–17.

recruitment was cited in internal KGB publications as a success story: an example of how a religious "fanatic" was turned into a most trustworthy informer.[47] A long-term agent who worked for the KGB for nearly 20 years, he was an ambitious leader whose collaboration with the KGB led to the arrest of some high-ranking Witnesses, including the country committee members Stanislav Burak and Pavlo Ziatek.[48] At the same time, he took an active role in reorganizing Witness districts and circuits in western Ukraine after the Soviet annexation. Krestinski's reports were loaded with religious imagery and demonstrated a certain care for ordinary believers. In the mid-1950s, his collaboration was exposed by Witnesses (although apparently he was not disfellowshipped), and the KGB removed him from the agent network of the LKB operation. In later years, his task was to draft Watch Tower journals that were printed by the secret police.

The story of Krestinski reveals the liminal role of the agent, placed betwixt two realities—the socialist and the religious—being part of both and at the same time of neither. A kind of subversive act that involved challenging the boundaries between two antagonistic domains, this was a risky game that endangered the settings of authority formed by the Soviet state and at the same time shattered established Witness structures and hierarchies. The liminality of this agent also shows that, despite the unified fundamentalist stances of Jehovah's Witnesses internationally, some Soviet Witnesses, at least in the 1950s, negotiated room for compromise and alternative strategies to restore their organization.

Agent Recruitment as a Religious Experience

"Prepare documentation for the arrest of —, secretly take him off the streets [*neglasno sniat'*], interrogate him, and make a decision about either his recruitment or arrest." This formula preceded nearly every report on agent recruitment. There were about 200 agents and informers working in the Witness underground in the mid-1950s. I could trace the file stories of about 50 of them. Most had tragic experiences, with their close families imprisoned or exiled. Some of them had been and would be (after their service with the security police) arrested and tried. All of them were recruited by straightforward blackmail, receiving, as Amir Weiner and Aigi Rahi-Tamm eloquently

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[47] SBU Archive f. 13, spr. 705, ark. 83.
[48] We cannot exclude the possibility that this was also the result of a heated power struggle among Witness leaders, quite common in the 1950–60s, when harsh methods were used in power realignments.

put it, "an offer they could not refuse: maintaining their freedom (or life) in exchange for information."[49]

Most of the agent reports I found in the archives were standardized "brushed" typewritten copies on letterhead. But even formulaic agent reports can offer an intimate glimpse into the lives of agents and their relations with KGB handlers. Some reports record dialogues and even arguments between an agent and an officer, as well as showing signs of an agent's emotional state.[50] Cross-check agent reports (a typical KGB procedure to verify an agent by other sources) shed light on the other side of an agent's life, outside of the KGB office. These sources can reveal the ambiguity of agents' role in the religious underground and their often wrenching identity (re)formation.

Grigorii Semak, a Witness district servant in the Ternopil´ region, was arrested in 1951. An authority in the underground network who personally knew a country committee member, Mykola Tsyba, he was approached by the secret police during his pretrial detention. Facing the standard alternatives—25 years in a labor camp or release as an agent—he chose the second option. The KGB staged a court session, with a judge, witnesses and a not-guilty verdict.[51] As Agent Vladko, with a bunch of Watch Tower journals issued to him by the KGB ("to strengthen his authority") and an undercover plan, he was released the same day.[52] Soon he became the third member of the covert regional bureau, and under his leadership he would unite over 300 believers out of 700 living in the Ternopil´ region. At the same time, for the next several years he would be one of the most active full-time evangelizers, who disseminated religious literature (produced by the KGB), preached at funerals and weddings, organized baptisms, and so on. As an agent, he could act without fear.

Ironically, recruitment as an agent provided greater opportunities for "theocratic service" and provided a modicum of freedom to proselytize, to distribute religious literature, or to communicate with other believers—in short, to practice the faith. Moreover, a case officer could recommend that others "use [their] available free time to study Bible" or receive baptism, if that were possible. Another agent was authorized by the KGB to read the Bible and the Watch Tower magazines to an illiterate community of peasant

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[49] Amir Weiner and Aigi Rahi-Tamm, "Getting to Know You: The Soviet Surveillance System, 1939–57," *Kritika* 13, 1 (2012): 15.

[50] Similar observations are made by Alison Lewis in "Secret Police Files and the Life Stories of Stasi Informers," in *Secret Police Files,* 29.

[51] On the KGB's manipulation of the Soviet justice system, see also Andrew Mitrokhin, *Sword and the Shield*, 7.

[52] SBU Archive f. 2, op. 1, spr. 2019, ark. 24–27, 137; spr. 2023, spr. 30–31.

Witnesses. On another occasion, an agent was given the task of recruiting a particular person into the sect.[53] From the Chekist point of view, this action might reflect some operational necessity; from the religious point of view, it is called evangelism.

It is noteworthy that this freedom led to the unmasking of Agent Vladko by his brothers in faith. After one funeral where Vladko openly preached, believers began to suspect him of being a KGB collaborator. "If he were not connected with the KGB," people were saying, "he would not preach so openly; anyone else would have been arrested long ago for that."[54]

Recruitment could also be perceived as God's testing. A 1953 document reported the recruitment of a young Witness woman, Paraskovia Oleschuk. Cross-check agent reports provide insight into her emotional distress. Paraskovia often wept and said to her brothers in faith that she had "died forever," because she had served two gods. She approached a congregational elder (who was an agent himself), asking him whether God could forgive her sin. Then she went to meet Iosif (on whom she had reported), crying and saying that he was dead, too, because she had betrayed him. She even brought him a warm jacket so that he would be warmly dressed in case of arrest.[55]

Forced collaboration opened up a polyphony of feelings that were translated by believers in religious terms. Despite the fact that KGB recruitment of a person was supposed to be fully secret, it often became a kind of symbolic property of a local faith community, something that they lived through together. I was able to follow the history of one small Witness group in L´viv in 1951–54: four out of ten members gave information to the "organs" at different times.[56] As one believer stopped collaborating for various reasons, another one was targeted for recruitment. Knowing that they were all under constant surveillance, the group kept up their weekly Bible study meetings, often discussing the issue of collaboration and betrayal. Recruitment caused violence and disorder, but at the same time it provided new opportunities that believers could and did recycle in their religious experience.

The story in the opening vignette—two Witness ministerial servants meeting in the safe house of a Witness courier and the three of them being KGB agents—was a typical KGB strategy to turn a religious setting into a fake one. Yet this artificially constructed context was appropriated by the religious group to ensure the continuity of its (authentic) religious practices. While being agents, the two Witnesses were functioning as district servants

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[53]　Ibid., spr. 2432, ark. 56, 69; spr. 2431, ark. 24, 140.
[54]　Ibid., spr. 2435, ark. 168.
[55]　Ibid., ark. 39–40, 41.
[56]　Ibid., spr. 2432.

within the religious underground organization, carrying on their respective responsibilities. The fake setting allowed them to meet (how else could they get together when all communication channels were severed?) to discuss the restoration of the Witness organization in Ukraine, the publication of new literature, and other purely religious matters.

Cross-check reports submitted by other informers who watched Agent Kirpichenko show that he had bitter anti-Soviet sentiments. "It is all *vile* [an officer underlined the word while reading the cross-check report]!" he once argued about a Komsomol demonstration organized by the local authorities. "[People] are pushed to participate in it. They are all hungry and for them this is the only way to get some bread!" Kirpichenko openly complained to his officer: the KGB was using him to reveal all leading Witnesses and to arrest them all, *including himself.* On another occasion he said, "It would be better if they put me in jail; it would be easier for me in prison."[57] Throughout the entire four-year operation, Agents Kirpichenko and Vladko were both categorized as "fanatical sectarians" in their character assessments.[58]

At some point, it looked like the covert operation started to live its own life. Agents were traveling between congregations, more often outside of the KGB's direct control. They organized prayer groups and Bible study meetings, held annual Memorials (commemorations of Jesus' last evening meal), and distributed literature. In August 1953, over 20 people were clandestinely baptized as new Jehovah's Witnesses in L´viv and Stanislav. It was Agents Kirpichenko and Guiva who organized the events and baptized believers. "The baptism was held with the great joy of all. Everyone was very happy," Guiva reported later.[59] A KGB agent baptizing believers is reporting about the event to his officer without concealing his faith's excitement. What is fake and what is authentic in this frame? It was the KGB that staged the baptisms and the two KGB agents who baptized. But it was true believers who received baptism—a religious event that was quite difficult to organize at the time. For them, it was an authentic act of faith. Be it a fake meeting of the two ministerial servants-turned-KGB agents or a staged baptism—within a religious context, the fake was appropriated and converted into an authentic religious domain.

The KGB as a Source of Religious Reproduction

The production of Watch Tower literature was the KGB's trump card. Intrinsic to the practice of faith, what Witnesses called "spiritual food," Watch Tower

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[57] Ibid., ark. 40, 303; spr. 2434, ark. 61.
[58] Both names are blanked out in the report to protect their symbolic purity (ibid., spr. 2433, ark. 58, 65).
[59] Ibid., spr. 2434, ark. 79, 81, 107, 114, 120.

literature connected congregations and circuits all over the world with the Society. The KGB was aware of the importance of *The Watchtower* (second only to the Bible) in the Society. It was produced exclusively by the Society's headquarters and smuggled into the Soviet Union, where Witnesses translated and reprinted tens of thousands of copies in their bunker printing presses (fig. 3).[60]

A form of symbolic and material capital, *The Watchtower* was intertwined with religious power and authority. Those who distributed it represented the international Society. In exchange for literature, believers submitted their missionary tallies and donated funds, which ministerial servants in turn passed to the hierarchy.

To strengthen the credibility of their agents, and to make the covert committee function independently from the international Society, the KGB started to reprint Watch Tower literature using its own means. In August 1951, the KGB printed the first 50 copies of *The Watchtower*. The original copy of the journal was intercepted by the police and reprinted using confiscated Witness printing facilities (fig. 4). Soon 400 more copies of *The Watchtower* were reprinted "in house" by the KGB.[61] This was not sufficient, because the police was printing previously confiscated and already out-of-date issues. Believers were waiting for "fresh food" from "Mamma."[62] In every report, agents demanded more literature, warning that the operation was about to fail as believers began to suspect that there was no communication with the Watch Tower Society. The KGB was desperately looking for new channels abroad. The results border on absurd—for example, when reading an internal KGB document that states the need to intercept literature coming from Brooklyn in order to publish it first.[63]

Meanwhile, when no fresh literature was available, the KGB decided to produce its own. During 1952–53, the secret police published several issues of the *Informer* newsletter (over 300 copies in total), authored by Agents Krestinski, Kirpichenko, and Guiva. Although a KGB fake, the newsletter nevertheless encouraged believers to improve their "theocratic work" and to restore broken ties between members of the organization. They called for

[60] For more about the case, see Tatiana Vagramenko, "Bunker Printing Press," in *Hidden Galleries: Material Religion in the Secret Police Archives in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. James Kapaló and Vagramenko (Münster: Lit, 2020), 19.

[61] SBU Archive f. 2, op. 1, spr. 2019, ark. 52; spr. 2433, ark. 178.

[62] Witness code words for the Watch Tower literature and the Society that seemingly were widely used by believers in that period as they frequently appear in Jehovah's Witnesses' letters and publications of that times.

[63] SBU Archive f. 2, op. 1, spr. 2432, ark. 282–84.

Вещественные доказательства обнаруженные в подземном бункере в доме Атаманюка М.П.: ротатор, восковка, бумага, типографский шрифт, отпечатанная иеговистская литература, краски. Внизу входной ящик от подземного бункера.

Хозяин дома - Атаманюк М.П. вместе с обнаруженными и изъятыми в его доме вещественными доказательствами преадлежащих главарям иеговистского подполья.

Figure 3. KGB-Produced Photograph of an Underground Printing Press in the Village of Smodna, nowadays in the Ivano-Frankivsk Region
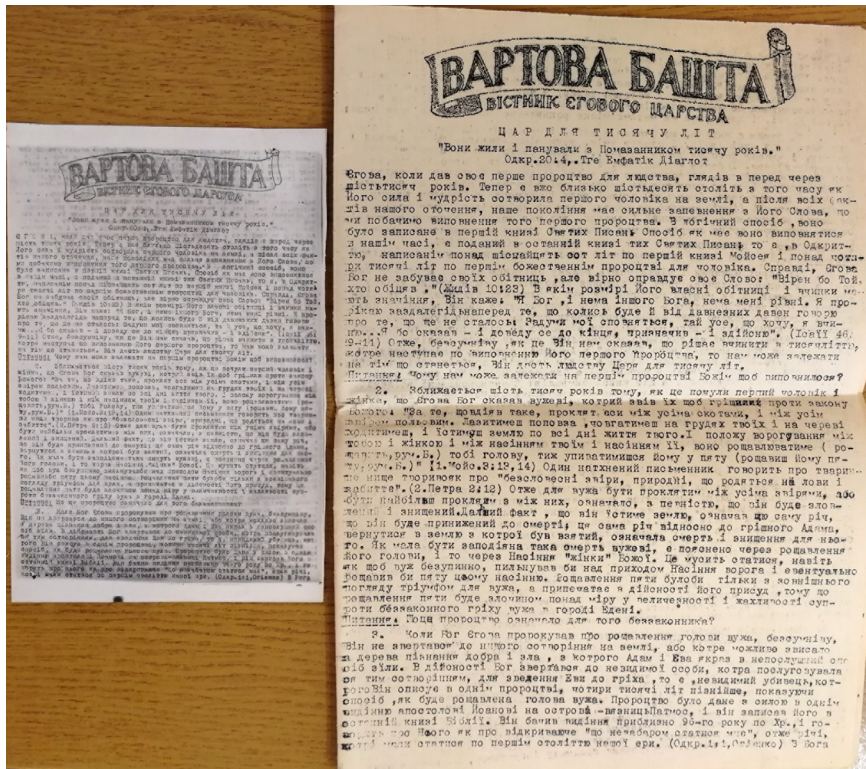*Source:* SBU Archive, f. 5, spr. 42795, ark. 90.

Figure 4. A Photocopy of an Intercepted Issue of *The Watchtower*
and a Reprinted Copy produced by the KGB
Source: SBU Archive f. 2. op. 1, spr. 2019, ark. 158.

strengthening the faith and the intensification of preaching. "Bring everybody to Mamma!" stated one KGB fake.[64]

In 1953, Agent Krestinski submitted his draft of a *Watchtower* issue titled "Rahab the Harlot," which the KGB center in Kiev was getting ready to publish.[65] But the great hopes of winning over Ukrainian Witnesses and succeeding with the aims of the operation faded when Moscow banned the production of "illegal" literature. Apparently Moscow realized the risk of such intense religious involvement and forbade the use of "Jehovist terminology" such as Armageddon or mentioning the establishment of the Kingdom of God and the theocratic state. Numerous appeals from Kiev brought no changes.[66] Without fresh literature, KGB agents were exposed, one by one, by their congregations. This coincided with the death of Stalin and the 1954

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[64] Ibid., ark. 74–81 ob., 312–13.
[65] Ibid., ark. 144–53 ob.
[66] Ibid., spr. 2434, ark. 168; spr. 2435, ark. 122, 127.

restructuring reforms within the security services (consolidation and central-ization of the apparatus and significant staff reduction). As a result of these reforms, many local initiatives were suspended. The Regional Bureau Covert Operation was among them.

During the nearly four years of its existence, the covert bureau printed several thousand copies of *The Watchtower*, brochures, and newsletters. The KGB tried to track the dissemination of its own literature by maintaining tallies with names and addresses of those who received the publications.[67] Realizing the risk of the operation—the Soviet secret police itself producing illegal religious literature—the KGB tried to distinguish "fake" copies from "authentic" ones. Nearly invisible signs—a typo on page 1, a missing word overwritten on page 6, or a tiny line across page 11—formed that symbolic line separating religious dissent from the Soviet secret police (fig. 5). The jour-nal quickly spread among believers with only one outcome—they requested more. Believers used fake literature in an authentic religious context of Bible study groups for religious purposes. The boundaries between the fake and the authentic were becoming less clear.

Paradoxically, in the context of a disintegrated Witness underground network (caused by deportation and mass arrests), severed communication channels with the Society and the absence of Watch Tower literature, the KGB became an alternative communication channel between the faith com-munities and a source of religious reproduction. Writing about the dissident political samizdat in the Soviet Union, Sergei Oushakine argues that the op-positional discourse "shared the symbolic field with the dominant discourse: it echoed and amplified the rhetoric of the regime, rather than positioning itself outside of or underneath it."[68] Conversely, this story illuminates the attempts of the secret police to enter the symbolic field of religious dissent and to imitate the oppositional discourse of religious samizdat. But the imita-tion failed to undermine the power of the religious discourse. The mimicry became the authentic source of religious reproduction when the KGB's imita-tion was appropriated by believers in their authentic religious context.

Conclusion

The LKB operation was suspended in 1954, having failed to achieve its am-bitious tasks. As later reports show, most of the operation's key agents were unmasked by Witnesses or were removed from leading positions due to being under suspicion. What the covert operation revealed instead was "borrowed

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[67] Ibid., spr. 2431, ark. 291.
[68] Serguei Oushakine, "The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat," *Public Culture* 13, 2 (2001): 191–214.
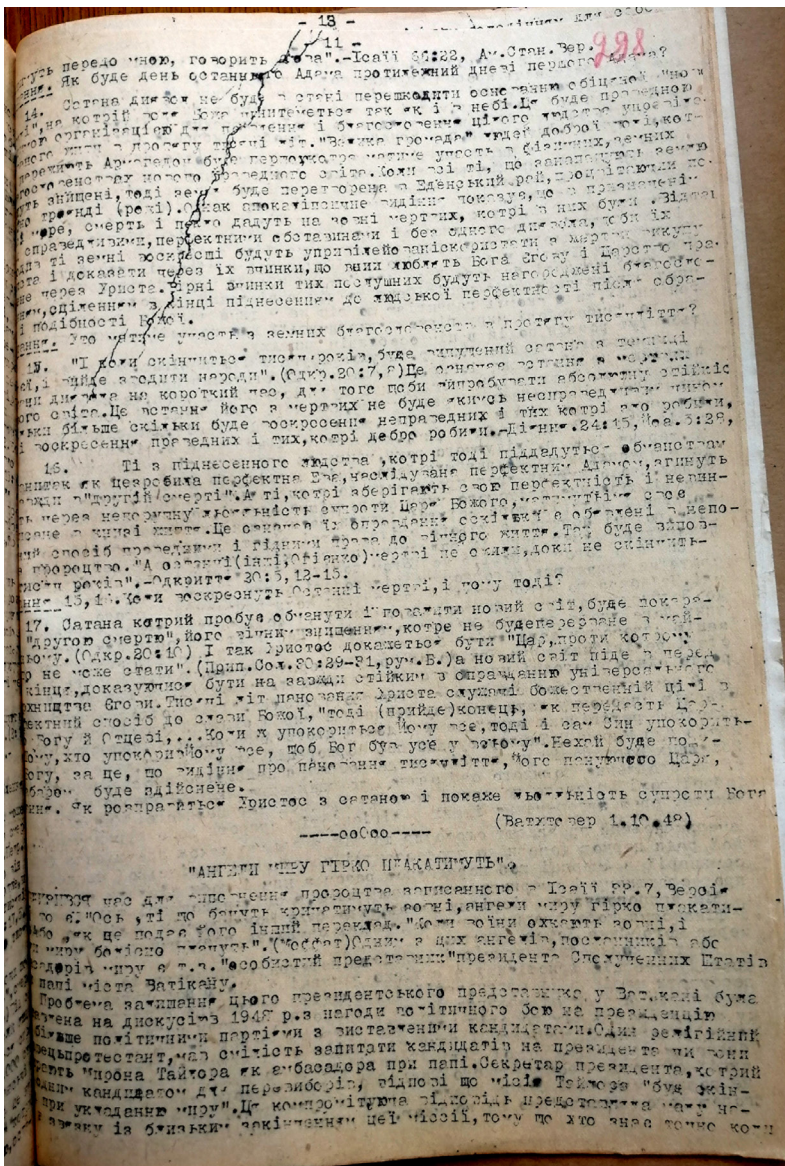
Figure 5. A Copy of *The Watchtower* with a Printing Defect (a Black Line across the Page) to Mark the Copy as Produced by the Soviet Security Services
Source: SBU Archive f. 2, op. 1, spr. 2431, ark. 298.

power" and the hidden agency of religious dissent within the context of a totalizing state's control—the agency to appropriate the fake and to recycle it into authentic religious experience.[69] This was a situation of double appropriation.

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[69] Ziff H. Bruce and Pratima V. Rao, *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

The KGB borrowed, or imitated, Witness cultural forms (leadership body, literature, and religious practice) in its political struggle to overcome religious dissent. Conversely, these KGB constructions acted as cultural reappropriation in the religious domain. Staged rituals were appropriated as authentic religious experience. Clandestine religious meetings organized by the KGB were used by believers to rebuild broken ties between faith communities. Eventually the entire covert operation was borrowed by the marginalized religious minority as a way of empowerment.

The LKB operation was not the last attempt by the KGB to infiltrate the Jehovah's Witness organization. As soon as the covert regional bureau was closed down, the KGB started a new, centralized operation. Its files did not survive, and only a few secret documents briefly report agent-operative work in the Witness underground.[70] The KGB claimed credit in triggering the later split between the Ukrainian and Siberian Witness committees. The "organs" allegedly established a communication channel with the Brooklyn headquarters and influenced the Society's sudden shift toward more loyal politics (the issue caused long-term conflicts among Soviet Witnesses).[71] Another document stated that it was thanks to the influence of the agents—members of the country committee—that Soviet Witnesses reconsidered their policy regarding participation in national elections or membership in trade unions.[72]

The later history of the Jehovah's Witnesses shows that neither KGB agent infiltration nor systematic state persecution of Witnesses prevented the marginalized religion from surviving and steadily growing. Nor were they able to change the Witnesses' fundamentalist theocratic stances. During their withdrawal into the underground in the Soviet period, Witnesses developed multiple forms of challenge and adaptation to repression and control. Not losing their millennial apocalyptic views, they lived through the fall of the USSR, the legalization of their organization in the early 1990s and its public resurgence in the post-Soviet era.

The history of Soviet Witnesses offers a vital insight into the complicated relationship between surveillance and religion, including its (broadly defined) fundamentalist forms. The increasing state control over religious diversity—as in the case of Putin's Russia—can trigger new-old responses in religious actors. If religious fundamentalism is formed in conflict with modernization and secularization (Soviet forced secularization was no exception to that rule), its resurgence in secular postmodern societies can be triggered by the proliferation of surveillance practices as political tools. When surveillance is

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[70] SBU Archive f. 1, op. 1, spr. 1103, ark. 15–16.
[71] SBU Archive f. 16, op. 1, spr. 949, ark. 341–45.
[72] SBU Archive f. 1, op. 1, spr. 1103, ark. 185–88.

mobilized to control religious dissent, the agency of the watched can be expressed through the development of more radical nonconformist strains.

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