The hidden history of Trump's first trip to Moscow

In 1987, a young real estate developer traveled to the Soviet Union. The KGB almost certainly made the trip happen.

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It was 1984 and General Vladimir Alexandrovich Kryuchkov had a problem. The general occupied one of the KGB's most exalted posts. He was head of the First Chief Directorate, the prestigious KGB arm responsible for gathering foreign intelligence.

Kryuchkov had begun his career with five years at the Soviet mission in Budapest under Ambassador Yuri Andropov. In 1967 Andropov became KGB chairman. Kryuchkov went to Moscow, took up a number of sensitive posts, and established a reputation as a devoted and hardworking officer. By 1984, Kryuchkov's directorate in Moscow was bigger than ever before—12,000 officers, up from about 3,000 in the 1960s. His headquarters at Yasenevo, on the wooded southern outskirts of the city, was expanding: Workmen were busy constructing a 22-story annex and a new 11-story building.

In politics, change was in the air. Soon a new man would arrive in the Kremlin, Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev's policy of detente with the West—a refreshing contrast to the global confrontation of previous general secretaries—meant the directorate's work abroad was more important than ever.

Kryuchkov faced several challenges. First, a hawkish president, Ronald Reagan, was in power in Washington. The KGB regarded his two

predecessors, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, as weak. By contrast Reagan was seen as a potent adversary. The directorate was increasingly preoccupied with what it believed—wrongly—was an American plot to conduct a preemptive nuclear strike against the USSR.

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It was around this time that Donald Trump appears to have attracted the attention of Soviet intelligence. How that happened, and where that relationship began, is an answer hidden somewhere in the KGB's secret archives. Assuming, that is, that the documents still exist.

Trump's first visit to Soviet Moscow in 1987 looks, with hindsight, to be part of a pattern. The dossier by the former British intelligence officer Christopher Steele asserts that the Kremlin had been cultivating Trump for "at least five years" before his stunning victory in the 2016 US presidential election. This would take us back to around 2011 or 2012.

In fact, the Soviet Union was interested in him too, three decades earlier. The top level of the Soviet diplomatic service arranged his 1987 Moscow visit. With assistance from the KGB. It took place while Kryuchkov was seeking to improve the KGB's operational techniques in one particular and sensitive area. The spy chief wanted KGB staff abroad to recruit more Americans.
In addition to shifting politics in Moscow, Kryuchkov's difficulty had to do with intelligence gathering. The results from KGB officers abroad had been disappointing. Too often they would pretend to have obtained information from secret sources. In reality, they had recycled material from newspapers or picked up gossip over lunch with a journalist. Too many residencies had "paper agents" on their books: targets for recruitment who had nothing to do with real intelligence.

Kryuchkov sent out a series of classified memos to KGB heads of station. Oleg Gordievsky—formerly based in Denmark and then in Great

Britain—copied them and passed them to British intelligence. He later co-published them with the historian Christopher Andrew under the title *Comrade Kryuchkov's Instructions: Top Secret Files on KGB Foreign Operations 1975–1985*.

In January 1984 Kryuchkov addressed the problem during a biannual review held in Moscow, and at a special conference six months later. The urgent subject: how to improve agent recruitment. The general urged his officers to be more "creative." Previously they had relied on identifying candidates who showed ideological sympathy toward the USSR: leftists, trade unionists and so on. By the mid-1980s these were not so many. So KGB officers should "make bolder use of material incentives": money. And use flattery, an important tool.

The Center, as KGB headquarters was known, was especially concerned about its lack of success in recruiting US citizens, according to Andrew and Gordievsky. The PR Line—that is, the Political Intelligence Department stationed in KGB residencies abroad—was given explicit instructions to find "U.S. targets to cultivate or, at the very least, official contacts." "The main effort must be concentrated on acquiring valuable agents," Kryuchkov said. The memo—dated February 1, 1984—was to be destroyed as soon as its contents had been read. It said that despite improvements in "information gathering," the KGB "has not had great success in operation against the main adversary [America]."

One solution was to make wider use of "the facilities of friendly intelligence services"—for example, Czechoslovakian or East German spy networks.
The document wanted to know: "Is he in the habit of having affairs with women on the side?"

And: "Further improvement in operational work with agents calls for fuller and wider utilisation of confidential and special unofficial contacts. These should be acquired chiefly among prominent figures in politics and society, and important representatives of business and science." These should not

only “supply valuable information” but also “actively influence” a country’s foreign policy “in a direction of advantage to the USSR.”

There were, of course, different stages of recruitment. Typically, a case officer would invite a target to lunch. The target would be classified as an “official contact.” If the target appeared responsive, he (it was rarely she) would be promoted to a “subject of deep study,” an *obyekt razrabotki*. The officer would build up a file, supplemented by official and covert material. That might include readouts from conversations obtained through bugging by the KGB’s technical team.
The KGB also distributed a secret personality questionnaire, advising case officers what to look for in a successful recruitment operation. In April 1985 this was updated for “prominent figures in the West.” The directorate’s aim was to draw the target “into some form of collaboration with us.” This could be “as an agent, or confidential or special or unofficial contact.”

The form demanded basic details—name, profession, family situation, and material circumstances. There were other questions, too: what was the likelihood that the “subject could come to power (occupy the post of president or prime minister)”? And an assessment of personality. For example: “Are pride, arrogance, egoism, ambition or vanity among subject’s natural characteristics?”

The most revealing section concerned *kompromat*. The document asked for: “Compromising information about subject, including illegal acts in financial and commercial affairs, intrigues, speculation, bribes, graft … and exploitation of his position to enrich himself.” Plus “any other information” that would compromise the subject before “the country’s authorities and the general public.” Naturally the KGB could exploit this by threatening “disclosure.”

Finally, “his attitude towards women is also of interest.” The document wanted to know: “Is he in the habit of having affairs with women on the side?”

When did the KGB open a file on Donald Trump? We don’t know, but Eastern Bloc security service records suggest this may have been as early as 1977. That was the year when Trump married Ivana Zelnickova, a twenty-eight-year-old model from Czechoslovakia. Zelnickova was a citizen of a communist country. She was therefore of interest both to the Czech intelligence service, the StB, and to the FBI and CIA.

During the Cold War, Czech spies were known for their professionalism. Czech and Hungarian officers were typically used in espionage actions abroad, especially in the United States and Latin America. They were less obvious than Soviet operatives sent by Moscow.

Zelnickova was born in Zlin, an aircraft manufacturing town in Moravia. Her first marriage was to an Austrian real estate agent. In the early 1970s she moved to Canada, first to Toronto and then to Montreal, to be with a ski instructor boyfriend. Exiting Czechoslovakia during this period was, the files said, “incredibly difficult.” Zelnickova moved to New York. In April 1977 she married Trump.

According to files in Prague, declassified in 2016, Czech spies kept a close eye on the couple in Manhattan. (The agents who undertook this task were code-named Al Jarza and Lubos.) They opened letters sent home by Ivana to her father, Milos, an engineer. Milos was never an agent or asset. But he had a functional relationship with the Czech secret police, who would ask him how his daughter was doing abroad and in return permit her visits home. There was periodic surveillance of the Trump family in the United States. And when Ivana and Donald Trump, Jr., visited Milos in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, further spying, or “cover.”

Like with other Eastern Bloc agencies, the Czechs would have shared their intelligence product with their counterparts in Moscow, the KGB. Trump may have been of interest for several reasons. One, his wife came from Eastern Europe. Two—at a time after 1984 when the Kremlin was experimenting with *perestroika*, or Communist Party reform—Trump had a prominent profile as a real estate developer and tycoon. According to the Czech files, Ivana mentioned her husband's growing interest in politics. Might Trump at some stage consider a political career?

"One thing led to another, and now I'm talking about building a large luxury hotel, across the street from the Kremlin, in partnership with the Soviet government" — Donald Trump

The KGB wouldn't invite someone to Moscow out of altruism. Dignitaries flown to the USSR on expenses-paid trips were typically left-leaning writers or cultural figures. The state would expend hard currency; the visitor would say some nice things about Soviet life; the press would report these remarks, seeing in them a stamp of approval.

Despite Gorbachev's policy of engagement, he was still a Soviet leader. The KGB continued to view the West with deep suspicion. It carried on with efforts to subvert Western institutions and acquire secret sources, with NATO its No. 1 strategic intelligence target.

At this point it is unclear how the KGB regarded Trump. To become a full KGB agent, a foreigner had to agree to two things. (An "agent" in a Russian or British context was a secret intelligence source.) One was "conspiratorial collaboration." The other was willingness to take KGB instruction. According to Andrew and Gordievsky's book *Comrade Kryuchkov's Instructions*, targets who failed to meet these criteria were classified as

“confidential contacts.” The Russian word was *doveritelnaya svyaz.* The aspiration was to turn trusted contacts into full-blown agents, an upper rung of the ladder.

As Kryuchkov explained, KGB residents were urged to abandon “stereotyped methods” of recruitment and use more flexible strategies—if necessary getting their wives or other family members to help.

As Trump tells it, the idea for his first trip to Moscow came after he found himself seated next to the Soviet ambassador Yuri Dubinin. This was in autumn 1986; the event was a luncheon held by Leonard Lauder, the businessman son of Estée Lauder. Dubinin’s daughter Natalia “had read about Trump Tower and knew all about it,” Trump said in his 1987 bestseller, *The Art of the Deal*.

Trump continued: “One thing led to another, and now I’m talking about building a large luxury hotel, across the street from the Kremlin, in partnership with the Soviet government.”

Trump’s chatty version of events is incomplete. According to Natalia Dubinina, the actual story involved a more determined effort by the Soviet government to seek out Trump. In February 1985 Kryuchkov complained again about “the lack of appreciable results of recruitment against the Americans in most Residencies.” The ambassador arrived in New York in March 1986. His original job was Soviet ambassador to the U.N.; his daughter Dubinina was already living in the city with her family, and she was part of the Soviet U.N. delegation.

“Trump melted at once. He is an emotional person, somewhat impulsive. He needs recognition” — Natalia Dubinina

Dubinin wouldn't have answered to the KGB. And his role wasn't formally an intelligence one. But he would have had close contacts with the power apparatus in Moscow. He enjoyed greater trust than other, lesser ambassadors.

Dubinina said she picked up her father at the airport. It was his first time in New York City. She took him on a tour. The first building they saw was Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue, she told *Komsomolskaya Pravda*newspaper. Dubinin was so excited he decided to go inside to meet the building's owner. They got into the elevator. At the top, Dubinina said, they met Trump. The ambassador—"fluent in English and a brilliant master of negotiations"—charmed the busy Trump, telling him: "The first thing I saw in the city is your tower!"

Dubinina said: "Trump melted at once. He is an emotional person, somewhat impulsive. He needs recognition. And, of course, when he gets it he likes it. My father's visit worked on him [Trump] like honey to a bee."
This encounter happened six months before the Estée Lauder lunch. In Dubinina's account she admits her father was trying to hook Trump. The man from Moscow wasn't a wide-eyed rube but a veteran diplomat who served in France and Spain, and translated for Nikita Khrushchev when he met with Charles de Gaulle at the Elysée Palace in Paris. He had seen plenty of impressive buildings. Weeks after his first Trump meeting, Dubinin was named Soviet ambassador to Washington.

Dubinina's own role is interesting. According to a foreign intelligence archive smuggled to the West, the Soviet mission to the U.N. was a haven for the KGB and GRU (Soviet military intelligence). Many of the 300 Soviet nationals employed at the U.N. secretariat were Soviet intelligence officers working undercover, including as personal assistants to secretary-generals. The Soviet U.N. delegation had greater success in finding agents and gaining political intelligence than the KGB's New York residency.

Dubinin's other daughter, Irina, said that her late father—he died in 2013—was on a mission as ambassador. This was, she said, to make contact with America's business elite. For sure, Gorbachev's Politburo was interested in understanding capitalism. But Dubinin's invitation to Trump to visit Moscow looks like a classic cultivation exercise, which would have had the KGB's full support and approval.

In *The Art of the Deal*, Trump writes: "In January 1987, I got a letter from Yuri Dubinin, the Soviet ambassador to the United States, that began: 'It is a pleasure for me to relay some good news from Moscow.' It went on to say that the leading Soviet state agency for international tourism, Goscomintourist, had expressed interest in pursuing a joint venture to construct and manage a hotel in Moscow."

There were many ambitious real estate developers in the United States—why had Moscow picked Trump?

"Everything is free. There are good parties with nice girls. It could be a sauna and girls and who knows what else" — Viktor Suvorov, a former GRU military spy

According to Viktor Suvorov—a former GRU military spy—and others, the KGB ran Intourist, the agency to which Trump referred. It functioned as a subsidiary KGB branch. Initiated in 1929 by Stalin, Intourist was the Soviet Union's official state travel agency. Its job was to vet and monitor all foreigners coming into the Soviet Union. "In my time it was KGB," Suvorov said. "They gave permission for people to visit." The KGB's first and second directorates routinely received lists of prospective visitors to the country based on their visa applications.

As a GRU operative, Suvorov was personally involved in recruitment, albeit for a rival service to the KGB. Soviet spy agencies were always interested in cultivating "young ambitious people," he said—an upwardly mobile businessman, a scientist, a "guy with a future."

Once in Moscow, they would receive lavish hospitality. "Everything is free. There are good parties with nice girls. It could be a sauna and girls and who knows what else." The hotel rooms or villa were under "24-hour control," with "security cameras and so on," Suvorov said. "The interest is only one. To collect some information and keep that information about him for the future."

These dirty-tricks operations were all about the long term, Suvorov said. The KGB would expend effort on visiting students from the developing world, not least Africa. After 10 or 20 years, some of them would be "nobody." But others would have risen to positions of influence in their own countries. Suvorov explained: "It's at this point you say: 'Knock, knock! Do you remember the marvelous time in Moscow? It was a wonderful evening. You were so drunk. You don't remember? We just show you something for your good memory.'"

Over in the communist German Democratic Republic, one of Kryuchkov's 34-year-old officers—one Vladimir Putin—was busy trying to recruit students from Latin America. Putin arrived in Dresden in August 1985, together with his pregnant wife, Lyudmila, and one-year-old daughter, Maria. They lived in a KGB apartment block.

According to the writer Masha Gessen, one of Putin's tasks was to try to befriend foreigners studying at the Dresden University of Technology. The hope was that, if recruited, the Latin Americans might work in the United States as undercover agents, reporting back to the Center. Putin set about this together with two KGB colleagues and a retired Dresden policeman.

Precisely what Putin did while working for the KGB's First Directorate in Dresden is unknown. It may have included trying to recruit Westerners visiting Dresden on business and East Germans with relatives in the West. Putin's efforts, Gessen suggests, were mostly a failure. He did manage to recruit a Colombian student. Overall his operational results were modest. By January 1987, Trump was closer to the "prominent person" status of Kryuchkov's note. Dubinin deemed Trump interesting enough to arrange his trip to Moscow. Another thirtysomething U.S.-based Soviet diplomat, Vitaly Churkin—the future U.N. ambassador—helped put it together. On July 4, 1987, Trump flew to Moscow for the first time, together with Ivana and Lisa Calandra, Ivana's Italian-American assistant.

Moscow was, Trump wrote, "an extraordinary experience." The Trumps stayed in Lenin's suite at the National Hotel, at the bottom of Tverskaya Street, near Red Square. Seventy years earlier, in October 1917, Lenin and his wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, had spent a week in room 107. The hotel was linked to the glass-and-concrete Intourist complex next door and was— in effect—under KGB control. The Lenin suite would have been bugged. Meanwhile, the mausoleum containing the Bolshevik leader's embalmed corpse was a short walk away. Other Soviet leaders were interred beneath the Kremlin's wall in a communist pantheon: Stalin, Brezhnev, Andropov—Kryuchkov's old mentor—and Dzerzhinsky.

"I was impressed with the ambition of Soviet officials to make a deal" — Donald Trump

According to *The Art of the Deal*, Trump toured "a half dozen potential sites for a hotel, including several near Red Square." "I was impressed with the ambition of Soviet officials to make a deal," he writes. He also visited Leningrad, later St. Petersburg. A photo shows Donald and Ivana standing in Palace Square—he in a suit, she in a red polka dot blouse with a string of pearls. Behind them are the Winter Palace and the state Hermitage museum.

That July the Soviet press wrote enthusiastically about the visit of a foreign celebrity. This was Gabriel García Márquez, the Nobel Prize–winning novelist and journalist. *Pravda* featured a long conversation between the Colombian guest and Gorbachev. García Márquez spoke of how South Americans, himself included, sympathized with socialism and the USSR. Moscow brought García Márquez over for a film festival.

Trump's visit appears to have attracted less attention. There is no mention of him in Moscow's Russian State Library newspaper archive. (Either his visit went unreported or any articles featuring it have been quietly removed.) Press clippings do record a visit by a West German official and an Indian cultural festival.

The KGB's private dossier on Trump, by contrast, would have gotten larger. The agency's multipage profile would have been enriched with fresh material, including anything gleaned via eavesdropping.

Nothing came of the trip—at least nothing in terms of business opportunities inside Russia. This pattern of failure would be repeated in Trump's subsequent trips to Moscow. But Trump flew back to New York with a new sense of strategic direction. For the first time he gave serious indications that he was considering a career in politics. Not as mayor or governor or senator.

Trump was thinking about running for president.

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