

The project is based on approximately 200 hours of my interviews with Vladimir Semichastny (1924-2001), whom I met in Moscow on numerous occasions between the years 1993 and 1999. I taped approximately 130 hours of our interviews. These tapes are my most important source material. As far as I know, these interviews with Semichastny represent the richest oral testimony that any KGB chairman has ever left behind. Already at a very early stage in our conversations, I realized that chance had offered me an extraordinary opportunity to meet a prominent decision maker who – unlike some others – was willing to speak out and resume his previous career.

Even though he was willing to speak out, however, there were two big taboos in our conversations. First, Semichastny stressed that he was not willing to disclose any names of Soviet agents who were not yet publicly known at that time. Similarly, he was unwilling to reveal any unknown secret operation of the KGB. However, I do not see these facts as *decisive limitations* for my study since I see the duty of the KGB-Chairman ***as a politician rather than as a master spy***, even though the latter, of course, was by no means unimportant.

Strictly formally, the KGB chairman's official political rank corresponded with a position of a minister of the Soviet government. However, he was not obliged to primarily report to the prime minister. His only boss was in fact the leader of the Soviet Communist party, which clearly proves the status of the KGB as mainly political police within the Soviet system. The chairman was appointed or replaced by the First or General Secretary of the CPSU and only approved by other members of the party leadership. As far as I know, there is not a single case in the history of the Soviet state that would show that the party politburo had a different opinion about this question

than the leader of the party.

Unlike his fellow KGB workers at lower levels, the chairman of the KGB could see and direct the work of his organisation in all its complexity. Due to the fact that the military counter-intelligence was a part of the KGB, he had a good knowledge of the situation within the Soviet Red Army and, to a certain extent he even had an opportunity to influence the army personnel. He represented the KGB in its contacts with the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the ministry of defence, the ministry of foreign affairs, the ministry of justice and others. Unlike other politicians, however, he could sometimes use the KGB for his own political goals, which gave him a very specific form of power. This power helped Semichastny's predecessor, Alexander Shelyepin, up to the politburo, and his successor, Yuri Andropov, up to the very top of the Soviet pyramid of power.

Main goals of the project

The aim of this study is to analyze Vladimir Semichastny's attempt to *make sense* of his own political career that culminated in the KGB headquarters Lubyanka, and his thoughts on the place of the Communist system in Soviet and Russian history. In a broader perspective, the project also deals with questions concerning individual and social memory of the Soviet terror, with the problem of how strategies that legitimized the Soviet communist dictatorship coexisted with critical stances within the system itself and with the question of how it is possible to give a positive meaning to the Soviet communist dictatorship even after the collapse of the Communist system and at the same time not deny the worst crimes of Stalinism.

Thus, the aim is to write a study based on a comparative narrative analysis of how an individual in his historical consciousness tried to construct a coherent, overreaching

narrative of a person's life as a part of the Soviet project while this project itself is constructed from very problematic and sometimes very contradictory hegemonic historical narratives. Such a theoretical approach, to my knowledge, has not yet been advanced by either Western or Russian scholars. The project aims to contribute to the analysis of the discursive construction of the inner 'Soviet self' and to the concept of 'internalizing Soviet ideology'. The project is relevant even for the research of current trends of collective historical consciousness and historical cultures in present-day Russia, where the Putin administration continuously shows its ambivalent attitude to Stalin's legacy. The relevance is strengthened by the fact that religious and anti-communist Russian nationalism is getting closer and closer to a sentimental pro-communist view of the Soviet past in terms of its common aversion to "the West" and its liberal values. According to this sentiment, the Brezhnev years of "stability" especially start to occupy a special position.

Like Semichastny, even Vladimir Putin has his roots in the KGB, and the current Russian president seems to share Semichastny's sentiment regarding the KGB as, in a certain sense, the best organisation of the Soviet regime. In this context, Semichastny's recollections of the role of the KGB in the propaganda war against the West, in addition to his understanding of the role of misinformation as an effective tool of international relations, offer a deeper knowledge about Soviet leaders' way of thinking about the Soviet decision-making system.

The background

Vladimir Semichastny was born in January 1924, shortly before the death of Vladimir Lenin, the founder of the Soviet communist system and state. He died in January 2001, shortly after Vladimir Putin became the president of Russia. During his

lifetime, he was a witness to periods when all the six other Soviet leaders were in power, from Stalin to Gorbachev, as well as the first post-communist leader of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin. He personally knew four of the seven highest-ranking officials of the Soviet Union.

Soon after World War II, Semichastny started a brilliant career within the Soviet political system. Coming from a Russian family in Ukraine, he was early noticed by Nikita Khrushchev, who only a few years later replaced Joseph Stalin as the highest-ranking leader of the Soviet Union. This relationship helped Semichastny to become the highest leader of the communist youth organisation, the *Komsomol*, (this in 1958), and later, in 1961, the chairman of the KGB. As he explained to me during one of our meetings, the quick and successful development of his career exceeded even his wildest dreams. Only 37 years old, he became the youngest chairman of the KGB ever.

From his office in Lubyanka, Vladimir Semichastny helped Nikita Khrushchev with the so-called de-Stalinisation of Soviet society as well as with the fight against the main Soviet enemies, the United States and other NATO countries. As head of the KGB, Semichastny experienced the Vietnam War and one of the largest crises of the Cold War, the Cuban Missile crisis in 1962. Moreover, he signed Lee Harvey Oswald's application when Oswald wanted to return to the US from his exile in the Soviet Union. He participated in the response of the Soviet leadership when the world learned that American authorities blamed Oswald for the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The peak of his domestic political activity came in 1964 when he turned against his mentor Nikita Khrushchev and helped Leonid Brezhnev replace Khrushchev as the highest-ranking leader of the Soviet state. This made Semichastny unique among all leaders of the KGB. He was the only head of the KGB in Soviet history who co-organized a coup against an acting leader of the Soviet Union, while do so in such a way that the freshly replaced

leader/dictator remained alive. However, already by 1967 Brezhnev replaced Semichastny with Yuri Andropov as head of the KGB. Semichastny spent the rest of his active political life among the privileged Soviet *nomenklatura* in the Ukrainian capital Kiev, and later back in Moscow, but without any real political power.

His own family experienced Stalin's terror when his brother was imprisoned during World War II and was kept in the Gulag even after the war. Semichastny himself became a well-informed assistant to Nikita Khrushchev during the so-called de-Stalinization period after the death of Stalin in 1953 and the 20th Party Congress in 1956. On the other hand, however, the same Semichastny became a prominent representative of the Soviet repressive system, first in 1958 when he, as the highest-ranking official of the Komsomol, openly criticized Boris Pasternak, who had just been awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, and in the name of the Soviet leadership helped to force Pasternak to return this prestigious award; and second, in 1961, when he joined the KGB. Semichastny showed no sympathy for the most radical critics of the Stalinist regime, such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Sakharov. Both of these men increased their "anti-Soviet activities" during Semichastny's years in the Lubyanka. Moreover, the trial of two Soviet writers, Andrei Sinyavski and Yuri Daniel, accused of "crimes" similar to those of Boris Pasternak, was also organized in Moscow during Semichastny's time in power. It was precisely this trial that demonstrated the new tough approach of the Soviet post-Khrushchev authorities against cultural personalities and others who would later become known as dissidents.

In the 1980s, Semichastny was quite optimistic at first about Gorbachev's Perestroika, but later became very sceptical. Until his death he remained a faithful communist, more old-fashioned than reform-oriented.

When he reminisced with me in the 1990s, he seldom questioned his old acts and

he created his own rather unique personal historical narrative in defence of the communist system. He did not believe that a parliamentary democracy would be possible in Russia within the forthcoming half century.

I am conducting my research on three levels:

The first contains a basic question about what new things we might learn from Semichastny's testimony. How do the facts that he has presented from his unique point of view develop our knowledge about the decision-making, political system and society of the Soviet Union and the Cold War? In this context, he, for example describes the relationships between powerful groups within the Soviet leadership, such as the *politburo*, the highest organ of the Communist Party, the KGB and the Ministry of Defence. His testimony deals also with the relationships between the Soviet Union and the China of Mao Zedong. He also addresses Soviet espionage in the West. It was during his time in Lubyanka that two of the most important spies from the West, Kim Philby and George Blake, emigrated to Moscow. During his time as KGB leader, one of the most important Soviet traitors, Oleg Penkovsky, was sentenced to death in Moscow.

Second, what was his perception of the specific role of the KGB, of which he was one of the longest serving leaders? How did he evaluate and conceptualise the KGB from the point of view of his institutional position? How did he compare his own activities within the KGB to the activities of his predecessors and successors, such as Felix Dzerzhinsky, Genrikh Yagoda, Nikolay Yezhov, Lavrenti Berija and Yuri Andropov? How does his KGB narrative differ from the narratives presented by others, especially by the former KGB defectors during the Cold War and those who wrote their testimonies after the collapse of the Soviet Union? How was the KGB-narrative connected to its activities abroad, both in the West and in the countries of the former Soviet bloc? As a part of this kind of narrative, Semichastny also wanted to show that he was not a marionette in the

hands of other politicians but a relatively independent politician who knew what he did and why.

Third, how did he connect three very different periods of the development of Soviet communism with his political life? How did he blend the era of Stalin's terror, Khrushchev's de-Stalinization reforms, and Brezhnev's 'de-Khrushchevization', stagnation and corruption – into a single historical narrative aiming to legitimize Soviet communism in the history of Russia and the other former Soviet republics? How did he try to make sense of Soviet activities during the entire post-war period? This narrative construction is complicated by the fact that Semichastny marked his partial distance from all three historical periods while simultaneously being a part of the same. Being a “good Communist” meant three different things for him during his own political development: first, during the Stalin era, the “good Communist” Semichastny was supposed to follow the party line and not ask any disturbing questions. Second, during the Khrushchev years before the early 1960s, the same “good Communist” Semichastny was supposed to evaluate different concepts of Communism and choose a side. Finally, as a chairman of the KGB, the Communist Semichastny remained “good” in his own eyes by opposing two party leaders in order to follow his political heart, even though it cost him his prominent political position.

My plan is to complete a book on these topics within a maximum of two to three years.

Thank you for your attention.