

Warren Report Ignored Soviet Defector's Claims

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The Warren Commission ignored the claims of Russian defector Yuri Nosenko in its report on President Kennedy's assassination despite an explicit decision several months earlier to take Nosenko's story into account.

According to a top-secret transcript made public Tuesday by the Justice Department, the commission decided in executive session June 23, 1964, that it could not properly suppress Nosenko's reports about Lee Harvey Oswald's activities in the Soviet Union even if it distrusted Nosenko.

"... [F]or us to ignore the fact that an agency of our government [the Central Intelligence Agency] has a man who says he knows something about Oswald's life in the Soviet Union... for us to just ignore the fact... would be unfortunate," commission member Gerald R. Ford, then House minority leader, observed at the time.

The commission chairman, Chief Justice Earl Warren, agreed. He said the report should simply make clear "that we cannot vouch for the testimony of Mr. Nosenko."

The day after that meeting, according to published reports, the CIA's then deputy director for plans, Richard M. Helms, requested and obtained a private audience with Warren concerning Nosenko. The subject never came up again at a commission meeting, and the Warren report in September 1964 made no mention of Nosenko's story.

Helms has said he merely told Warren that the CIA could not vouch for Nosenko's credibility. But the transcript shows that the commission was fully aware of this the day before, at its June 23 executive session.

Warren, for instance, said he was "allergic to defectors." Of Nosenko he

said that "we cannot corroborate this man at all." Ford said he had been told "by people who I believe know, that there is a grave question about the reliability of Mr. Nosenko being a bona fide defector."

It thus appears doubtful that Helms would have sought a private session with the chief justice the next day simply to tell the commission what it already knew.

A high-ranking KGB official, Nosenko defected to the United States in January 1964, two months after Kennedy's assassination. He told the FBI that he had supervised Oswald's KGB files and he insisted that the Soviet intelligence agency had no interest in Oswald and had not even bothered to debrief him. Nosenko also told the FBI that the Soviets suspected Oswald might have been "an American sleeper agent" when Oswald defected to the Soviet Union in 1959. (The Warren Commission found that Oswald acted alone in killing Kennedy.)

FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover told the commission in the spring of 1964 that he had arranged for Nosenko to testify before the panel if it wanted to hear what he had to say. Before Nosenko could be called, however, the CIA put him in solitary confinement and subjected him to "hostile interrogation" that lasted for more than three years. The FBI never questioned him again.

The transcript of the June 23, 1964, meeting was declassified in response to a freedom-information lawsuit filed three years ago by commission critic Harold Welsberg. The litigation is now before the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals here.

Of the documents made available, Welsberg said: "The Warren Commission was supposed to investigate. The one thing this proves is a determination not to investigate."