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Epstein's Thesis: Hints Of KGB Entanglements

By David Wise

Lee Harvey Oswald, according to Edward Jay Epstein, may have been some sort of a KGB agent. Epstein, the author of "Inquest" and other writings about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, does not quite come out and say that Oswald worked for the Soviet intelligence service, nor does he offer proof, but that is the clear thrust of his new book, "Legend: The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald."

Epstein hastens to add that high CIA officials did not believe that Oswald acted "under the control of Soviet intelligence when he assassinated the President." In fact, he tells us, "circumstantial evidence" (a phrase not further explained) "seemed" to make that possibility unlikely.

But the theory that Oswald was deeply entangled with the KGB while he lived in the Soviet Union and perhaps after he returned to the United States is entirely compatible with the world-view of James Jesus Angleton, the former chief of counterintelligence for the CIA, who is a central figure in "Legend," and who was, it would appear, of considerable assistance to Epstein.

Angleton, it will be recalled, is the tall, reclusive figure whose job it was to unmask KGB attempts to penetrate or confuse the CIA. He was inevitably portrayed in the press as a character out of spy fiction — an admirer of Ezra Pound who raised prize-winning orchids in his greenhouse and patiently outwitted trout with the same skill that he used to reel in unwary Soviet agents. To some, Angleton seemed a rather sinister figure, an impression reinforced when he appeared before the Church committee of the United States Senate and actually testified that a secret agency like CIA does not have to obey the "overt orders" of the President.

TO ANGLETON, the Cold War has never ended, and detente is a Potemkin village, yet another Soviet trick. Although the CIA broke the law by opening first-class mail, Angleton defended that in his testimony as "indispensable" to combat the Soviets. Angleton made it plain to the senators that he was shocked — not by CIA law-breaking but by "the weakness of power" of the United States.

The Angleton who testified to the Church committee is not recognizable in "Legend." To Epstein, Angleton is a master counterspy, with "prematurely silver hair and a finely sculptured face," the "superbly patient" fisherman who "played defectors much like trout." A man, in short, much too clever to fall for a story told by the likes of Yuri Ivanovich Nosenko.

Yuri Nosenko, ostensibly a member of the Soviet disarmament delegation at Geneva, defected to the CIA on Feb. 4, 1964, less than three months after President Kennedy was murdered in Dallas. Nosenko told his astonished CIA contacts that he was a KGB officer who, while in Moscow, had personally supervised the file his agency had opened on Oswald when the former Marine Corps radar operator defected to the Soviet Union in 1959. Nosenko claimed that the KGB had decided Oswald was of "no interest," and that neither Oswald nor his wife, Marina, had ever been

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recruited or even approached by the KGB as possible agents. Nosenko, according to Epstein, added that Oswald was considered by the KGB to be "unstable and of little importance."

WITHIN THE CIA, a debate occurred over Nosenko: In brief, Angleton and his men on the counterintelligence staff considered Nosenko to be a fake, a KGB agent dispatched to feed disinformation to the CIA. Others in the CIA did not agree; they concluded Nosenko was what he represented himself to be. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, Epstein argues, had two good reasons to disagee with Angleton and to accept Nosenko's "bona fides," as they say in the spy business. First, if Oswald was a Soviet agent, the FBI, which had failed to keep very good track of him when he returned to the United States, would look even more incompetent. Second, Hoover's favorite Soviet double-agent, a KGB officer working under diplomatic cover at the United Nations in New York, told the FBI that Nosenko was real. This agent, whom the FBI code-named "Fedora," had supplied the FBI with a steady stream of information about Soviet spy activities. If Fedora was lying about Nosenko, it would mean that for two years he had been hoodwinking Hoover and the FBI about a lot of other things.

Nosenko and his story form the core of Epstein's book, and here he has broken important new ground. There is no question that Nosenko's defection in Geneva in 1964 touched off a bitter and prolonged debate within the intelligence community, one that has not been resolved to this day. Before long, one senior CIA official involved in assessing the case had even been accused by a colleague of being a Soviet "penetration" of the CIA. And, as Epstein reveals, the Warren Commission decided not to question Nosenko when Richard M. Helms of CIA explained to Chief Justice Warren that U.S. intelligence was unable to decide whether Nosenko was real, or a Soviet disinformation agent.

THE MOST INTRIGUING portion of Epstein's book relates how, bit by bit, Angleton and his staff were able to assemble evidence leading them to conclude that Yuri Nosenko could not have held the positions in the KGB, and handled the cases, that he claimed he did.

Epstein's account is as interesting an exposition of the lethal chess game that goes on between the CIA and the KGB as will be found anywhere. At the same time, a major flaw is revealed, both in Angleton's theory of the case and in "Legend," which so heavily depends on that theory. For Angleton concluded that if Nosenko was a false, that is, a planted defector, then his story was false. What Nosenko was attempting to protect, Epstein says Angleton concluded, "might be a prior connection Oswald had had with the KGB." *Might be*.

The difficulty with Angleton's equation, and Epstein's, is that it doesn't work to the exclusion of all others. Epstein argues that if Nosenko is false, his story is false. Other equations might be set up: for example, Nosenko true, his story false. Under this theory, Nosenko might be a KGB man who defected, but who made up a story about Oswald's file to have something to peddle to the CIA. Or Nosenko might be true, and his story true.

I lean toward a fourth equation, which apparently never occurred to James Jesus Angleton or anyone else in CIA: that Nosenko was false but his story was true. Suppose the KGB panicked after President Kennedy was killed and the only suspect arrested in the case turned out to be an avowed Marxist who had lived in the Soviet Union. Suppose that the Soviet leadership felt it crucial to convince the American government, the American public, and world opinion that Moscow bore no responsibility for the assassination of a young and popular American president. What better means of accomplishing this than to send out a KGB agent with a message that Oswald was not a Soviet agent?

That Nosenko may not really have handled Oswald's file does not mean that his message was necessarily false. If the Soviet motive was to "clear" Moscow and the KGB of responsibility for Oswald, it is certainly possible that Nosenko was not all he claimed to be but his information about Oswald was true.

EPSTEIN ARGUES, convincingly, that Oswald might have turned over information about the U-2 spy plane to the Russians, since he had access to data about the CIA aircraft when he was stationed as a Marine aviation radar operator at Atsugi, Japan. Conceivably, the Soviets even used this information to shoot down the U-2 piloted by Francis Gary Powers on May 1, 1960, only six and a half months after Oswald defected to the Soviet Union. But Oswald's access to information about the U-2 was known to, and explored by, the Warren Commission, which reported that Oswald had threatened to reveal to the Russians the military secrets he had learned as a radar operator in the Marines.

But to suggest, as Epstein does, that Oswald might have betrayed secrets to the Soviets is rather different from concluding that Oswald had a KGB "connection." Which brings us to what is perhaps most disturbing about Epstein's book: it is, from jacket and title to the last footnote, heavily larded with dark hints, implications never-quite-stated, and veiled innuendo. For example, Epstein devotes considerable (and very interesting) detail to George De Mohrenschildt, the Soviet-born businessman who befriended the Oswalds and who, according to Epstein, worked variously for Polish, French and possibly Swedish and Nazi intelligence, and was in close contact with "J. Walter Moore, the CIA agent in Dallas."

But Epstein's impressive research into De Mohrenschildt's tangled life is severely distorted by the chapter title: "The Handler." The handler for whom? Does Epstein mean to suggest that De Mohrenschildt was Oswald's Soviet controller? Or his "handler" for the CIA? Or what? Presumably, Epstein wants us to conclude that De Mohrenschildt was "handling" Oswald for some intelligence agency, but he doesn't say, and the chapter heading conveys some of the elusive, slippery quality of the book. Perhaps George De Mohrenschildt was handing Oswald for the KGB, as I think Epstein is hinting, but there is an equally valid possibility that he was an international, free-lance busybody.

"LEGEND," although it concentrates on Nosenko and Oswald, travels through an espionage maze. For example, before Nosenko popped up in Geneva in 1964, another Soviet defector, whom the CIA called "Stone," and whom Angleton apparently believed to be telling the truth, had warned that a "mole," or penetration agent, had burrowed his way into the senior ranks of the CIA and was reporting to Soviet intelligence. Nosenko contradicted certain information provided to the CIA by Stone and insisted there was no "mole." Angleton, Epstein says, therefore concluded that Nosenko may have been dispatched to the West in part to discredit Stone and to persuade the CIA that there was in fact, no "mole" in Langley.

Within the CIA, the debate over Nosenko continues. Angleton's view was not universally hailed. For one thing, Epstein says, Nosenko, who had first contacted CIA in 1962, two years before he defected, provided the information that enabled the British to arrest John Vassali, a Soviet spy in the British Admiralty. By itself, this did not prove Nosenko's bona fides, since in the espionage sea, little fish are often sacrificed for the bigger fish. In 1967 and 1977 official CIA in-house investigations concluded that Nosenko was a genuine defector. In the meantime, CIA director William Colby had forced out Angleton and his top aides. The cloaks and daggers were flying.

In the end, the most persuasive lesson of "Legend" is that Angleton, for all of his apparent brilliance in discrediting the details of Nosenko's story, was limited in his larger conclusions by the very limits of the dark and secret world in which he operated. Nosenko false story false is not an equation that would be accepted by an honorable schoolboy.

ONE MIGHT EVEN suggest a fifth equation. If Nosenko's story was so clumsily transparent, if there were so many strands dangling for Angleton to tug at and unravel, might it even be that Nosenko was a KGB plant whose purpose was to make CIA conclude that he was false, and therefore his story false? That, you see, might lead the CIA to think Oswald was a KGB agent, when in fact he was not, which would confuse everybody. And it would lead James Angleton to conclude there was indeed a "mole" burrowing away in the CIA. What better way could Moscow find to sow confusion and suspicion inside the top echelons of American intelligence?

For all of its shortcomings, "Legend" will be required reading for those interested in the secret world of intelligence and in the Kennedy assassination. It is well-written, carefully researched, and ultimately very disappointing. •