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A Lack of Fresh Data, Breeding False Suspicion

By Jacob Cohen

Can it be that Lee Harvey Oswald, surely the most intensely studied murderer in history, was, in fact, a very different man than we have been led to believe?

Edward Jay Epstein, a long time critic of the Warren Commission with a reputation as a moderate conspiracist, suggests this intriguing possibility in his latest book.

Far from being an habitual loner, Epstein's Oswald is a man who could do nothing without external direction. He did not decide by himself to defect to the Soviet Union but was recruited by Soviet agents while he served in the Far East as a Marine radar operator. In Russia, he supplied important military intelligence which may have led to the downing of the U-2 spy plane.

Epstein's Oswald is intelligent, rational, and stable, in the manner of a competent spy. He may have attempted suicide in Russia but, even so, he enjoyed a happy and prosperous stay there while being trained at a spy school in Minsk. His application for re-admission to the United States was made under direct KGB tutelage and his writings from that period — his "Historic Diary," an unfriendly essay about life in Russia, letters home, and several sets of notes — were also prepared under Soviet direction to create the accepted "legend" of Oswald, the seriously unhappy, increasingly disillusioned, highly erratic, suicidally unstable, volatile Nonentity.

Russia's control of Oswald did not end with his departure from the Soviet Union. Epstein suggests that a KGB agent may even have continued coaching him on board the ship he took home. Once back, he behaved in a furtive spy-like manner, contacted known Russian agents, and even supplied the Soviets with more classified military information obtained from a photography lab where he worked. And all the time Oswald continued to embellish upon the "legend" of the unstable loner which the Russians had created for him.

A "LEGEND" in spy language is a cover and Epstein points out that Oswald's legend, which the Warren Commission accepted, was a perfect cover for his re-defection to the United States and for his subsequent spying. If caught, he could always appear to be a lonely nut, absolving his bosses. Indeed, the Russians were so intent upon maintaining this legend after the assassination that they sent over a fake KGB defector who claimed to have been in personal charge of the Oswald case in Russia and confirmed to the CIA and FBI that Oswald had been a pain in the neck who had given no secrets and whom the Russians were glad to be rid of.

It should be stressed that Epstein now accepts the Warren Commission's finding that Oswald was the lone assassin and even says he accepts what he calls the "circumstantial" evidence that Oswald conceived and planned the shooting alone. However he does not even summarize this circumstantial evidence and the pages on Oswald's activities just prior to the killing are sprinkled with old conspiratorial insinuations which Epstein makes no effort to elucidate or clear up. Amazingly, he says absolutely nothing about how and why his rational spy turned into a lone

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'Legend' and Enigmas

LEGEND: THE SECRET WORLD OF LEE HARVEY OSWALD, by Edward Jay Epstein. Reader's Digest Press/McGraw-Hill Book Company. \$12.95. The controversial book is reviewed today from two perspectives: David Wise writes frequently about intelligence agencies. His most recent book is "The American Police State." Jacob Cohen is an associate professor of American Studies at Brandeis University. His book, "Conspiracy Fever," will be published this fall.

murderer who would risk involving Russia in an incident which could have had catastrophic consequences. I would guess, therefore, that most readers of this book will leave it with the strong impression that the man who could do nothing alone did not kill the President alone either.

How could we have been so wrong about the past and, more than that, the character of a man who has been as relentlessly scrutinized as Oswald? Supported by an "almost unlimited budget" which was supplied by the Reader's Digest, and aided by a team of researchers, Epstein claims to have turned up important new data. However, students of the case will be struck by how little new information he has uncovered and how cleverly he has projected, as his own, material which is already in the Warren Report and other works. Although the book gives the outward appearance of thorough documentation, anyone who carefully studies Epstein's footnotes will find little help in locating the verifiable sources for his most important factual assertions.

BUT MORE SERIOUS: in several instances Epstein has resorted to distortions and coverups of exactly the sort he has frequently attributed to the Warren Commission.

Consider, for example, his sensational contention that Oswald's handwritten "Historic Diary" is not an accurate day-by-day account of a despairing man's growing disillusionment with Russia, as suggested in the Warren Report, but in fact a legend, manufactured under Soviet direction. Epstein notes two striking anachronisms in the diary which prove that it was composed well after the indicated date. He also claims that microscopic analysis of Oswald's handwriting establishes that the diary was written in one or two sittings, referring in his footnotes to the work of one Thea Stein Lewinson, a graphologist.

Now it should immediately be noted that Epstein has misrepresented the Warren Commission which did not claim that Oswald's diary was a day-by-day record. Appendix XIII to the Warren Report states clearly that "the early entries (in the Historic Diary) were written after the events which they describe." Indeed, it is not only Epstein's view that the Historic Diary created a legend for Oswald but the Commission's as well; after all, what is an "Historic Diary" which is carefully printed and not written longhand in Oswald's usual manner, but a deliberately-fashioned legend written, to quote the Commission, "with future readers in mind"?

One would never guess it from reading Epstein, but the Commission's Oswald was an inveterate creator of documented legends for himself, a one-man KGB: Oswald, the disillusioned lover of Russia; Oswald, the effective pro-Castro organizer; Oswald, the meticulously patient would-be assassin of right-winger Edwin Walker. His Russian wife Marina, who in Epstein's reading must be an agent, too, and a brilliant and reckless liar, told the Warren Commission about a scrapbook Oswald collected documenting each step of his plan to assassinate Walker; and, to verify her story we have pictures which he took of Walker's home.

SO THE ISSUE is not, as Epstein suggests, whether Oswald's version of his life in Russia or anywhere is partly legendary (the scar on his left wrist from the suicide seems real enough) but whether he was coached in his legend by the Russians.

Nonetheless, I got curious about Epstein's graphologist, Thea Lewinson, and contacted her. A graphologist, she explained, is not a handwriting expert, but an interpreter of psychology through handwriting. She generously sent me (and I shall now quote from) some of the materials she says she submitted to Epstein which develop her analysis of Oswald's mental state while in Russia: "Apparently the writer of these letters was subject to strong changing moods and intense fluctuating emotions caused by a basic instability in the personality makeup. . . . (E)motional intensity (kept) this individual in a state of unrelieved suspense, similar to a catatonic state."

The Oswald which Lewinson perceives in his Russian writings was a man who could only learn what appealed to him, a sloppy worker, unrealistic, inconsistent, unable "to discern the vital points in a problem," unable to follow orders for very long, who "frequently misperceived and misinterpreted his environment." A most unlikely candidate as a Soviet operative. One wonders what Epstein would have said if the Warren Commission had so egregiously suppressed the complete opinions of one of its own experts.

But one doesn't have to be a handwriting expert to see signs of Oswald's troubled state in his writing. His spelling, for one thing, is almost subversively poor — "acquaintances" for acquaintances, "yonuge" for young, "beaure" for bureau — bespeaking, among other things, a fierce resistance to the authority of language. What could have motivated Epstein, who has Oswald submitting docilely to Soviet authority, to have corrected all of Oswald's spelling errors in his direct quotations?

Slowed down and examined frame by frame, the film of Oswald which Epstein flashes before his reader turns out to be a patchwork of flimsy insinuations which go against the commonest sense.

WAS OSWALD SPYING for the Russians in the Far East and recruited there to go to Russia? If so, he was the stupidest spy on record, for he contrived to get himself removed from radar duty and sent to the brig for striking an officer and misusing a gun. Some of his Marine buddies,

who made the pathetic Oswald the brunt of their jokes, told Epstein that the girl he was seeing in Japan was too classy for the likes of him, and Epstein makes a good deal of that. But the Warren Commission says clearly that Oswald made contact with communists in the Far East and that they may have influenced his decision to defect. The Commission simply found no evidence of recruitment, nor has Epstein.

Would the Russians have been so stupid as to have put a Russian-speaking agent on board the ship which took Oswald home and have him spend hours coaching him in his legend? If Oswald were a spy would he have begun to write communist organizations immediately after his return to the United States openly referring to himself as a savvy operative? Could he have supposed that his letters to the Soviet embassy, in which he openly refers to his contact with a Soviet agent, would not have been intercepted by the FBI or CIA, as indeed they were? Would he have so conspicuously identified himself as a pro-Castro anti-American and referred to himself as a possible spy to perfect strangers?

Epstein says that Oswald may have given the Soviets classified data while working, at the minimum wage, in a photographic lab which was doing secret work for the Air Force. He points out that Oswald had written the word "microdot" next to the address of the lab, a reference no doubt to the familiar espionage technique whereby data is photographically compressed to the size of a dot before being passed on. But Oswald also openly discussed the microdot technique with co-workers at the lab — would a spy? — and the Warren Report leaves no doubt that he obtained his low-level job entirely through the efforts of the Texas Employment Bureau, which has not been shown to have been under Russian control. Furthermore, Epstein's shameless insinuation that the classified lists of map locations which the lab was photographing were actually lists of spy plane targets — a leap of fancy which gets Oswald back into the old U-2 business — is offered, like most of his may-have-beens, without any evidence whatsoever.

OF COURSE, there is no way finally to disprove a may-have-been and indeed most of the may-have-beens which Epstein develops have been the subject of official and private speculation since well before the assassination.

After Oswald defected to Russia in 1959, the Navy investigated the possibility that he had been recruited by the Russians, concluding that he had not. At that time as well, the FBI recorded its reasonable suspicion that Oswald might be an agent and might return to this country under false pretences.

In his book, Francis Gary Powers expresses the suspicion that Oswald's information led to the downing of his plane but we now know that it was not Oswald's possible information (altitude and flight characteristics) which enabled the Russians to shoot down the U-2 but rather an improved missile capability.

When Oswald applied for readmission to the U.S., the State Department was wary; and when Nosenko defected, bringing confirmation of the official version of Oswald's Russian period, elements in the CIA's counter-intelligence staff were suspicious that Nosenko was a so-called disinformation agent sent to clear the Russians. Although the CIA eventually came to believe Nosenko, one man in particular, James Angleton, its former head of counter-intelli-

gence (who was removed in 1974 after his involvement in the CIA's notorious "Operation Chaos" surfaced), has carried his suspicions to the point of obsession.

Angleton seems to have been Epstein's principal source. The author treats him almost reverentially. However, contrary to the implication in this book, Angleton had been leaking his suspicions to journalists and congressional committees long before he met Epstein; conspiracists have been talking about him and his views on Nosenko for years.

Edward Jay Epstein, who has been a profound observer of how the press is used to plant misinformation, should have been more suspicious of the motives of a defeated bureaucrat. Not that there isn't something to be said for Angleton's position or for the other suspicions which Epstein has resurrected. There is; and Epstein has said it well. But there is something to be said for the other side as well, which remains unexamined; and, after all, there is only one truth in the matter.

ONE OF THE defining characteristics of the political paranoid is that he takes an atmosphere of suspicion as proof of his own suspicions. Students of McCarthyism will recognize the phenomenon. If Epstein has given us nothing new about Oswald, he has brilliantly evoked the workaday suspicions, the savage bureaucratic competitions which ensued upon the assassination; and, yes, the indubitable coverups which spot the record of the Kennedy assassination. No doubt, after the shooting, government agencies, which are habitually terrified of hindsight judgments, moved to obscure their prior suspicions of Oswald out of fear that they would be accused of insufficient caution. (But let it be understood that none were suspicious that he was a likely killer.)

No doubt, too, that the Warren Commission was misled and, in a few instances, warned off leads which would lead them to secret intelligence operations — not to speak of insights into the bureaucratic morass which Epstein has uncovered. This too can be made to seem suspicious. Piling suspicion upon suspicion produces — what else? — suspicion.

But no answers. No reality. Can any serious person really expect the Warren Commission to have aired these matters which, in light of all that the Commission knew about Oswald and his crime, were irrelevant to the president's death?

Lee Harvey Oswald shot Kennedy from a building in which he worked. He obtained the job nearly a month before decisions were made which brought the President to his very doorstep. The circumstances of his getting the job have been studied thoroughly and are entirely innocent. Nor can Kenneth O'Donnell, whose decision brought Kennedy to the Texas Book Depository Building, be suspected of having sent his friend to his assassin. This is only a smattering of the circumstantial evidence discouraging theories of conspiracy which Epstein never discusses.

AND WHAT ABOUT the assassin? For years, conspiracists knowing how the real-life Oswald defeats any notion of larger conspiracy have postulated the existence of second Oswalds, exact look-alikes. One recent book, "The Oswald File," by Michael Eddowes, argues that the real Oswald disappeared in Russia, replaced by an exact look-alike, sound-alike, remember-alike, who returned in his place, convinced his family that he was the old Lee, and then killed Kennedy on orders from Khrushchev. According to Eddowes the Americans were supposed to learn that the Communists were behind it, which is why the fake Oswald dropped so many clues about his affections for communism. Khrushchev's motive, he says, was to dare the Americans to act on this intelligence, and, since he knew they wouldn't, to accept the defeat implied, by their failure of nerve.

At least Eddowes has the courage to complete his story. Avoiding the use of a second Oswald, Epstein has simply made Oswald himself into the second Oswald, a sure-fire literary device which Melville uses to brilliant effect in "The Confidence Man."

But it won't wash. The theory is defeated by all that we reliably know about the nonentity who always resented and resisted authority and became an entity in one murderous moment.